

**From the Margins – Ordinary, Respectable,
Aspirational: The Shifting Social Identities of Clerks
from the 1930s to the 1960s.**

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September 2024

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Abstract

This thesis explores the social identities of clerks and considers how they changed between the 1930s and the 1960s. It examines the ways clerks were portrayed in contemporary fiction, film and television. Their perceptions of themselves and their social identities were drawn from an analysis of the responses of a sample of clerical workers to Mass Observation directives between 1939 and 1949 together with transcripts of interviews with clerks in Cambridge and Luton conducted by industrial sociologists, Goldthorpe et al. as part of a study into affluent workers between 1960 and 1963.

This study covers a period of unprecedented change for clerical workers; the relative prosperity and stability of the late 1930s, was broken by war, after which, followed reconstruction, austerity, educational reform and the introduction of the welfare state. Then, from 1951, there was a gradual return to prosperity culminating in Macmillan's boast 'you've never had it so good'.

The research examines the education reforms of the 1930s and the introduction of free universal secondary education following the 1944 Butler Act and their impact upon the individual clerks as a doorway into a new social, financial and cultural life and widening the social and gender composition of the clerical workforce.

It also investigates the feelings of the many clerical workers who moved into the suburbs as owner occupiers to enjoy privatised family lives, a marker of middle-class status. The importance of distancing themselves from the working classes from both council estates and the slums is also considered.

Overall, this explores how these fundamental changes around educational provision, suburbanisation and privatised lifestyles impacted on the social identities of a largely unstudied group, on the fringes of the middle classes, overlapping at one level with elements of the manual working classes and at the other with the professional and managerial middle classes.

Acknowledgement

I want to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my Mum and Dad, Peggy and Edmund Collins, two clerical workers whose hard work, love, continued support and aspiration for their children allowed me to have a university education and many more opportunities and choices about my life than they had ever had.

My thanks go to my husband, Michael for all his help, practical in the form of helping with my IT and doing more than his share of cooking and shopping over the past few months and also for all his love and care when I needed it. I also wish to thank my daughter, Brigid, for proof-reading parts of my thesis and her constant support and encouragement. Finally, I have to thank my supervisor, Ben Jones, for everything he did to support me, for his constructive comments and his continued belief in my ability to complete my research, even when I had no belief myself.

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From the Margins - Ordinary, Respectable, Aspirational: The Shifting Social Identities of Clerks from the 1930s to the 1960s.

Introduction

This study explores the social identities of clerks and how they changed during the mid-twentieth century. It examines public and personal images of clerks; how they were perceived by others in literature and on screen and how they thought about themselves and their place in the world drawn from a detailed analysis of the responses of clerical workers to Mass-Observation directives from 1938 to 1949 and the transcripts of interviews with clerks carried out by Goldthorpe, Lockwood et al. as part of their Affluent Worker studies between 1962 and 1964.¹ In this way, I will seek to examine how social, economic and educational changes in mid-twentieth century Britain, such as the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy, the introduction of universal secondary education, suburbanisation and the spread of owner-occupation together with the austerity of the immediate post war years and the affluence of the later 1950s and early 1960s, shaped the social identities of this group of workers.

To date, clerks have attracted little attention from the academy but, for me, this study is important, not just because it sheds light upon a dynamic, but neglected, group of workers but also because it is my story. The changes discussed in this thesis are precisely the ones which shaped the lives of my parents and thus my own early life. My father was born in 1925. For most of his working life, he was a clerk in a small transport company in Manchester which distributed goods, mainly food, from farms and ports to small wholesalers scattered around Manchester, Lancashire and Cheshire. His responsibilities grew over time, from calculating loads and ensuring the most efficient itineraries for the individual lorries to day-to-day supervision of office staff – a second male clerk, a typist and a female office junior, calculating wages and bonuses, managing stock, dealing with queries from customers and organising driver rotas. The son of a general labourer, my father had had a

¹ [Mass Observation Online - Adam Matthew Digital \(oclc.org\)](https://www.mass-observation.org.uk/)
J. H. Goldthorpe, D. Lockwood, B. Bechhofer & J. Platt, *The Affluent Worker Collection*, University of Essex Special Collections, GB301 Q045; J.H. Goldthorpe, D. Lockwood, *Affluent Worker in the Class Structure, 1961-1962*. [data collection]. UK Data Service, 2010, SN:6512 <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6512-1>.

secondary education, winning a scholarship to grammar school in the mid-1930s, and leaving at 16 after taking his school certificate. His first job was in a grocer's shop as an errand boy and then after the Second World War, he began work as a clerk in the transport company where he remained until the owner retired in the late 1960s and the business was taken over by a larger company. My father was kept on and stayed with them throughout several other take-overs until his retirement at 65.

My mother, born in 1921, was the eldest daughter of a disabled leather worker who was unemployed for much of the 1920s and 1930s. She won a scholarship for grammar school but was unable to take up the opportunity as her family could not afford the necessary books, uniforms and fares so she was educated at the local elementary school leaving at 14. Although it was a struggle, and by this time her father had a job, not as a skilled leather worker, but as a labourer tending the boilers at the local washhouse, she was able to attend a commercial school for twelve months learning shorthand and typing. From there she had a series of jobs working up to secretary to a partner in a chartered accountancy firm until my birth in 1955, when, like most women at that time, she left to become a full-time housewife and mother.

After their marriage in 1948, in common with many of their peers, my parents struggled to find a place to live; initially they lodged with my grandparents, then in the 1952, managed to purchase, with a local authority mortgage, a small, terraced house. Later in 1963, following a small win on the football pools which enabled them to afford the deposit, we moved into a semi-detached on a 1930s estate not far away. This was a huge step up, from four children squashed into a two bedroomed terrace with an outside toilet and tiny backyard, we had three bedrooms, a garden and an inside toilet.

Educating their children was of prime importance to my parents, I and my siblings all attended the local primary school where, in turn, myself and my sisters were entered for and passed the eleven plus and went to grammar school. Comprehensive education had been introduced by the time my brother was eleven, so he was spared the trauma. For my mother, in particular, passing the 11 plus was an absolute priority; it was not just because she had missed her chance, it was also because she saw education and for her, that meant a grammar school education, as the only way for us to achieve our potential, to 'get on' and to have choices about the ways we would live our lives. For this, my parents were prepared to make sacrifices;

there was no car, no holidays abroad and we were the last in the street and the wider family to get central heating, but by the time I left school in 1973 to go to university, the choices open to me were very different from those of my parents in the 1930s and 1940s.

I have no memories of any discussions about class in our family home. If anything, as Labour voters, I understood us to be working class, definitely not lower class or posh but there were lots of books in the house and my mother was fierce about behaviour, good manners and speaking properly. While every family is different, my parents shared common experiences and a way of living with the clerks studied in this thesis. I hope, therefore, that my knowledge and understanding of their values and attitudes and my familiarity with their style of living will bring extra insights into my study of the changing social identities of clerical workers over the middle years of the twentieth century.

