

Emigration and poverty in Edwardian Leicester

by Stephen J. Page

This paper argues that any assessment of the poor who emigrated requires an in-depth study to understand the diversity of human experiences associated with the decision to emigrate, often a last resort to alleviate personal hardship and deprivation. Using case histories generated by the Leicester Charity Organisation Society, this paper focuses on their philanthropic activities in assisting the 'deserving poor' to emigrate and their detailed investigative procedures which provide a unique insight into the lives of the poor in Edwardian Leicester.

Introduction

The United Kingdom has a long tradition of emigration although its scale and extent was particularly significant in the nineteenth and early twentieth century: according to Findlay, up to 9 million people left Britain between 1851 and 1900.¹ The majority of these emigrants had the intention of settling abroad permanently, and many were destined for British Colonial territories like Canada, Australia and New Zealand. These emigrants supplied the necessary labour and skills to dynamic and expanding overseas labour markets of the nineteenth century, thereby making a major contribution to the economic development of colonial territories. Baines has stated 'Britain was one of the most important emigration countries in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century',² but with the exception of his work, research on Victorian and Edwardian emigration has tended to focus on the experiences of families and individual emigrants on arrival in the host country. The conditions in the areas of origin for emigration have largely been overlooked despite recent calls to consider the motivation and 'lived worlds' of individual movers so that the reasons for migration can be understood.³ The decision to emigrate was not a spontaneous response to a specific situation but a calculated choice based on the evaluation of existing conditions, information and knowledge, both perceived and real.

1. According to Findlay an emigrant can be defined as a 'person who has resided in the United Kingdom for a year or more and who on leaving has declared the intention to reside abroad for a year or more' (based on the technical definition adopted by the International Passenger Survey, Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1985). See A. M. Findlay, 'From settlers to skilled transients: the changing structure of British international migration', unpublished paper presented to the 'Workshop of the Skilled International Migration Working Party', Institute of British Geographers, University of Liverpool, July 1987. In the case of settler emigrants a subtle distinction can be drawn because their expressed intention was to settle abroad permanently and not to return voluntarily.
2. D. E. Baines, *Migration in a mature economy: emigration and internal migration in England and Wales, 1861-1900*. Cambridge: University Press, 1985
3. R. Lawton, 'Peopling the Past', *Trans. Inst. Brit. Geog.*, new ser. 12 (1987), pp.259-83

Using a case study of Edwardian Leicester, this paper argues that a more balanced view of assisted emigration is needed since Baines's emphasis on 'pull-factors' (i.e. information and publicity) to explain emigration would benefit from a discussion of 'push-factors' among the poor.⁴ Unemployment, debt, a changing industrial structure and social conditions all contributed to the decision to emigrate among the poor once the opportunities were made available. Therefore, this paper examines both the 'push' and 'pull' factors which prompted a small, but representative group of poor emigrants to leave Leicester for Canada in the early twentieth century. The results of such an in-depth study also raises questions related to the philanthropic interest of Emigration Societies and the work of the Charity Organisation Society within the context of Edwardian Leicester. Using an unique and rich data source, the case histories of the Leicester Charity Organisation Society (hereafter COS) provide an unique opportunity to consider the range of issues related to the emigration of the poor from one industrial town in the early twentieth century. The paper commences with a review of recent research on assisted emigration of the poor, which is followed by a discussion of Charity records as a data source for emigration research. The significance of Leicester as an urban case study is then examined as a prelude to a discussion of the interest of the Leicester COS in assisted emigration. This framework provides the basis for a detailed evaluation of past experiences of emigration among Leicester's poor between 1904 and 1911 since the COS case histories can be used to reconstruct the characteristics of those who decided to emigrate.

Recent research on assisted emigration of the poor

Baines's analysis of Victorian and Edwardian emigration shows that over 18 million people left Britain between 1815 and 1914, 13 million for the United States,⁵ 4 million for Canada and 1.5 million for Australasia, and that this migration took place in a series of 'waves' or distinct periods of movement.⁶ These waves were closely related to the cycles of economic growth such as that identified by Saville 'after 1905 [when] foreign investment with which emigration is again associated begins to show rising volumes and these trends continued until the era of the First World War'.⁷ The typical family emigrating from late Victorian and Edwardian Britain paid their own passage, which ranged from between £10 to £30 dependent upon the destination and nature of the travel arrangements. For the urban poor, assisted emigration originated in the hundred years from 1815. In this period assisted emigration developed as a method of reducing the potential social and political unrest and disorder which was likely to occur during periods of mass unemployment, especially in urban areas. A major stimulus to the development of Emigration Societies was the publication in 1883 of A. Mearns's *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*.⁸ This work was cited by the London Congregational Union as a means of justifying emigration on the grounds that it saved the ratepayer their

4. Baines, *Migration*, as n.2

5. Baines, *Migration*, as n.2

6. *Emigrants and empire: British settlement in the Dominions between the wars*, ed. S. Constantine. Manchester: University Press, 1990, provides an interesting comparison with the patterns and processes affecting emigration in the Victorian and Edwardian period.

7. J. Saville, 'Internal migration in England and Wales during the past 100 years', in *Les Placements Humains*, ed. J. Sutler, pp.1-21. 1962

8. A. Mearns, *The bitter cry of outcast London ... with leading articles from the 'Pall Mall Gazette' of October 1883 ...*, ed. A. S. Wohl. Leicester: University Press, 1970

upkeep under the Poor Law and was a means of reaffirming Imperial loyalty, and a long-term solution to unemployment. The wave of interest in emigration of the 1880s was repeated again in the early 1900s after the Boer War when acute national depression resulted in high levels of unemployment, at a time when the Poor Law was undergoing a review by a Royal Commission and legislation to relieve the able-bodied unemployed was being formulated, which culminated in the Unemployed Workmen Act of 1905. According to Saville, rising unemployment, a decline in the value of wages, and economic distress produced a wave of unprecedented trans-Atlantic emigration.⁹ The choice of destination was influenced by the Canadian government's policy of positive immigration and Britain's attempt to repay the loyalty and assistance of Canadian troops during the Boer War. As a result of these initiatives the Salvation Army assisted 32,000 men and their families to move from London to Canada by acting as an intermediary and shipping agent for the Canadian government.

