

# Was Dick Whittington taller than those he left behind? Anthropometric measures, migration and the quality of life in early nineteenth century London? ☆

Jane Humphries, Timothy Leunig \*

*All Souls College, Oxford University, UK  
Department of Economic History, LSE, UK*

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## Abstract

Using a new source of evidence we explore the mobility of mid-nineteenth century seamen. Among seamen born outside London, the tall, the literate and those who could remember the exact day, month and year when they were born, characteristics that we suggest mark them out as men with more choices in life, were more likely to migrate to London. Contrary to what might be inferred from contemporary descriptions of urban disamenities or from persistent differentials in mortality, London appears as a desirable destination for those who could choose. The conclusion must be that London was not so bad, and we should adjust our perception of the problems of urbanisation accordingly, with implications for the wider debate on the standard of living during the industrial revolution. The paper's methodological interest is the use of height as an explanatory variable in the analysis of migration. Although correlated with other variables that are routinely used in anthropometric studies to indicate life chances, such as literacy and the ability to know and recall date of birth, height has empirical advantages over these alternatives in that it exhibits higher levels of significance. Moreover while literacy and heaping are in essence binary variables, height is a (near) continuous one, and one that allows us to test for linear and non-linear responses, as we do with interesting results in this paper. Perhaps the most fruitful use of height in historical analyses may turn out to be as an explanatory variable; at the very least such a research strategy provides anthropometric historians with further opportunities.

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\* Corresponding author. Fax: +44 20 7955 7730.

*E-mail addresses:* [Jane.Humphries@all-souls.oxford.ac.uk](mailto:Jane.Humphries@all-souls.oxford.ac.uk) (J. Humphries), [T.Leunig@lse.ac.uk](mailto:T.Leunig@lse.ac.uk) (T. Leunig).

## 1. Introduction

Dick Whittington is the hero of a well-loved British children's story. In the tale, the young Dick, accompanied by his cat, travels from Gloucester to London believing that its streets are paved with gold. When things go badly he is tempted to return home, but, on leaving the city he hears the bells of London ringing. To him they say, "Turn again Whittington, three times Lord Mayor of London". Heartened, he does go back, and after a series of adventures the prophecy comes true. Dick marries his sweetheart Alice, makes a fortune and becomes Lord Mayor of London three times. The story, like most folklore, has a basis in fact: there was indeed a Richard Whittington, born in Pauntley Gloucestershire in the 1350s, who migrated to London, became an apprentice, and later a master, a rich man, and Lord Mayor of London, not three, but four times!

In migrating Whittington did what many had done, and many more would do in the centuries that followed: move to a large city, and, in particular, to London. Modern analyses of migration have been heavily influenced by Ravenstein's pioneering work on the published censuses of 1871 and 1881 which gave rise to his "laws" of migration (Grigg, 1977). While Ravenstein famously hypothesized that most nineteenth-century migration was over short distances, he also suggested that migrants going longer distances tended to go to one of the great centres of commerce or industry. Drawing on the 1851 census, Anderson found that 54% of the British population lived more than 2 km from their place of birth, with those moving to the cities moving particularly far: 80% of migrants to London had been born at least 26 km away (Anderson, 1990). Thus Anderson's and other studies confirm the propositions that while many people moved, migration was often only over short distances, but that those who moved to London and other important urban labour markets moved much further on average. (Anderson, 1990; Boyer, 1997; Boyer and Hatton, 1997).

Although some people would have migrated from towns to the countryside, the pattern was predominantly the other way, for this was an era in which Britain changed from being a predominantly rural to an increasingly urban society. In 1750, at the start of the industrial revolution, 21% of the English population lived in towns of 5000 or more inhabitants. By 1800 that figure had grown to 28%. This total may not sound dramatic, but it accounted for more than half of all European urbanisation in this period (Wrigley, 2004, pp. 89–90). The speed of urbanisation accelerated further in the first half of the nineteenth century, with the growth rates of urban areas increasing from 2.7% in the late eighteenth century to 3.2% in the early nineteenth century, before falling back to around 2% in the late nineteenth century (Wrigley, 2004, table 3.11 p. 88, Baines and Woods, 2004, table 2.3, p. 44). The early nineteenth century, the era with which this paper is concerned, thus represents the peak period for urbanisation in English and Welsh history. Understanding who migrated is therefore an important historical question.

The source of urbanisation was not a decline in the numbers employed in agriculture, since these remained roughly constant from 1600 until 1840. But given the rise in total population, a constant number of workers in agriculture implies a declining agricultural share of the workforce, in this case from around 55% in 1700 to 40% in 1800 and 25% in 1850 (Wrigley, 2004, p. 90). The rise in the number of non-agricultural workers is not a sufficient condition for urbanisation, but it does permit it, since unlike agricultural work, manufacturing and service jobs were geographically more flexible. It was the economies of scale and agglomeration in what we now call "the industrial revolution" that increasingly concentrated manufacturing in factories, and concentrated those factories in towns and cities. With that concentration came a concentration of services that support manufacturing, such as merchants, ports, and docks, as well as of personal services, such as retailing, and, of course, domestic service.

Migration within Britain is therefore an important aspect of British history. Yet its study even for the nineteenth century, relatively rich in documentation, has been limited by the data available (Whyte, 2004). One obvious question is: who moves? The published census returns allow large-scale, comparative analyses (Long and Ferrie, 2003; Long, 2005). The census enumerators' books from 1841 onwards provide detailed information on moves over the life course between birthplaces and places of current residence, with some information on intermediate moves forthcoming from the birthplaces of children. The migration histories of individuals can be explored in more detail by linking entries in the census enumerators' books for successive censuses but the number of definite linkages that can be made tends to be small relative to the effort involved (Pooley and Turnbull, 1998). Accounts of the movements of individuals and families can be constructed on the basis of diaries, memoirs and genealogies (Pooley and D'Cruze, 1994). Although these give migration a human face,

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