Notwithstanding my personal interest in clerks, this study is also important for wider reasons. It encompasses a period of unprecedented change impacting upon the daily lives of 'ordinary' people between 1930s and 1960s. The relative prosperity and stability of the late 1930s, at least for non-manual workers, was broken by six years of war, after which, under the Labour government, there followed reconstruction, the introduction of the welfare state and austerity and then from 1951, under the Conservatives, a gradual return to prosperity culminating in Macmillan's 'you've never had it so good' boast.² Between 1931 and 1971, the number of clerks soared by around 250 per cent from 1,404,000 to 3,479,000 and from 6.7 per cent of the workforce to 13.9 per cent.³ This had wide-ranging implications and raises huge questions. Some relate to the wider economy which drove the demand for clerical work, others, which are the main subject of this research, focus upon how these and other associated changes in the social, economic and educational fabric of Britain during the middle years of the twentieth century, impacted upon the clerks themselves, how they thought about themselves,

² H. Macmillan, speech in Bedford, 20th July 1957, www.bbc.co.uk/onthistday.20thJuly accessed 4th May 2021

³ A. Halsey and J. Webb, (eds.), *Twentieth Century British Social Trends*, (London; Macmillan Press, 2000), p.288; G. Routh, *Occupation and Pay in Great Britain 1906-1979*, (London; Macmillan, 1980), p.24

their daily lives, attitudes and values and how others thought about them. My study into how these fundamental changes around educational provision, suburbanisation and privatised life styles impacted on the social identities of a previously largely unstudied group, a marginal group on the fringes of the middle classes, a fluid, heterogeneous group overlapping at one level with elements of the manual working classes and at the other with the professional and managerial middle classes, provides insights into and a nuanced understanding of the daily realities of class, meritocracy, consumerism, austerity and affluence.

This study is also significant because clerks as a group have been largely neglected by the academy. Several reasons have been put forward to explain this, Crossick, introducing a collection of essays on the Victorian and Edwardian lower-middle class, suggested the main cause was 'the sheer lack of heroism', 'they fail to do anything very striking' while their individualism and the relative absence of organisations specifically championing their interests made them 'intimidating' to study.⁴ A sentiment which was corroborated by Bailey who argued that 'they didn't suffer enough to be interesting'.⁵ While it is true that this study of clerks will not include descriptions of 'daring-do' or epic struggle, it offers a new perspectives on this period of tumultuous change. The upheavals of the Second World War were followed a period of austerity during which the country struggled to rebuild. At the same time, the establishment of the welfare state and the reform of the educational system created a new economic and social landscape. By the mid 1950s, the economy had turned round ushering in a decade of growing prosperity, full employment and political consensus alongside anxieties about the possibility of nuclear war, juvenile delinquency and Britain's declining influence in the world.⁶ Much of the research to date, while exploring these issues around affluence, suburbanisation, the importance of class, meritocracy, the establishment of the welfare state and the development of the consumer society in mid-twentieth century

⁴ G. Crossick, *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914*, (London; Croom Helm, 1977), p.11

⁵ P. Bailey, 'White Collar, Grey Lives? The Lower-middle class revisited', *Journal of British Studies*, 38.3 (1999)

⁶ N. Thomas, 'Will the Real 1950s Please Stand Up? Views of a contradictory decade', *Cultural and Social History*, 5.2 (2008)

Britain has focused primarily on the impact upon the working classes.⁷ I want to show another picture, examining how these events and attitudes created new structures of feelings and their impact on a little studied group - clerical workers. It is a story of fundamental change, of material improvement and new opportunities while at the same time a resetting of relationships and status both within and between classes and the establishment of new identities as will be shown in subsequent chapters. Clerks were people whose opinions and attitudes were rarely sought and even when they were, their thoughts were lumped together with those of the wider middle classes or occasionally the lower-middle classes of which the clerks were only one part. Having established the importance and significance of my study, the next section explains my definition of a clerk, my understanding of the term social identity and the importance of class as an element of identity. It will be followed by a comprehensive review of the historiography on the key characteristics of the middle classes, the lower middle classes and clerks themselves. From this, I explain my key research questions and methodology before mapping out the structure of the thesis as a whole.

The Study Group – the Clerical Worker

He was the file that held all the information about the scholars, he was a reference that could produce at a command the dates of committee decisions and he was an instrument which, with pencil and shorthand notes, could suck in a letter or a report and an hour later produce it typed and nearly paragraphed for signature.⁸

Thus did Victor Canning describe a clerk working in the education office of a local authority in his 1938 novel, *The Wooden Angel*. In this quotation, Canning captured the meaning of the role of clerk, the essential cog who maintained corporate memory, who would take the decisions made by others and put them in a form in

⁷ See for example, F. Zweig, *The Worker in an Affluent Society: Family Life and Industry*, (London; Heinemann, 1961); L. Black & H Pemberton, (eds.), *'An Affluent Society?': Britain's post war 'Golden Age' Revisited*, (Aldershot; Ashgate, 2004); P. Catterall & J. Obelkevich, *Understanding Post-War British Society*, (London; Routledge, 1994); P. Hennessy, *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties*, (London; Penguin, 2007); S. Brooke, 'Gender and Working Class Identity in Britain during the 1950's', *Journal of Social History*, 34.4 (2001)

⁸ V. Canning, *The Wooden Angel*, (London; Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), p.85. First published in 1938 under pseudonym Julian Forest.

which they could be recorded and shared within and outside the organisation, not a decision maker but a conduit through which decisions, policies, information were passed to others. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the title clerk was bestowed upon everyone employed in an office; from the man (always) who acted as the right hand of the owner of the business dealing with confidential matters with authority over others to the junior whose task was to painstakingly copy the letters written by his superiors to be kept as records. However, by the 1930s, the role of office manager had evolved, and the term clerk was restricted to those like Canning's clerk, people who worked in business, financial services or local or national government, recording and retrieving decisions, maintaining ledgers, receiving orders, sending out invoices, chasing up payments and dealing with correspondence. Clerkship was seen to be a position of trust, so one needed to be educated and respectable, the role was clearly differentiated from that of the manual worker, and clerks were generally considered to be middle class. By the 1960s, while the basic office tasks remained, there was a further shift in meanings attached to clerical work. The educational reforms post war had widened the pool of potential clerical workers, the increasing affluence of manual workers and the reduction of the differentials in pay and conditions of work alongside the influx of women impacted upon the status of clerks. In addition, the trend towards the employment of more professionally qualified staff, for example, accountants and managers, stretched the hierarchy within many businesses and pushed clerical workers down the ladder.⁹

My research focuses upon the routine clerks, employed in government, both local and national, business and financial services, necessarily required to be numerate and literate, maybe with some supervisory responsibilities, who worked to management designed systems, within specified guidelines and limits on their decision-making. As a group, they form the largest proportion of the office workforce and are distinguished from those with professional qualifications such as solicitors, accountants or those with managerial and policy responsibilities who had more autonomy, higher incomes and status. I have based my definition of the clerk on that

⁹ D. Matthews, M. Anderson J. R. Edwards, 'The Rise of the Professional Accountant in British Management', *The Economic History Review, New Series*, 50.3 (1997). In 1931 there were 21,490 qualified accountants by 1961, 54,938.

adopted by the Registrar-General for census purposes. Yet even though they are recorded as a single group, they were not a homogeneous group.¹⁰ There were significant differences between those employed by banks and insurance companies, civil servants and local authority clerks and general commercial clerks.¹¹ Not only did bank and insurance clerks earn higher salaries but they benefited from a closed labour market. Recruited at 16 or 18, they had a clear career ladder with regular pay increments, good prospects of promotion, opportunities to gain professional qualifications, jobs for life and secure pensions.¹² Civil servants and local authority clerks, sometimes referred to as bureaucrats, (usually as a term of derision) followed a different path depending upon their department. Some were recruited as teenagers and trained as administrators or into professional posts, others were more like the general clerks described below, albeit enjoying job security and guaranteed pensions. The careers of routine commercial clerks were more uncertain, there were few nationally recognised clerical qualifications with individual companies having their own requirements, systems of work, salaries and conditions, there was no uniformity and no single pathway of clerical experience.