Glynn has recognised the inherent difficulties of compiling accurate records of the numbers that emigrated with the assistance of societies which in turn is complicated further by deportations and return migrations.¹⁰ Despite these difficulties it must not be overlooked that these Emigration Societies not only played a significant role in the emigration process but their records, when available, provide an illuminating picture of the emigrants and their living conditions in Britain. In addition, some 3,000 families were assisted by the Self-Help Emigration Society between 1904 and 1907 and the Church Emigration Society sent 700 persons annually. However, the East End Emigration Fund (henceforth EEEF) which increased its budget from £4,403 to £42,360 between 1904 and 1911, assisted over 13,000 families annually, mainly from London.

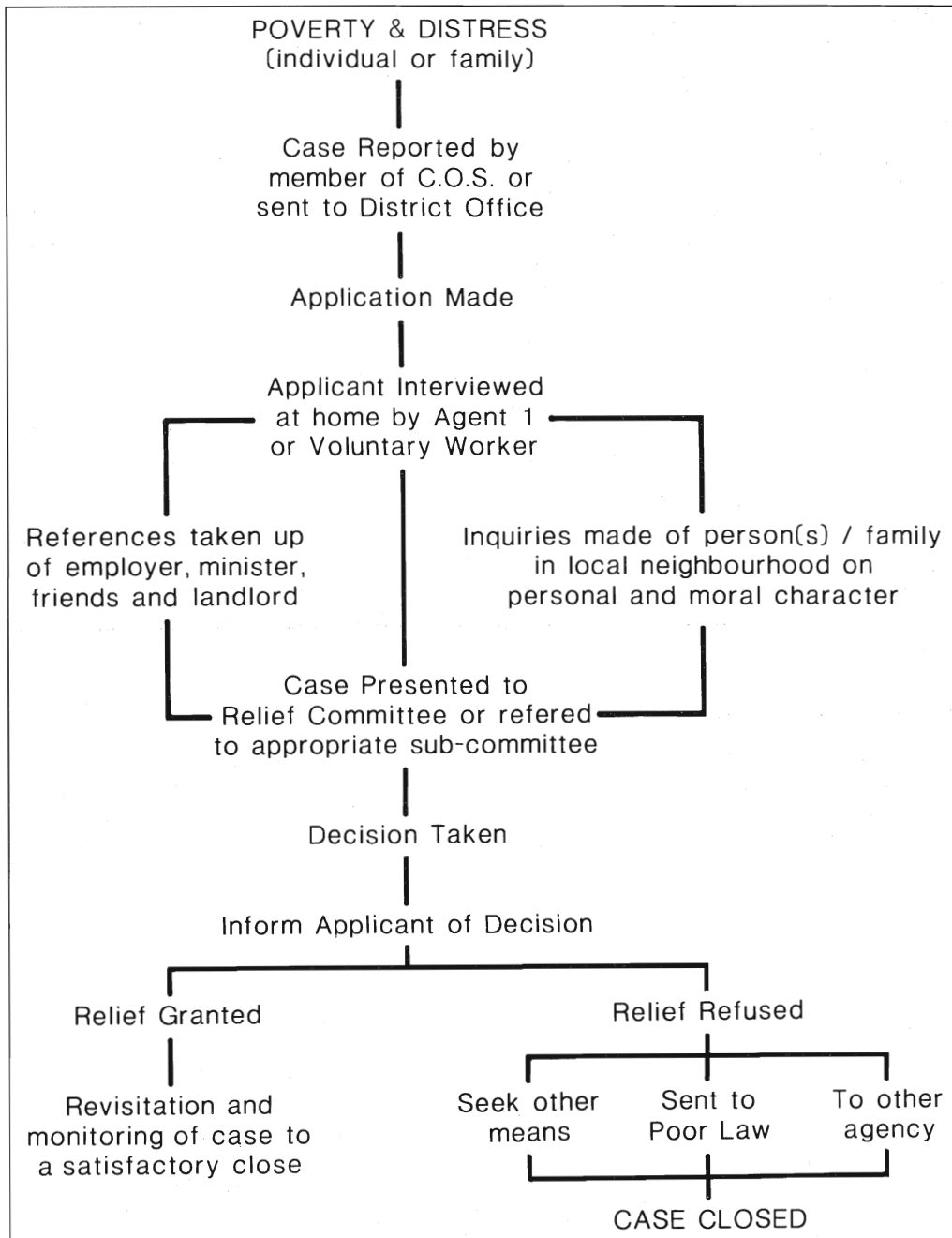
Charity records: their use in research on emigration

Charity records are a major source for the analysis of poverty and related phenomena such as assisted emigration.¹¹ Although the COS was not directly responsible for financing and 'emigrating' the poor, it did act as a clearing-house for the charitable organisations as well as in co-operating with the Poor Law and various emigration

9. Saville, 'Internal migration', as n.7

10. D. Glynn, "Exporting outcast London": assisted emigration to Canada, 1886-1914', *Historic Sociale/Social History*, 15 (1982), pp.209-38. In addition this theme was graphically portrayed in a 1987 BBC television documentary entitled 'Heaven on Earth', *Lives of four emigrant children in Canada at the turn of the century*. This was based on actual case histories derived from the archives of the East End Emigration Fund (EEEF) and it suggested that some five per cent. of Canada's present population are direct descendants of child emigrants during late Victorian and Edwardian times. These experiences and the background to Assisted Emigration are dealt with fully by J. Parr, *Labouring children: British immigrant apprentices to Canada, 1869-1924*. London: Croom Helm, 1980; see also H. L. Malchow, *Population pressures: emigration and government in late nineteenth-century Britain*. Palo Alto: Soc. for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1979 on the development of the EEEF's role in 'emigrating' the poor.

11. S. J. Page, 'A new source for the historian of urban poverty: a note on the use of charity records in Leicester, 1904-29', *Urban History Yearbook*, pp.51-60. Leicester: University Press, 1987



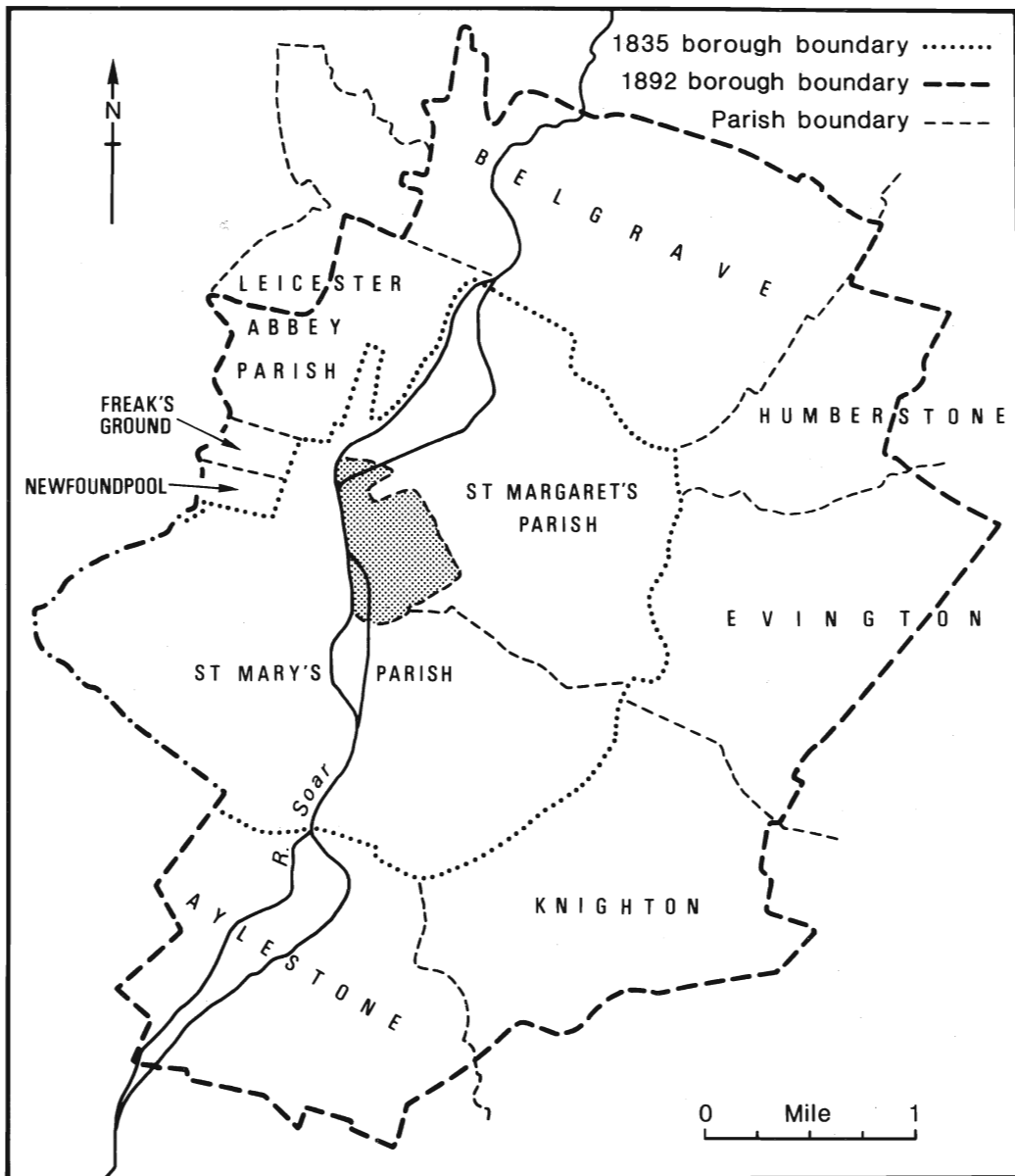
1. The Charity Organisation Society casework process.

societies.¹² The COS's concern with the condition of the poor meant that case histories were a fundamental part of their work.¹³ In the case of emigrants, the case histories record the date of departure and destination and, significantly, specific information on the attitudes and thoughts of the poor when making their decision to emigrate. As Page has shown they contain statements and opinions from the poor regarding their poverty and distress in Leicester's depressed labour market.¹⁴ They also provide a rich source of documentary evidence on the nature and characteristics of the people who wanted to leave Leicester in order to improve their personal condition through emigration. The 'applicant's statement' on the COS case histories elicits information on the real and perceived worlds of the poor which provide the basis for an explanation of their own distress. Such comments are complemented by those of the agents of the COS and provide an unique qualitative view of the emigration process as well as their attitude and understanding of the poor (see illus. 1). In addition, up to sixty variables can be generated from such records for a quantitative analysis of migration.¹⁵

Leicester: the social and economic context of emigration

While studies of emigration and poverty have hitherto concentrated on a number of towns such as London,¹⁶ York,¹⁷ and Manchester,¹⁸ Leicester is of particular interest for three reasons. Firstly, the town emerged as a centre of industrial production between 1870 and 1914. According to Patterson,¹⁹ the growth led to a gradual transition of Leicester from a country town to an industrial city, and Simmons claimed that the period 1850 to 1880 may have been the most significant in the town's history.²⁰ During this period Leicester's industrial base widened as the factory-system became fully developed and its population grew rapidly. Between 1861 and 1871 the town's population increased by 40 per cent, the highest rate of growth among Britain's twenty largest