Furthermore, the clerical work force was also split by gender, the experiences of women were very different to that of the men. The period saw a huge increase in the numbers of women in the office, from 646,000 in 1931 to 2,453,000 by 1971, from 46 per cent to 71 per cent of the workforce. Women were concentrated into low-wage, low-status jobs, mainly as shorthand typists, typists and machine operators; occupations which had become a female ghetto from which there were few prospects of progressing.¹³ In addition, pre-war a marriage bar, which forced women

¹⁰ S. R. S. Szreter, 'The Official Representation of Social Classes in Britain, the United States and France: The Professional Model and "Les Cadres",' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 35.2 (1993)

¹¹ G. L. Anderson, 'The Social Economy of Late-Victorian Clerks' in G. Crossick (ed.) *The Lower Middle class in Britain*, (London; Croom Helm, 1977); Halsey & Webb, *Twentieth Century British Social Trends*, p.288; M. Heller, *London Clerical Workers 1880-1914*, PhD Thesis, University of London (2003)

¹² Routh, *Occupation and Pay*, p.90 Q50 average pay for bank clerks in 1924 was £280 compared to £159 for Q50 business clerks, by 1955 it was £850 against £500.

¹³ R. Crompton and G. Jones, *White-Collar Proletariat: Deskillling and Gender in Clerical Work* (London; Macmillan Press, 1984), p.137-149; S. Cohn, *The Process of Occupational Sex-Typing: The Feminisation of Clerical Labor in Great Britain*, (Philadelphia; Temple University Press, 1985); Routh, *Occupation and Pay*, p.25. In 1951, there were 559,000 shorthand typists and typists, just under 40 per cent of the total female clerical work force.

to leave their employment upon marriage, was in widespread operation although it was largely dropped for the duration of the War. Post war, it was gradually removed, the Civil Service in 1946, Lloyds Bank in 1949 and the Post Office not until 1963.¹⁴ My mother was only allowed to remain in her job after her marriage in 1948 because of a shortage of experienced accountancy secretaries although for form's sake, she was to be known as Miss Francis and not by her married name. Even into the late 1970s, it remained customary for most women to leave paid employment when their children were born, albeit many returned, often on a part-time basis, as children entered secondary school.¹⁵ The female office career therefore did not follow the same pattern as that of the male clerk and for the most part they did not do the same jobs.

Social Identity and Class

Social identity is based upon understanding of who we are, who other people are, how we define ourselves in relation to others and how others see us.¹⁶ It is about how people identify and connect with others who share similar characteristics which provide them with a sense of who they are and how they are labelled by other people. While class is only one facet of social identity, it is and was important. This was evidenced by many sources from Orwell in 1941 describing England as 'the most class-ridden country under the sun,' to Gorer's findings in 1955, based on responses to a questionnaire in *The People* newspaper, that there was 'no question that class membership is a most important facet of an Englishman's view of himself as a member of society'.¹⁷ While Betjeman's poem 'Beside the Seaside', published in 1958 further highlighted the continued saliency of class as a key feature of post war social identities:

¹⁴ Cohn, *The Process of Occupational Sex-Typing*, p.97-99; G. Anderson, *The White-blouse Revolution: Female Office Workers since 1870*, (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 1988), p.13

¹⁵ H. McCarthy 'Women, Marriage and Paid Work in Post-war Britain', *Women's History Review*, 26.1 (2017)

¹⁶ R. Jenkins, *Social Identity*, Fourth Edition, (London: Routledge 2014), p.19

¹⁷ G. Orwell, *Lion and the Unicorn, Socialism and the English Genius*, (London; Harmondsworth 1982), p.52, originally published in 1941 quoted in D. Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, (New York; Columbia University Press, 1999), p.148; G. Gorer, *Exploring English Character*, (London; Criterion Books 1955) p.34 www.archive.org/details/exploringenglish002763mbp accessed 23rd April 2023

Whether we own a tandem or a Rolls,
Whether we Rudge it or we trudge it, still
A single topic occupies our minds
'Tis hinted at or boldly blazoned in
Our accents, clothes and ways of eating fish
And being introduced and taking leave
'Farewell', 'So Long', 'Bunghosky', 'Cheeribye'
That topic all-absorbing, as it was,
Is now and every shall be, to us -CLASS.¹⁸

Interest in class extended beyond the literary with contemporary social researchers also taking a keen interest in the topic. Key research includes Mass-Observation's investigations into class in 1939, 1948 and 1949; Glass's study into social mobility and social structures in the early 1950s and Goldthorpe, Lockwood et al., *Affluent Worker Studies* between 1961 and 1964. Each asked detailed questions about class and more importantly explored the reasons why individuals assigned themselves to a particular class, their relationships with other classes and the potential for movement between classes.¹⁹ A significant issue from these studies, as Lawrence has pointed out, was the differing understandings of class and the way it was measured, both between the professional sociologists and the general public and also within the responses of those surveyed.²⁰ The academics considered class against objective criteria such as relationship to the means of production or structural inequalities in social capital or power whereas the vernacular sense of class was much looser, more subjective, used as a way of describing social and material differences.

Thus, as Bourke noted in her study of working-class cultures, there was much confusion and ambiguity about the nature of class, the boundaries between them and how to assign people to specific classes with 'people defining class in terms of

¹⁸ J. Betjeman, 'Beside the Seaside', (1958) in *Collected Poems*, 4th Edition (London; John Murray, 1997)

¹⁹ M.O.A. Directives June 1939; September 1948 and January 1949; D. Glass (ed.), *Social Mobility in Britain*, (London; Routledge Kegan Paul, 1954); Goldthorpe, Lockwood et al, *Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*

²⁰ J. Lawrence, 'The British Sense of Class', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35.2 (2000)

socio-economic characteristics, socio-professional categories, social prestige and property'.²¹ She decided therefore to work on the basis of the labels people chose themselves. My approach is similar, for my study I consider class in the vernacular sense and examine the ways in which clerks assessed their own classed social identities based upon their income, lifestyles, education and experiences. Class and experience provided a framework through which people could understand their daily existence and their social relations, it allowed people a place where they felt they belonged with those who shared common experiences and ways of living.²² However, although most of the office workers studied were able to identify themselves in class terms, a minority refused class labels with many of these, particularly in the post war period claiming they were ordinary. As Langhammer argues, this is an elusive, ambiguous term, not a stable identity but one with a wide range of meanings and representing characteristics such as decency, common sense, respectability and authenticity.²³ It is used in different ways by different people, as a means of dividing the expert or official view from that of general public; by politicians to denote shared experiences and authenticity or as Savage suggests, to identify those outside the 'pathologised' working classes and not part of the upper class elite; those who saw themselves as without any special social distinction.²⁴ In this way, I can examine how clerical workers thought about themselves, what class meant to them and how ideas and perceptions of class changed over the period regardless of whether they described themselves as working, middle, lower-middle, ordinary or rejected all class labels and how these differing understandings of class shaped them and their social identities. The next section will examine the ways historians have written about class, specifically the growth and development of the middle and lower-middle classes, the groups in which clerks are traditionally considered to belong.