12. The growth and development of the charity organisation society can be found in D. Owen, *English philanthropy, 1660-1960*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965; C. L. Mowat, *The Charity Organisation Society, 1869-1913*, its ideas and work. London: Methuen, 1961; K. Woodroffe, 'The Charity Organisation Society and the origins of social casework', *Hist. Studies Australia & New Zealand*, 9 (1959), pp.19-29; M. Rooft, *A hundred years of family welfare: a study of The Family Welfare Association (formerly Charity Organisation Society), 1869-1969*. London: Michael Joseph, 1972. A discussion and excellent review of the work of COS in Leicester can be found in S. Flavell, 'Charity Organisation Society in Leicester, 1876-1914'. Victorian Studies Centre, Leicester University: unpublished M.A. dissertation, 1972
13. This is well documented by J. Fido, 'The Charity Organisation Society and social casework in London, 1869-1900' in *Social control in nineteenth-century Britain*, ed. A. P. Donajirodski. London: Croom Helm, 1977
14. Page, 'New source', as n.11, pp.52-3
15. For further details of the variables derived from charity records, see Appendix 8.2 (socio-economic variables coded from COS case histories) in S. J. Page, 'Poverty in Leicester, 1881-1911: a geographical perspective'. Leicester University: unpublished Ph.D thesis, 1987
16. G. Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: a study in the relationship between classes in Victorian Society*. Oxford: University Press, 1971; Glynn, "Exporting outcast London", as n.10
17. F. Finnegan, *Poverty and prostitution: a study of Victorian prostitutes in York*. Cambridge: University Press, 1979
18. A. J. Kidd, 'Outcast Manchester: voluntary charity, poor relief and the casual poor, 1860-1905', in *City, class and culture: studies of social policy and cultural production in Victorian Manchester*, ed. A. J. Kidd and K. W. Roberts, pp.48-73. Manchester: University Press, 1985
19. A. T. Patterson, *Radical Leicester: a history of Leicester, 1780-1850*, p.365. Leicester: University College Press, 1954
20. J. Simmons, *Life in Victorian Leicester*. Leicester: Leicestershire Museums, 1971 [2nd ed. 1976]



2. The expansion of Leicester in the late nineteenth century.

towns, a rate which was sustained up to the turn of the century. Thus, the population increased at over 30 per cent per decade between 1851 and 1901, although between 1901 and 1911 the population grew by only 7.37 per cent, rising from 211,579 in 1901 to 227,222 in 1911 as rural migration to urban areas declined.

21. R. Lawton, 'Urbanization and population change in nineteenth-century England', in *The expanding city: essays in honour of Professor Jean Gottman*, ed. J. Patten, pp.179-224. London: Academic Press, 1983

responsible for these changes and their impact on the town's social geography have been extensively documented by Pritchard,²² and Page.²³ However, demographic changes led to the expansion of the built area of the town, not only eastwards but also for the first time in 1892 to the west of the river Soar. The effects of such developments led to the extension of the administrative area of Leicester with the Leicester Extension Act, 1890 (see illus. 2) as economic changes in hosiery, footwear and light engineering continued to fuel industrial growth.²⁴ Therefore, the late Victorian and Edwardian years were a period of significant economic, social and demographic change within Leicester and it resulted in the formation, by 1914, of both a 'modern city' and a distinctive 'city-region'.

A second reason for considering poverty and migration in Leicester between 1881 and 1914 is the tendency for historians to believe that the abject poverty of the 1840s among framework-knitters was removed by factory production and a prosperous economy. For example, Simmons has argued that 'by 1880 the town had achieved a peculiar brand of assured prosperity that has given it its character ever since' although the benefits of prosperity were largely concentrated among the middle and upper classes.²⁵ Wage differentials and occupational status ensured that the competitive spirit of Victorian capitalism hindered the diffusion of prosperity beyond the middle classes. Thirdly, it could also be argued that Leicester is particularly suitable for a study of emigration because the failure to recognise the underlying problems of poverty and distress meant that assisted passages have not featured in previous studies of the town's development between 1881 and 1914.

The Charity Organisation Society and assisted emigration: the Leicester experience

In terms of assisted emigration Leicester is an interesting case because it was the only known provincial town where the COS co-operated with the EEEF. However, not until 1900 did Leicester's COS embark on initiatives to assist emigration from the town, which was marked in 1905 by a COS-sponsored conference in Leicester. The conference, addressed by the chairman of the EEEF, was reported and publicised in local newspapers and it emphasised the work of the local COS in initiating emigration. The COS set up an Emigration Committee which in 1904-5 assisted 45 cases by defraying the costs of those unable to afford the full expense of emigration. For those emigrants who were physically fit and had a knowledge of agriculture, the best opportunities were available in Canada.

C.S.Loach (national secretary of the COS) was reported as saying that 'every town should have its emigration office', an indication of the COS central office's support of Leicester's initiative.²⁶ Furthermore, it underlined the national problem of depressed conditions in urban labour markets, which was viewed as a 'solution to relieve congestion of overstocked labour markets'. In the Leicester context Rev. F.L. Donaldson, however, erred on the side of caution in stating that 'emigration would by no means effect a solution to the unemployed problem. It was an intolerable scandal that

22. R. M. Pritchard, *Housing and the spatial structure of the city: residential mobility and the housing market in an English city since the Industrial Revolution*. Cambridge: University Press, 1976

23. Page, 'Poverty in Leicester', as n.15

24. These themes are covered more fully in Page, 'Poverty in Leicester', as n.15, chapter 3

25. Simmons, *Life in Victorian Leicester*, as n.20, p.42

26. *Leicester Daily Post* [hereafter *LDP*], 21 Aug. 1905

England should be given over to pasture land. There could never hope to effect a remedy of the unemployed until they give the people a stake in the land'.²⁷ Donaldson,²⁸ therefore, was reiterating what Henry George had said about the land problems of the 1880s in that the growing rural-urban migration was attributed to changing agricultural practices and to land ownership patterns which denied labourers a stake in the land.²⁹ Rather than move to the towns the only viable alternative for the landless labourers was to emigrate to Canada. The conclusion reached at the 1905 conference was that funds raised in Leicester should be placed at the disposal of the COS due to its record in managing and co-ordinating the activities of charities. The EEEF also emphasised a commitment to assist cases sent via the COS in Leicester intended 'simply and solely for the benefit of those who are eager to begin the battle of life afresh in some less crowded and more promising field beyond the seas', and thereby reducing the pressure on those remaining.³⁰