²¹ J. Bourke, *Working Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity*, (London; Routledge 1994) p.2

²² S. Todd, 'Class, Experience and Britain's Twentieth Century', *Social History*, 39.4 (2014)

²³ C. Langhammer, 'Who the Hell are Ordinary People? Ordinarity as a Category of Historical Analysis', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28 (2018)

²⁴ M. Savage, 'Working Class Identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study', *Sociology* 39.5 (2005)

The Historiography of the Lower-Middle Classes

Research on social identities during the middle years of the twentieth century has been dominated by work on the working classes.²⁵ By comparison, the middle classes and particularly those on the fringes have attracted considerably less interest, a gap which this thesis will help to fill. Over the period of my study, there was little contemporary research into class and clerical workers but two sociological studies, Klingender's *The Condition of Clerical Labour in Britain* published in 1935 and Lockwood's *The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness* from 1958 stand out.²⁶

Both argued that the status of the clerk had changed fundamentally since days of the mid-Victorian 'counting house' when most businesses were small scale. This enabled close personal relationships between the owner and his clerks and for most honest and diligent clerks, job security, status and a good chance of advancement. Klingender argued, from a Marxist perspective, that clerks were working class as they were dependent on their labour and their employers. Furthermore, by the 1930s, the increasing size and complexity of business alongside the introduction of technology and the specialisation of tasks meant that clerical work had become more routinised and menial; 'it is the advent of the office machine, the establishment of the office-factory, which vitally transforms the work of the clerks and finally destroys the former craft basis of their trade'.²⁷ He also sought to prove that the differentials between the working classes and the clerks had eroded both in terms of pay, conditions and especially job security.²⁸ For Klingender, this meant that clerks were 'proletarianised' and firmly part of the working classes, but they failed to fight to improve their lot due to their anti-working-class prejudices, their stigmatisation of

²⁵ For example, A. Davies and S. Field, (eds.) *Workers' Worlds: Cultures and Communities in Manchester and Salford 1880-1939*, (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 1992); E. Roberts, *Women and Families 1940-1970*, (Oxford; Blackwell, 1995); B. Jones, *The Working class in mid-twentieth century England: Community, Identity and Social Memory*, (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 2012); S. Ramsden, *Working Class Community in the Age of Affluence*, (London; Routledge, 2017); B. Rogaly and B. Taylor, *Moving Histories of class and Community: Identity, Place and Belonging in Contemporary England*, (Basingstoke; Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); J. Bourke, *Working Class Cultures*

²⁶ F. D. Klingender, *The Condition of Clerical Labour in Britain*, (London; Martin Lawrence, 1935); D. Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness*, (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1958)

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.61

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.98

trade unions and the way they 'cling to the mentality and habits of life' of the capitalists.²⁹

In contrast, Lockwood, while agreeing that the status and role of clerks had changed significantly since the mid-nineteenth century, rejected the idea of proletarianisation arguing that clerical workers were distinct, different from the working-classes. He based his arguments on what he labelled the 'market situation', the 'work situation' and the 'status situation' drawing on the ideas of Weber in which class was formed from market determined factors, such as occupation, property ownership, education and status from the prestige accorded to the individual or group.³⁰ In terms of the 'market situation' he demonstrated that by the 1950s, there were few material differences between the clerk and the manual worker due to full employment and the post war improvements to wages and conditions such as paid holidays, sick pay, and pensions although the clerical worker tended to have a greater opportunities for upward mobility.³¹ Within the workplace, relationships with employers, managers and more junior staff remained closer, more co-operative and, in the general absence of trade unions, more personal than in the manual workers' larger, more impersonal, physically separate factory units.³² While the 'status situation' of the clerk was certainly higher than the factory or manual worker due to higher levels of education, closer relationships with management and simply by working in a non-manual job in a clean environment.³³

Thus, both highlighted the anomalous social position of clerks, working class with only their labour to sell and with same incomes and employment conditions as manual workers. However, according to Klingender, they refused to recognise this and adopted middle class attitudes and styles of living. While Lockwood saw clerks as materially close to manual workers but distinct in terms of status and relationships within the workplace, a group on the margins of the middle classes. If, therefore, this was a group feeling itself to be middle class, what were the key elements of middle-

²⁹ Ibid., p.xii

³⁰ Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*, p.15-16

³¹ Ibid., p.68

³² Ibid., p.95

³³ Ibid., p.209 Lockwood argues that the values determining status position are those of the dominant class i.e. in twentieth century Britain, those of the middle and professional classes.

class identity, what made an individual middle class and how did they distinguish themselves from other classes?

Kidd and Nicholls have argued, that apart from a few notable exceptions, British social historians did not turn their attention to the middle classes until the 1980s.³⁴ This coincided with a time when there were significant debates about the meaning of class and its use as a tool for analysis. Postmodernism with its rejection of overarching narratives and post-structuralism with its emphasis on language and discourse challenged the importance of class considering it a construct not a social structure.³⁵ There was a shift away from ideas about monolithic classes with shared consciousness and increasing interest in the significance of other forms of subjectivity, such as gender, race, and place alongside a more sensitive consideration of the ways in which language and culture shaped our understanding of the past.³⁶ These intellectual trends shaped the recent historiography of the middle class and offered new insights into the ways in which middle class identities evolved.

In place of the previously widely held view that a unified middle class emerged during the industrial revolution from capitalist merchants and manufacturers primarily located in the north and midlands, a more complex picture has emerged.³⁷ Mostly focused on the period prior to 1900, recent research has highlighted the diversity of the forces which brought together the 'middling sorts' and their adoption of specific mores and ways of life around which the middle class identities began to cohere. For example, Davidoff and Hall's *Family Fortunes* traced the growing importance of the private family home and the domestic ideology of separate spheres with men as breadwinners and women managing the home and bringing up children as a model

³⁴ A. Kidd & D. Nicholls, *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism, Middle class Identity in Britain 1800-1940*, (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 1999), p.1-6 & A. Kidd & D. Nicholls, *The Making of the British Middle Class? Studies of Regional and Cultural Diversity since the Eighteenth Century*, (Stroud; Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1998), p.xvi-xxii. The most notable exception being the collection of essays edited by G. Crossick, *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914*, (London; Croom Holm Ltd, 1977) which will be discussed below.