Emigration from Leicester: evaluating the experiences of the poor

The response of the COS to local economic circumstances heralded a rise in applications for assisted emigration, though it must be emphasised that the extent of local records prevent a detailed analysis of all cases between 1904 and 1911 because of the vast and largely uncatalogued nature of the case histories. However, the detailed nature of the available COS case histories does provide an insight into the complex relationship between poverty and assisted emigration. By using a small number of case histories it is possible to examine the reasons which led people to seek assistance to emigrate. A qualitative analysis of these applicants is necessary to explain why only certain people wanted to migrate even though poverty was widespread among the working classes in Edwardian Leicester. Thus, a detailed qualitative study of specific families yields information representative of the human experience of poverty and emigration that is not available from a large scale quantitative analysis. In this study 21 families were selected from a much larger survey of 290 COS case histories for the period 1904-11, and those who requested assistance to emigrate were distributed thus; seven in 1905 and 1906, four in 1907, two in 1904 and one for 1910. Although the sample size is particularly small, the skewed distribution towards certain years appears to have been related to the existence of severe national and local economic conditions, which coincided with the decision by agencies like the COS to promote emigration after 1904 as a method of relief.

According to Baines and Erikson the typical emigrants, in Edwardian times were young families who had saved sufficient funds to move without assistance.³¹ However, the evidence presented here differs from that view since assisted emigration was often a last resort among families attempting to relieve distress and poverty. In view of the extensiveness of assisted passages in the emigration process at the beginning of the century a certain degree of revision of Baines's view is indicated.³²

27. *LDP*, as n. 26

28. *LDP*, as n. 26

29. *The Victorian countryside*, edited by G. E. Mingay, 2 vols. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981

30. *LDP*, as n. 26

31. Baines, *Migration*, as n.2; C. Erickson, 'Who were the English and Scots immigrants to the United States in the late nineteenth century?' in *Population and Social Change*, ed. D. V. Glass and R. Revelle, pp.347-81 London: Edward Arnold, 1972

32. Baines, *Migration*, as n.2

Household characteristics of emigrant families

Within Leicester, the more established families were the most likely to apply for relief: nearly half of the household heads (ten out of 21 cases) applying for emigration assistance were aged 31-40 years while six out of 21 cases were middle aged (41-50 years); in contrast only five out of 21 cases were in the youthful age category (25-30 years). Although the majority of the families had passed the initial child-rearing stage, emigration still involved a major social upheaval for them. At a national level Baines has considered the hypothesis that the decision to emigrate was largely determined by the information available to the population.³³ Yet this presumes a certain degree of literacy within a family which allowed applicants to disseminate information about the possibilities for emigration. For those unable to read it was not uncommon to find the parish priest being consulted for advice and this person often referred cases to the COS. In his study Baines emphasised information rather than local socio-economic conditions as being the prime determinant of emigration because no correlation was found between local conditions and emigration rates at a county level.³⁴

Such an interpretation can be overemphasised since information itself does not cause emigration but, rather, aids the discovery of opportunities elsewhere. For example, in Edwardian Leicester an application in 1905 (case one) by a 44 year old labourer, who had been employed for eight weeks and had a 45 year old wife who worked as a spinner, stated that he had been motivated by an article by the COS in the *Leicester Daily Post* (24 August 1905) entitled 'Emigrate to Canada'.³⁵ This article was addressed to 'youthful families' in order to encourage them to emigrate, so as to reduce the pressure in an overstocked labour market. The labourer and his family were assisted at a cost of £35 and the COS pushed this case through rather speedily because of their dependence upon relatives who were providing temporary housing. In fact, over a third of those wishing to emigrate lived with their relatives. Although most of the households had a male head, it did not prevent female-headed households from applying; case two was a clear example of a 45 year old widow with five children making the necessary approach to the COS. The mother of the children had been a shoehand for five years at a workshop in the town but the shortage of work and unemployment concealed a much more severe structural problem as the widow reported that in the last year she had been out of work for twenty weeks during various slack periods. She also had debts of £2 3s. 0d. and was six weeks behind with the rent. Contributions from the two children who were in work proved insufficient for her to break out of the vicious circle of debt although she maintained her own self-respect and avoided the clasp of the Poor Law. The COS was able to assist the family to move to Nova Scotia, thereby acknowledging the deserving nature of the applicant who had managed to avoid becoming a charge of the Poor Law, preferring to seek help from her family in the first instance.

Although the stage in the life cycle was a critical factor in explaining the emigration of poor families in this instance, two out of 21 cases were from households which had children aged over 18 who were in work. In addition, in eleven out of 21 cases, the wife was under 45 years of age (with one or more children at home). This feature might be explained by the fact that the heads of household had to be less than 50 years of age in

33. Baines, *Migration*, as n.2

34. Baines, *Migration*, as n.2

35. To safeguard the confidentiality of those people who applied to the COS all case numbers and personal details have been removed.

order that they could work for at least five years in support of their families in a colonial country. If this was not achieved then deportation was highly likely among assisted emigrants who again fell upon hard times and became public charges. For this reason, the COS assessment of cases had to ensure that the household head was fit and able to support the family through the initial stages of resettlement in a new country.

From such case history evidence it would seem that Baines's emphasis on information as the determinant of emigration may be misplaced. While this played a role in initiating consideration of emigration it was not the cause of it.³⁶ Rather it was fluctuating economic conditions of the poor within the context of the guidelines adopted by the COS, Emigration Societies and the host country that were the prime determinants. Some of these determinants will now be considered in greater detail.

Emigrants' occupational structure and the labour market

To the Edwardians emigration was largely undertaken by skilled workers who would find readily available employment in expanding colonial territories. Nevertheless, in the case of Leicester almost half of the emigrants were unskilled, normally labourers. Some nine out of 21 households were footwear operatives and the remaining applicants were in semi-skilled, or in other skilled occupations unrelated to hosiery or footwear production. In other words, emigration was a means of alleviating poverty, particularly at times of economic distress.