³⁵ S. Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority in the English industrial city 1840-1914*, (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 2000), p.3

³⁶ See A. Kidd & D. Nicholls, (eds.) *The Making of the British Middle Class*, p.xv-xxxii; S. Gunn, 'The Public Sphere, Modernity and Consumption: New Perspectives of the History of the English Middle Class' in A. Kidd & D. Nicholls, *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism*

³⁷ For example, A. Briggs, *The Age of Improvement*, (London; Longman, 1959); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day*, (London; Harmondsworth, 1969)

middle class life.³⁸ Wahrman provided a different viewpoint, as an example of the 'linguistic turn', in *Imagining the Middle Class*, he analysed contemporary commentaries and speeches between 1780 and 1840 for what he called the 'middle class idiom', ones which differentiated the middling sorts from the debauched and corrupt aristocracy and the extremes of the mob. These, he argued emphasised the role of the middle class as the 'hinge which holds society and the social order together' based upon the rights of property ownership, of order and reason. Ideas which continued to be central to middle class identities throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and beyond.³⁹

Other scholars, such as Morris, Trainor and Gunn saw the development of a distinctive public culture as unifying factors.⁴⁰ This was fostered through membership of religious institutions, municipal bodies, organisations such as literary and philosophical or musical societies and philanthropic organisations conferring prestige, a public role, shared sociability and the means to bestow and seek patronage as well as authority and power. It separated the 'cultivated' from the lower classes, the uneducated and unthinking working classes. While these studies were focused upon the nineteenth century and the elites within the middle classes, they demonstrate key characteristics and values which remained potent factors for *all middle-class identities* throughout the twentieth century, namely respectability, domesticity, privatised family life, order, respect for property, moral and cultural

³⁸ L. Davidoff & C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*, Revised Edition (London; Routledge, 2000), originally published in 1987; See also A. Vickers, 'Golden Age or Separate Spheres? A Review of the categories and chronology of English women's history', *The Historical Journal*, 36.2 (1993) and J. Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle Class Home in Victorian England*, (London; Yale University Press, 1999), both of which argue that the notion of separate spheres was more open and messier in practice.

³⁹ D. Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c.1780-1840* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.46

⁴⁰ R. J. Morris, *Class, Sect and party: The Making of the British Middle Class: Leeds, 1820-1850*, (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 1990); originally conceived as a way of complementing Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* by examining the other side of the class relationship and paying proper attention to evidence of shared experiences, culture and practices; R. H. Trainor, *Black Country Elites: The Experience of Authority in an Industrial Area 1830-1900*, (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1993); S. Gunn, 'Translating Bourdieu: Cultural Capital and the English middle class in historical perspective', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 56.1 (2005); S. Gunn, 'Middle Class modernity and the Provincial City' in Kidd & Nicholls, *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism*, p.112-127

superiority and the need for distance from the rough, uncultivated, manual working classes and the effete, indolent upper classes.

If there has been relatively little research on the middle classes in general, references to clerks and the lower middle class are even fewer and concentrate on the period from about 1870 to 1914 when, according to Crossick, the label lower middle class began to emerge – a group comprising clerical workers and a ‘petite bourgeoisie’ of shopkeepers and small business owners.⁴¹ These two groups had little in common apart from their vociferous antipathy to the manual working class, economic insecurity and marginal social status. All of which contributed to their somewhat excessive concerns about respectability and their need to demonstrate social superiority through dress, housing and possessions.⁴²

Both Crossick and Anderson offer insights into the experiences of late Victorian and Edwardian clerks.⁴³ While emphasising the diversity of clerical workers, they paint a picture of decline from a supposed golden age of the mid-Victorian counting house clerk. They argue that prospects for advancement were reducing and while the numbers of clerks were increasing, improved educational provision, the introduction of women and foreign clerks into the workplace resulted in deteriorating wages and rising unemployment. At the same time, the size of business units was increasing and becoming more complex leading to rationalisation and specialisation within the workplace which, in turn, resulted in deskilling and loss of status. Situations which the clerks could not or did not resist due to their middle class sensibilities, their overwhelming requirement for respectability, their individualism and aversion to collective action or trade unions; as George Bernard Shaw, then an estate agent’s clerk, wrote in 1870s, ‘it would have been considered a most ungentlemanly thing to do’.⁴⁴ These factors may be seen as a contribution to the

⁴¹ G. Crossick ‘The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain: A Discussion’ in G. Crossick (ed.), *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914*, (London; Croom Helm, 1977), p.13-14

⁴² H. McLeod, ‘White Collar Values and the Role of Religion’ in Crossick, *The Lower Middle Class*, p.61-88 emphasized the importance of respectability as a way of proving themselves as worthy of trust and as a sign of superiority to manual workers; S. M. Gaskell, ‘Housing and the Lower Middle Class’ in Crossick, *The Lower Middle Class*, highlighted the importance of privatised domesticity as a sign of status.

⁴³ G. Anderson, ‘The Social Economy of Late Victorian Clerks’, in G. Crossick, *The Lower Middle Class*

⁴⁴ Crossick, ‘The Emergence’ in Crossick, *The Lower Middle Class*, p.25-27. Anderson, ‘The Social Economy’ in Crossick, *The Lower Middle Class*, p.116-128

view of the clerk as dependent, weak, and overly deferential aligning themselves entirely with their employers. On the other hand, identifying with the employer, whether this be in terms of emulating dress and manners or adopting similar respectable lifestyles, endowed status upon the clerk, made them appear as gentlemen. It is a sign of the lack of interest in the Victorian and Edwardian clerk that there were no further interventions until 1998 when Guerriero Wilson in his study of Glasgow clerks reported the same pattern of decline, of deskilling, reduced income and prospects and status anxiety.⁴⁵

However, this model has been challenged by Michael Heller who argued that the premise of the decline and loss of status was mistaken based upon an uncritical acceptance of propaganda from the clerical unions and commentators such as the Marxist Klingender.⁴⁶ He suggested that, in general, salary levels remained stable and that, far from being overstocked, the growth of the clerical labour market was driven by increasing demand due to general economic expansion. Furthermore, he claimed that bureaucratization and technological advances, rather than deskilling clerks, brought professionalization and stability while the employment of women, who became in effect a secondary, disadvantaged sector, removed male clerks from the most menial and repetitive work and thus helped to boost male clerks' status.⁴⁷ These interpretations were supported by Attewell who argued the picture of the counting house clerk responsible for all aspects of office work was a myth and Cohn who claimed the cheap labour provided by women allowed for the upgrading of work for males and thus higher salaries and greater opportunities.⁴⁸ Moreover, Heller explored through personal testimonies, the 'lived experience' of clerks which revealed a different picture to the exploited drudgery suggested by Klingender, Anderson and Guerriero Wilson, one in which clerical work in London offered stability, respectability and opportunity.

⁴⁵ R. Guerriero Wilson, *Disillusionment or New Opportunities? The Changing Nature of Work in Offices, Glasgow 1880-1914*, (Aldershot; Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 1998)

⁴⁶ M. Heller, *London Clerical Workers 1880-1914: The Search for Stability*, PhD thesis, (University of London 2004)

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.173

⁴⁸ P. Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled: A Study in False Nostalgia', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 2.4 (1989); Cohn, *The Process of Occupational Sex-Typing*

These works explore the development of middle class, lower middle and clerical lives and values in the years leading up to my period of study, they are important as identities evolve slowly. Moreover, these are the circumstances in which many of the inter-war clerks grew up and these attitudes and experiences conditioned and helped to shape the ways in which their social identities developed.