The effect of unemployment upon those involved can be gauged from individual work histories. From Table 1 it can be seen that the work experience of the emigrants varied within and between groups in the sample. Although it is only a crude indicator, based on years and months, one has to make the assumption of continuous work experiences although in reality this might be modified by periodic lay-offs, particularly during the winter months among the unskilled workers in the building trades. The importance of long service among footwear operatives and the short-term nature of unskilled work experience was evident. The latter reported one to two months and up to three years work with one employer, notwithstanding layoffs due to slack trade. For footwear workers the impact of restructuring most affected those whose long-term service exceeded five years and made their skills redundant in the face of mechanical processes. The proportion of emigrants who had been unemployed for one to four months (four out of 21 cases) suggested that workers considered emigration after a period of unemployment and not just as a snap decision. Indeed, it was a careful and considered judgement of the social and economic realities facing the household that eventually led to an application to the COS for assistance.

In this respect, unemployment was a key factor in motivating emigration because the prospects for those who did not seek an alternative solution were bleak. A significant proportion of applicants (five out of 21 cases) had been out of work and without assistance or income for between four months and one year, emphasising the structural nature of a good deal of unemployment. The bleak prospects in the footwear trade and in unskilled labour markets also stimulated applications from two people who were still in work. The industrial malaise that beset Edwardian Leicester in 1905-6, 1907 and 1910 undoubtedly provoked a reaction among a small proportion of people in work to seek a better future overseas.

The reasons given by those applying to the COS for assistance to emigrate were

36. Baines, *Migration*, as n.2

Table 1 Work profile of household heads applying to emigrate

<i>Time employed^a</i>	<i>Years Covered^b</i>	<i>Number of cases</i>
8 years	1893-1905	1
12	1894-1906	1
12	1895-1907	1
6	1898-1904	1
6	1899-1905	1
5	1900-1905	1
3	1902-1905	1
2	1903-1905	1
7	1903-1910	3
3	1903-1906	1
4-6 mths	1904-1904	1
9-12 mths	1904-1905	1
1-2 mths	1905-1905	1
12-18 mths	1905-1906	1
9-12 mths	1905-1906	1
4-6 mths	1907-1907	1
		18 ^c

a Any ambiguity that arises from this measure is a direct result of the lack of precision given by applicants to case workers when recording these actual experiences.

b Years in work are calculated by backward tracing of dates given on case histories confirmed by an employer's reference.

c 3 cases missing where the category was left blank or contained incomplete information.

Source: LRO, Charity Organisation Society Case Histories, 1904-1911.

varied; fifteen people attributed it to the lack of work and two applicants to firms going bankrupt; illness and industrial accident also affected a further two applicants. However, the overriding cause was unemployment.

The differential impact of unemployment can in part be attributed to the level of skills among the workers. Even so the existence of skilled footwear operatives in the sample of emigrants seems to suggest that restructuring within that industry caused a widespread reduction in required skills requirements making certain segments of the workforce redundant. For those thrown out of work the opportunities for a similar skilled job were extremely limited, and even jobs requiring less skill were difficult to obtain due to other labour markets which were again compounded by increased competition from female labour.³⁷ Inevitably unemployment affected skilled workers much more than their unskilled counterparts because of the greater loss of income: while unskilled households seemed to be more accustomed to the fluctuating fortunes of the labour market.

Household resources among the emigrants

By examining the wages of those who applied to the COS to emigrate, one can assess the extent of financial deprivation among this group since the earnings of the household

37. W. Lancaster, *Radicalism, co-operation and socialism: Leicester working-class politics, 1860-1906*. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1987

head provide some indication of the available income. Seventeen people admitted to be earning no income at the time of application, whilst two people in full time work earned only £1 6s. 0d. to £1 10s. 0d. per week, and the one worker on short time earned as little as five to ten shillings a week. The impact of such wage losses upon a family can be clearly demonstrated by case history three; a male householder who had been resident in the Workhouse and had been placed on the Labour Test which was followed by three months out of work after his dismissal as a shoe hand. The applicant, aged 42, reported that his wife had left him twelve years previously with two dependent children to support. The applicant's sense of responsibility led him to seek work as a labourer in the way advocated by the COS.³⁸ After an investigation, the COS decided to support his application to emigrate by offering him assistance of £14. The Board of Guardians also paid him £8 because the case was initially referred to the COS when the applicant was on the Poor Law Labour Test for able-bodied men who were unemployed.

The support a wife could offer in times of hardship often proved invaluable among those families seeking to emigrate because it maintained the household above starvation level. Such households could retain a degree of self respect rather than suffer the indignity of having to apply to the Poor Law, which was important because the typical family seeking to emigrate was more likely to be assisted if the COS perceived them as 'deserving' or 'respectable'. Often an additional stimulus to emigration for the poor was the exceptionally low level of financial contributions from the wives. In fact fourteen wives of poor emigrants reported no visible income, although casual work was often undertaken to earn a few shillings in order to purchase basic foodstuffs. This is illustrated in Table 2 where wives and children's financial contribution to household incomes remained small, although such activities are not always recorded in case histories. However, the COS social workers did consider the living conditions.

Table 2 Total household income of COS applicants for emigration, 1904-1911

<i>Amount</i>	<i>Number of Households</i>
None	1
2 to 5 shillings	3
5 to 9 shillings	0
9 to 10 shillings	2
10 to 15 shillings	5
15 shillings or more	4
Missing Cases	6
	21

Source: LRO, Charity Organisation Society Case Histories, 1904-1911.

38. C. Loch, 'The problem of the unemployed', *COS Review*, 20 (1906), pp.16-39. Loch argued that the problem of the skilled worker could be overcome by de-skilling and undertaking manual and unskilled work. Yet this simply placed an additional burden on the unskilled labour market which was already saturated in Edwardian Leicester.