The Middle Classes and Clerks – the inter and post war years

I will now examine the ways in which historians have addressed questions of clerical experience and class during the period of my study. As a starting point and as it is important to acknowledge that classes are interdependent and relational, not monolithic, McKibbin's valuable study which he described as 'about the fundamental mentalities and structures of English society' provided a comparative analysis of a England segregated between classes from 1918 to 1951.⁴⁹ Divided into three broad classes, upper, middle and working, with the upper class defined by wealth and birth and the others primarily by the split between manual and non-manual workers, he examined how each class experienced work, education, housing, religion, leisure and culture and the shifting relationships between the classes concluding that there were distinct working-class and middle class cultures albeit with significant blurring at the margins. While he recognised the changing character of the middle class as numbers soared and the development of what has been called a 'modern' middle class made up of, for example, office workers, technicians, librarians, social workers and teachers, he underplayed the wide range of economic and cultural differences evident both within the middle class as a whole and within the individual fractions. The gulf between a civil service permanent secretary and a railway clerk was huge, not only in terms of income, in 1935 one earned over fifteen times more than the other, but also in education and status, yet both are said to be middle class, the relationships within the middle class form a key question for my thesis.⁵⁰

Furthermore, as Lawrence suggests, one can ask why certain activities or practices be labelled middle or working-class – why was an aspiration to owner-occupation, for example, considered a middle class characteristic when manual

⁴⁹ R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1950* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1998), p.v.

⁵⁰ G. Routh, *Occupation and Pay*, p.73 and p.90. In 1935 earnings for a male Permanent Secretary were £3,500 per annum while for the average male railway clerk it was £224.

workers in steady employment were equally interested in buying homes on suburban estates and the pre-1914 terraces near the centre of towns housed manual and non-manual workers.⁵¹ Although the interwar period took up the main part of his study, crucially McKibbin extended it to 1951 which allows for consideration of both the impact of the War, the Labour victory in 1945, the fundamental educational reforms, the introduction of the welfare state and the austerity and construction on class identities and this thesis will build upon these insights and take the story forward through to the 1960s and the so-called 'age of affluence'.

Moreover, as McKibbin showed, the mid-twentieth century middle class was very different to that of the Victorian and Edwardian elites. In part this was due to the increasing numbers of lower middle-class clerks and shopkeepers and also to the growth in numbers of salaried managers and administrators in response to changes in business organisation and trends towards amalgamations and larger companies.⁵² At the same time suburbia and its distinctive ways of life grew in significance. Gunn and Bell chronicled the growth of the suburban middle classes from the mid-nineteenth century to the present and their role in the development of suburbia with a distinctive way of life based upon owner-occupation, respectability, self-help, regard for education, the nuclear family and a privatised home life.⁵³ Jackson's work covering the first half of the twentieth century followed a similar trajectory with a focus upon the suburbs and patterns of consumption from houses and education to holidays and leisure activities.⁵⁴ Other research has considered middle class identities from different perspectives, for example through the growth of suburbs in the interwar years; the quest for education or around patterns of consumption and taste.⁵⁵ These studies all emphasised the continuing salience of factors around

⁵¹ J. Lawrence, 'Review article: The British Sense of Class', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35. 2 (2000)

⁵² McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p.45-48; the middle class rose from about nine million in 1921 to over thirteen million in 1951; numbers of clerical workers increased from 6.72 per cent to 10.68 per cent of the workforce.

⁵³ S. Gunn & R. Bell, *Middle Classes, Their Rise and Sprawl*, (London; Cassell & Co, 2002)

⁵⁴ A. Jackson, *The Middle Class 1900-1950* (London; David St John Thomas, 1991)

⁵⁵ For example, P. Scott, *The Making of the Modern British Home: The Suburban Semi and Family Life between the Wars*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2013); M. Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change in England*, (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1987)

education, hard work, self-reliance, respectability, good manners, and privatised family life as key to middle class identity.

McKibbin's research and specifically his discussions about class relationships and the antagonism between the middle and working classes and how they played out in political terms deserve special attention.⁵⁶ He argued that the interwar years were the period in which the middle class were 'enthroned' with their interests at the heart of Conservative government policies equating the middle class as the essence of Englishness. Stability, rising real incomes, low interest rates and the easy availability of mortgages fuelled the housing boom while increasing numbers of grammar school places and easy availability of consumer goods allowed more of the lower middle classes and clerks to enjoy lifestyles previously confined to the more established middle classes. These advances had to be defended against the organised working class, the Labour Party and the trade unions who were seeking to overturn the status quo and destroy the Nation, a fear which shaped a sense of middle-class unity and exaggerated the differences with the working classes.

Yet despite unity in face of the working class, there were divisions within the middle classes, in particular in the arguments about materialism, one which accused the lower middle class generally and specifically clerks of 'aping their betters' and being sucked into a consumer culture where status was acquired and measured by the possession of goods.⁵⁷ The increasing availability of consumer goods and the differences household goods such as vacuum cleaners and radios made to family life has been much explored and this thesis will expand upon this to examine the impact specifically on clerical identities.⁵⁸

Again, there has been little research specifically upon the inter-war lower middle classes. One exception is Koshar's work on interwar Europe which brings

⁵⁶ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p.58 & p.528; McKibbin, 'Class and Conventional Wisdom: The Conservative Party and the 'Public' in Interwar Britain' in *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain: 1880-1950*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1994), p.259-293

⁵⁷ J. Greenfield, S. O'Connell & C. Reid, 'Gender, Consumer Culture and the Middle-Class Male: 1918-1939' in A. Kidd & D. Nicholls, *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism*, p.183-197

⁵⁸ For example, J. Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain 1880-1980*, (London: Longman, 1994); S. Bowden, 'The New Consumerism', in P. Johnson (ed.), *Twentieth Century Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change*, (Harlow; Longman, 1994); J. Giles, 'Class, Gender and Domestic Consumption 1920-1950' in E. Casey and L. Martens (eds.), *Gender and Consumption: Domestic Cultures and the Commercialisation of Everyday Life*, (Aldershot; Ashgate, 2007)

together essays on the experiences of lower middle-class people, two of which focus upon England.⁵⁹ These two essays provide a more nuanced picture of lower middle-class politics than that depicted by McKibbin. In the first, Jeffery argues that the Baldwin governments during the 1930s demanded only acquiescence from lower middle classes, to act as a 'political reserve army' against socialism if required and in return the government would provide stability and security.⁶⁰ However, as that stability broke down and war threatened, there was a upsurge of interest in more radical ideas, some from the fascist right but most from the left. Over 1,000 Left Book Clubs were established and over 2,000 groups raising aid for Spain while the radical non-fiction Pelican specials could sell over 100,000 copies.⁶¹ He argued that Mass Observation was part of this radicalism, a new way of having a voice, of contributing ideas to those who governed. Jeffery and Pennybacker's essay on a small group of activist clerks working for London County Council whose interests ranged from employment rights, birth control, aid for Spain to pacifism and the League of Nations, demonstrated the breadth of affiliations espoused by clerks.⁶²