Housing, rent and debt among emigrants

The typical accommodation for the poorer families in Edwardian Leicester was a series of rented rooms, although it was found that data on housing was incomplete on most case histories. In contrast, among emigrants rent was a variable recorded more consistently. In Edwardian Leicester average rents varied from those under five shillings for the less desirable areas, falling in places to under two shillings, whilst for more 'respectable' working class areas like Spinney Hills, rents averaged seven to ten shillings. Among those wishing to emigrate, ten applicants paid four to five shillings, a further eight paid five to seven shillings, especially in the newer areas of town like north Belgrave. It was not surprising to find that between a quarter and a half of emigrants' available income was spent on rent. In contrast, the few emigrants applying from 'slum' properties within a half mile radius of the Clock Tower paid between 2s. 6d. and three shillings a week.³⁹

People seeking assistance to emigrate faced problems of debt, and one indicator of this was 'rent owing'. For example, thirteen applicants owed more than a week's rent, part of what Green has called the 'rhythm of poverty', a vicious circle of debt and want intensified by seasonal and cyclical fluctuations in the labour market.⁴⁰ A further three emigrants had additional debts of between two and five shillings and a small proportion even owed over £1. The extent of debt and poverty was also reflected in the total household income (Table 2) since in fourteen out of 21 cases household heads seeking to emigrate had no visible earnings. So inevitably they hovered on the threshold of absolute need, and emigration seemed one of the few solutions to their predicament. Children may have made a smaller economic contribution to families in Leicester considering emigration but concern over the use and abuse of their labours was evident in an article entitled 'Are the children of the Poor overworked?' which followed a Home Office Committee investigation into the use of child labour in 1905.⁴¹ There were estimated to be upwards of 800,000 'child slaves' in Britain according to the article. This was seen as a 'growing evil' and the Home Office study found that the children added only 6d. to a shilling a week to family income, but this was often vital as a means of avoiding destitution. Absolute poverty among households with no visible income was obviously a major stimulus for families unwilling to suffer the sense of helplessness which poverty and unemployment induced.

The spatial distribution of potential emigrants 1904-11

The residential location of the poor who applied to emigrate from Edwardian Leicester is difficult to determine because of the small number of families in this study, though an absence of applicants from the poorest districts of Sanvey Gate and Belgrave Gate is a notable feature.⁴² The main catchment areas were mainly in the new working class

39. The absence of rate books for late Victorian and Edwardian Leicester does not rule out detailed analysis of the housing structure within the city. The recent interest in the 1910 'Domesday Survey' of urban and rural areas considered by T. Austin, 'Field books: a twentieth-century Domesday', *Local Historian*, 16 (1985), pp.282-3, and B. Short, 'Landownership in Edwardian England and Wales: a new source for geographical analysis', *Area*, 18 (1986), pp.153-56, has identified the value of such records for studying urban structure.

40. D. R. Green, 'People of the Rookery: a pauper community in Victorian England'. Department of Geography, King's College, London, Occasional Paper 16, 1986

41. *LDP*, as n.26

42. For a more detailed analysis of the spatial distribution of poverty from COS case histories, see Page, 'Poverty in Leicester', as n.15

districts, for example in north Belgrave, Aylestone, Oxford Street/West End and Spinney Hills, a pattern that suggests poverty was also found in newer working class areas in the early twentieth century.

During years of extreme economic crisis like 1904-1905, many footwear workers who had moved from inner districts to north Belgrave felt the effects of unemployment which led them to apply for assistance to emigrate. Unemployment had a severe effect on the skilled footwear workers, who formed half of those seeking to emigrate at the height of an economic depression in 1905. Hence, most applicants for assistance to emigrate were skilled workers. Unskilled applicants tended to apply for assistance simply in response to their immediate condition rather than to major economic crises such as the severe depression of 1905. However, those people who wanted to emigrate were most likely to live in more 'respectable' working class districts like north Belgrave and usually the skilled workers received the most assistance because the COS believed they were most likely to 'help themselves'. Very poor families living in the central areas of town were largely absent from the sample of emigration cases considered by the COS.

Hence, the decision to emigrate was not so much an indication of the severity of socio-economic distress in Edwardian Leicester, rather a measure of those most prepared to seek assistance to 'help themselves' to find a permanent solution to their problem. Only a limited number of families were willing to leave Britain to start a new life abroad. The majority of poor families continued to try to make ends meet as emigration was only a small part of the COS's work. The very poor unskilled headed households did not emigrate as only the skilled possessed acceptable social and economic characteristics to receive help. One way of assessing the COS's bias towards certain types of applicant is to consider their casework procedure which questions the motivation of the COS when assisting the poor to emigrate.

Casework procedures: why were certain families selected for emigration?

The selection of individuals and families who were awarded assistance to emigrate by the COS was determined by various casework procedures. It is evident that the COS records on emigration only documented potentially 'deserving' cases since its 'clearing house' role may have led to the referral of 'undeserving' cases to other agencies like the Poor Law rather than recording the real scale of poverty and distress. This may well explain the absence of applications from the poorer districts of Leicester and evidence exists to illustrate the bias within the COS's casework procedures. The experiences recorded in case four underlined this most vividly. The 29 year old applicant had worked at an iron foundry as a labourer between 1904 and 1905 and had been made redundant in 1905 after an industrial accident which resulted in a poisoned hand. This meant a loss of a weekly income of eighteen shillings which had supported a wife and three children. The wife, aged 27, supplemented the household income by working as a charwoman, though at the time of the application to emigrate the family was two weeks behind with the rent. In this case the opinion of the Poor Law Relieving Officer was critical as 'Mr W was not up to much he had absconded and the family was now in the Workhouse due to this'.⁴³ The case was refused as the husband absconded before the COS's inquiry was complete: since the family became dependent upon Poor Relief they could not emigrate, a decision reflecting the COS and EEEF's desire to maintain a credible image overseas

43. The Poor Law relieving officer was responsible for the day-to-day running and administration of poor relief in the local district office.

by not sending dependent families who could be deported for becoming public charges.⁴⁴

This particular family lived in the Sanvey Gate district reinforcing the COS's belief that the deserving families by and large resided in the newer working class districts. Such social and geographical discrimination meant that 'relief for the purposes of emigration' was biased towards the 'deserving' applicants. In the majority of cases, applicants from the areas outside the central districts of towns were offered assistance, in contrast, only a minority of those from the more central areas of town were assisted. Although the COS argued that they treated each application on its merits, the bias of the 'relief awarded' meant that it concentrated on outlying districts and, especially, among skilled workers.

Yet it was not just families that applied for assistance to emigrate. Case five involved a male head of household who decided to emigrate in order to establish himself abroad. In turn he was prepared to pay to bring his family to settle in Canada at a later date. However, this was only feasible if his family could support themselves after he had emigrated. The wife and children said they would live with kin to reduce the risk of poverty and dependence on the Poor Law. The COS treated the application as a genuine case as the husband could not muster sufficient money to pay for the passage and assisted his passage. The wife continued to work and the children were cared for by kin.

The investigation process for those seeking to emigrate was very lengthy and can, in part, be measured by the number of entries made by the COS on each case history. The investigation itself and decision-making process often took up to eight months, with the COS and EEEF corresponding over the arrangements for assisted passages and potential employers for applicants. This was one of the reasons why two-thirds of the case histories had as many as fifteen entries. However, some applications were also sent to the COS by the Poor Law's Relieving Officer, another source of discrimination. The Poor Law only selected 'deserving' applicants whom they referred to the COS. The Relieving Officer tended to highlight certain social and behavioural traits to justify the selection of cases to the COS. Typically, many of the people who applied to emigrate whilst on the Labour Test were from new working class districts like north Belgrave. The Relieving Officer's comments were important since the COS and Poor Law jointly assisted cases to emigrate thereby removing the poor as a public liability. Even so, it is apparent that no single factor or range of experiences characterised those deemed as 'deserving' of emigration assistance apart from their place of residence. The differing impressions gained by COS social workers can only be a starting point for analysing such interpretations of individual families' plight and whether they should be assisted to emigrate.

The particular experiences recorded in the case histories were inextricably linked to wider social and economic forces and the proponents of emigration made the fatal error of assuming that imperial labour markets were not subject to depressions. Emigration did lead to a wave of anti-imperial feeling in host countries like Canada during the late Edwardian period, which is one reason why this relief option tended to lose its appeal after 1911.⁴⁵ This case study of Leicester is unique since it was one of the only known provincial towns where the COS collaborated with emigration societies in order to reduce poverty problems. It may have been far-sighted of the COS to undertake such work but the fundamental problems facing the majority of poor families remained untouched. Moreover, the social and moral justification of assisted emigration came

44. Parr, *Labouring children*, as n.10

45. Parr, *Labouring children*, as n.10

under increasing scrutiny in the years leading up to 1914. For poor families emigration remained an attractive proposition, which could not be achieved without a detailed investigative procedure by the COS to decide on the perceived merits of each case.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of looking at a small number of families in one particular town, it is clear that the poor were not a homogenous social group who simply occupied the slum districts of Edwardian Leicester. They often responded to poverty by moving to cheaper accommodation and in some cases by emigrating. As poverty can be seen as a continuum with different degrees of distress, so migration of the poor can be seen in a similar way. The poor most commonly moved in the local area (intra-urban migration), often just a street or two away: but only a small proportion of the poor applied for assistance to emigrate. Emigration was an antidote to overstocked labour markets while intra-urban migration simply meant the poor moved house while the structural problem of poverty remained unchanged. Emigration may have lifted some families out of the vicious circle of poverty and desperation but it was dependent upon the COS deeming them 'deserving'. In many cases the COS only helped those who had made a concerted attempt to 'help themselves'.

The restructuring of Leicester's footwear industry at the turn of the century combined with the fluctuations in the town's specialised economy to inflict poverty and distress on its workers. Migration was one method adjusting household expenditure in times of economic crisis although the relatively high rents which the poor had to pay meant that those families least able to pay had to earmark the greatest proportion of their disposable income for rent.⁴⁶ Many families in poverty possessed few resources and moved more frequently than the non-poor. Similarly, most of those who emigrated took few possessions other than their own labour and aspirations for a new life.⁴⁷ This is a clear example of the philosophical determination of relief based on a social and moral interpretation of 'self-help' among different working class applicants. Movement was one response to the pressures on families in times of need, although emigration was only perceived by a small number as the only likely long-term solution to the problem of poverty. It is apparent that the evidence from COS records does lead us to reconsider the type of person and type of motives which underlay late Victorian and Edwardian colonial emigration, despite the potential limitations of who the COS recorded in their case histories. The extent to which the case study is representative of other provincial towns awaits further research on this theme using records from similar charitable bodies.

It is difficult to assign the poor who tried to emigrate into a single category regardless of occupation, behaviour, and attitude, because of their diversity of their experiences and the solutions which they sought to their problems. The range of cases dealt with by the COS emphasizes their diversity. The poor varied in their composition (i.e. they were drawn from various sections of the working classes), reactions and resolve to overcome their condition. Families reacted differently to poverty while the COS and official relief agencies treated different groups in a variety of ways. Yet, as particular emigration

46. F. Engels, *The condition of the working class in England in 1844*. London: 1892

47. A similar point was made by Evans in the context of late Victorian Cardiff where middle class control of the Provident Dispensary meant that only families seen to be helping themselves were assisted. See N. Evans, 'Urbanisation, elite attitudes and philanthropy: Cardiff, 1850-1914', *Int. Rev. Soc. Hist.*, 27 (1982), pp.290-323

experiences suggest, in the final analysis one should concentrate on individual families to understand their attitudes and perceptions of their condition.⁴⁸

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor M. Rose, University of Manchester, for the helpful and constructive comments he made on an earlier draft. I am also grateful to Christ Church College of Higher Education for typing the manuscript and to the Board of Governors for financial support towards completing this paper. In addition, I would like to thank Mrs K. Moore (Cartographer, University of Leicester) for drawing the illustrations.

Personal details

Stephen Page graduated from Staffordshire Polytechnic with a first degree in human geography in 1984. Between 1984 and 1987 he was an Economic and Social Research Council Research Student in the Department of Geography at the University of Leicester examining the geography of poverty in late Victorian and Edwardian Leicester. Since receiving his doctorate in 1987, he has taught human geography and is currently a Senior Lecturer in Geography at Christ Church College of Higher Education, Canterbury.

48. The *Welshman* for the 1840s contains a wealth of information on emigration including advertisements and reports of people who had left mid-Wales: National Library of Wales. In addition, letters found in collections collated by Workmen Emigration Societies such as Dafydd Williams's letter of March 1842 to his family in South Wales documents the assisted emigration process.