However, the Second World War, the Labour government, the creation of the welfare state and the increasing affluence and influence of the working class shifted class relations.⁶³ Right wing commentators such as Lewis and Maude predicted the destruction of the middle class, while the Mass-Observation file report *Middle Class Why?* described the sense that the middle classes and their values were being rejected and threatened by the tendency towards 'levelling down'.⁶⁴ After 1951, the return of Conservative government, the ending of rationing, full employment and increasing affluence especially for skilled manual workers led to a further panic about class relations from the late 1950s, this time it was the turn of working class identities

⁵⁹ R. Koshar, *Splintered Classes: Politics and the Lower Middle Classes in Interwar Europe*, (New York; Holmes & Meir, 1990)

⁶⁰ T. Jeffery, 'A Place in the Nation: The Lower Middle Class in England', in Koshar, *Splintered Classes*, p.78

⁶¹ Ibid., p.86

⁶² S. Pennybacker, 'Changing Convictions: London County Council Blackcoated Activism between the Wars', in Koshar, *Splintered Classes*, p.97-120

⁶³ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p.62 from 1938 salaries remained static while wages of manual workers increased by 30% between 1938-1940.

⁶⁴ Lewis and Maude, *The English Middle Classes*, (London; Phoenix House, 1949); M.O.A, *File Report, FR 3073, 'Middle Class Why?'*, December 1948

<http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk.uea.idm.oclc.org/.../FileReport-3073> Accessed June 12, 2023.

which appeared to be threatened. Academics and commentators such as Zweig, Abrams and Rose hypothesized that the manual working class was forsaking traditional collective working class culture and adopting middle class values and life styles.⁶⁵ This thesis of embourgeoisement was tested in 1962 when Goldthorpe, Lockwood et al. carried out a major study into the attitudes and values of affluent manual workers in Luton, as part of this they collected significant data from clerical workers in both Luton and Cambridge but used it simply as a control against which to assess changes in manual workers' attitudes and values without interrogating the details of the clerical workers responses.⁶⁶ This data, however, forms a significant element of my own research. There has been considerable attention in the literature to the impact of affluence on politics, the economy, the development of youth culture, the dangers of consumerism and especially to changes in working class experience.⁶⁷ However, there has been little recognition of the ways in which affluence affected class relations of the middle class and clerical workers; specifically how the growing prosperity of manual workers altered clerical workers' sense of class identity.

Jon Lawrence has argued that the emergence of the so-called 'affluent worker' and the changing attitudes to work, a privatised, family-centred lifestyle, and the decline of deference should be placed within a much longer time frame, not a post war phenomenon but one with roots in the interwar years.⁶⁸ This re-enforces the importance of the periodisation of my study with growing numbers of manual workers as owner occupiers and possessors of consumer goods from the 1930s, raising the question of how this changed the dynamic between the classes.⁶⁹ Lawrence's work

⁶⁵ F. Zweig, *The Worker in an affluent society; family life and industry*, (London; Heinemann, 1961); M. Abrams and R. Rose, *Must Labour Lose?* (Harmondsworth; Penguin, 1960)

⁶⁶ J. Goldthorpe, D. Lockwood, F. Bechhofer, J. Platt, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.53

⁶⁷ For example, V. Bogdanor and R. Skidelsky (eds), *The Age of Affluence 1951-1964*, (London; Macmillan, 1970); L. Black and H. Pemberton, (eds) *An Affluent Society? Britain's Post-war 'Golden Age' Revisited*, (Aldershot; Ashgate, 2004); S. Brooke, 'Gender and Working-class Identity in Britain during the 1950s', *Journal of Social History*, 34.4 (2001)

⁶⁸ J. Lawrence, 'Class, 'Affluence' and the study of everyday life in Britain, c.1930-64', *Cultural and Society History*, 10.2 (2013)

⁶⁹ See P. Scott, 'Marketing mass home ownership and the creation of the modern working-class consumer in inter-war Britain', *Business History*, 50.1 (2008), p.4-25; G Speight, 'Who Bought the Inter-war semi? The Socio-Economic Characteristics of New House Buyers in the 1930s', *University of Oxford Discussion Paper in Economic and Social History*, 38 (2000)

on distinctions between manual and non-manual workers in the 1960s also examined this shifting dynamic within the workplace specifically around attitudes to promotion, the separation of canteens and the chances of setting up in business concluding that, among Luton clerks and well-paid manual workers, there was considerable blurring of class boundaries and significant diversity of attitudes and questions whether the manual/non-manual split was fundamental to clerical identities, something which in the pre-war responses to Mass-Observation seemed to be central.⁷⁰

Mike Savage has also written about changing social identities drawing on evidence from the responses to the Mass Observation directives on class from 1939 and more particularly from 1948. He argued that the responses in 1948 revealed a new middle class identity, one based, not upon cultural superiority, but rather one which emphasised the technocratic and scientific capabilities of the middle classes which placed them as 'efficient managers of the nation'.⁷¹ This differed sharply from the conclusions of Hinton in his analysis of the responses to the 1939 class directive which he maintained clearly demonstrated a 'taste for culture' was a key distinguishing feature of the middle classes.⁷² Hinton's review of *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method*, disputed Savage's claims criticising his methodology and his interpretation of the Mass Observation responses.⁷³ In particular, he questioned the reliance on the 1948 responses and whether they revealed a long term change or whether the more aggressively anti-working class tone was reaction to the social and economic context of 1948, at a time, when the middle classes were experiencing severe status anxiety due to falling living standards and a perception that the Labour government was biased towards the working classes.⁷⁴ He argued that the evidence from the responses failed to

⁷⁰ J. Lawrence, 'Workers' testimony and the sociological reification of manual/non-manual distinctions in 1960s Britain in *Sozial.Geschichte Online* (2017) <http://duepublico.uni-duisburg-essen.de/servlets/DocumentServlet?id=43554> accessed November 12 2021

⁷¹ M. Savage, 'Affluence and Social Change in the Making of Technocratic Middle-class Identities', *Contemporary British History* 22.4 (2008); M. Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2010)

⁷² J. Hinton, 'The "Class Complex": Mass Observation and Cultural Distinction in pre-war Britain', *Past and Present*, 199 (2008)

⁷³ J. Hinton, 'Self-Reflections in the Mass: Review of M. Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method*', *History Workshop Journal*, 75.1 (2013)

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.253

demonstrate a rejection of culture and clearly showed the Mass Observers as distinctive 'thinking people' with a strong sense of intellectual curiosity which encompassed both cultural and scientific and technical matters.⁷⁵ Yet, there was some basis for Savage's contention about the middle classes as 'efficient managers' of the nation but this is largely drawn from the responses to the January 1949 directive which asked about the value of the middle classes.⁷⁶ Written up in file report, *Middle Class Why?*, the middle classes were seen both as 'forming the managerial and administrative section' of the country and as 'the trustees and the builders of culture' for whom both cultural and scientific knowledge were fundamental; 'they push our development of cultural and education, our creative arts, our scientific and other knowledge'.⁷⁷

Key Research Questions

The historiography therefore raises significant questions and exposes substantial gaps when considering the social identities of clerks during the mid-twentieth century. Firstly, there is little work on clerks in the period after 1914 and what there is, is often included within a wider discussion about the middle classes. This thesis aims to offer new focus putting clerks at the centre, to bring them from the margins so that there is a better understanding of a much neglected, overlooked group – one often condemned for its ordinariness – but, which, nevertheless, was the fastest growing occupational group between 1931 and 1971. My research will address the following questions:

- What were the key elements which made up the social identities of clerical workers? How did they perceive themselves and how were they portrayed by others in literature and film?
- If, as Klingender and Lockwood concluded clerks aspire to be middle class, what were the factors which assigned them to the middle classes? Were

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.254; Hilton gives several examples from Savage's book, *Identities and Social Change*, p.63-64: the response of a mill manager who railed against the 'pseudo highbrows' and that of a librarian who dismissed those pretending an interest in Bloomsbury and high culture. In both cases, Hilton argues, it was the inauthenticity, the pretence which they were rejecting, not high culture itself and that they both saw themselves as highly cultured.

⁷⁶ See appendix 2, p.267

⁷⁷ M. Tarrant, 'Middle Class Why?' *M.O.A. File Report 3073*, (1949), p.112

these shared by all clerks and how did they change over the course of the mid-twentieth century?

- What was the role of class in clerical identity? How did the importance and reality of class change over the course of mid-twentieth century England?
- What were the relationships between clerks and manual and professional and managerial workers? How did they distinguish themselves?
- How did the educational reforms and ideas about meritocracy impact upon clerical experiences and aspirations?
- What role did suburbanisation, privatised lifestyles and the spread of owner-occupation play in moulding the aspirations and everyday lives of clerks?
- How did the increasing affluence of manual workers, the closing of differentials in both incomes and conditions and their supposed adoption of middle-class values impact upon social identities?

Methodology and sources

As has been discussed, there are two sides to social identity, how others identify us and how we identify ourselves – the commonalities in behaviour, attitudes, ways of living and experience which bring us together and exclude others.⁷⁸ It was essential therefore to develop a methodology which enabled me to examine these two aspects. Perceptions about clerks arise from a wide range of sources from day-to-day dealings as workers, friends or neighbours; from how clerks behave; where they live; their spending habits; where they send their children to school or how they spend their leisure time; through the ways they are classified in the Census or other government studies, by marketing labels or sociological research. These are all valuable sources revealing information about how clerks are perceived although they tend to focus on individual aspects of the clerks' persona within specific categories and also to aggregate their responses. These studies such as Massey's into spending patterns, Willmott and Young on suburban life and Floud on social class

⁷⁸ R Jenkins, 'Categorization: Identity, social process and epistemology', *Current Sociology*, 48.3 (2000), p.7

and secondary education have been analysed as part of my research and incorporated into my work.⁷⁹

However, data from these studies and surveys produce a two-dimensional picture of clerical workers lives and experiences and, in order to reveal a more complete, rounded and nuanced representation of feelings and identities, it is essential to dig deeper. Raymond Williams wrote; 'We learn each element as a precipitate, but in the living experience of the time every element was in solution, an inseparable part of a complex whole.'⁸⁰ To understand the social identities of clerks therefore, I need to examine factors beyond the traditional 'elements' of study such as education, family or work, important as they are, and look at different and more innovative ways of exploring social identities and consider how their different characteristics and experiences came together and the ways in which 'particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living.'⁸¹

As Williams suggested, one way of achieving this 360-degree view of the clerk was through an analysis of contemporary fiction. Not only would this allow me to see the clerks in the round but also provide a way of understanding what Williams defines as the 'structures of feeling', an evasive and slippery term which I understand to mean the ways in which particular political, social and economic structures combine to create patterns of feelings among specific groups of people creating what might be called the 'spirit of the time', a fluid concept which captures the lived experiences of a particular group.⁸²

Contemporary fiction is unique in allowing the reader to share experiences and through the eyes of contemporaries to learn how people lived and worked, to gain

⁷⁹ See for example, P. Massey, 'The Expenditure of 1360 British Middleclass Households in 1938-39', *Journal of Royal Statistical Society*, 105.3 (1942); P. Willmott & M. Young, *Family and Class in London suburb*, (London; Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960) and J. Floud, 'Social Status and Secondary Education since the 1944 Act: Some data from London' in D V Glass, (ed.), *Social Mobility in Britain*, (London; Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954)

⁸⁰ R Williams, *The Long Revolution*, (Parthian Books, 2012). *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/UEA/detail.action?docID=1426446>. p.103, First published London, Chatto & Windus 1961

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.103

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.366 & B. Highmore, *Cultural Feeling: Mood, Mediation and Cultural Politics*, (London: Taylor and Francis 2017), p.21. Williams gives the example of the emergence of the 'angry young men' in 1950s who have been able to acquire a good education, where there are discourses about meritocracy and opportunity but they feel held back by the forces of class and the power of the establishment – the tensions between individual mobility and the stability of institutions.

insights into feelings, mentalities and values within a whole way of life. I have therefore used fiction, subject to careful interrogation and triangulations with other sources, as one way of exploring the realities of clerical life. As it is clearly impractical to survey all works of fictions involving clerks, I have considered a selection of books and films with a clerk as the main protagonist, and which were popular with the general public. While each are individual, demonstrating a multitude of different situations, events and characters, there are common recurring themes which, over time, build up pictures of clerks; representations of what people expect and believe to be typical of clerical workers, images which influence the ways in which clerks are perceived by the public and themselves.

Turning now to the question of how clerks identified themselves, the task of obtaining direct evidence of their thoughts proved challenging. Studies such as those by Hall and Caradog Jones in 1950 and Willmott and Young in 1956 explored the differing ways in which individuals assessed the social standing of specific occupations.⁸³ Both claimed considerable consensus with professional occupations ranked as the most prestigious and unskilled labouring jobs as the least although there was limited agreement between respondents around the relative prestige of skilled manual and routine non-manual occupations. Furthermore, there were significant differences between the lists from 1950 when the majority of consultees were professional or non-manual workers and the 1956 survey, which was based on responses from manual workers. The 1956 survey ranked the social status of manual jobs such as carpenter, fitter or miner more highly than the non-manual workers.⁸⁴ Using the same 30 occupational categories, a civil servant was ranked 5th in 1950 and 11th in 1956, an insurance agent moved from 15th to 20th and a routine clerk from 18th to 23rd, while fitters rose from 19th to 15th and carpenters from 20th to 16th.

⁸³ J. Hall & D. Caradog Jones, 'Social Grading of Occupations', *British Journal of Sociology*, 1.1. (1950); C. A. Moser, 'The Social Grading of Occupations', in D. V. Glass, (ed.), *Social Mobility in Britain*, (London; Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954); M. Young & P. Willmott, 'Social Grading by Manual Workers', *British Journal of Sociology*, 7. 4 (1956)

⁸⁴ Within Young and Willmott's sample, there were a significant number of working-class respondents, labelled as 'deviants' who used very different criteria based upon value to the wider community, with medical officers still ranked highly together with farm labourers, miners and police while clerks or commercial travellers were near the bottom of the scale.

In addition, also in 1950, Martin examined how individuals working in specific occupational groupings thought about their class identities as a way of exploring differences between subjective and objective class.⁸⁵ Those in administrative, professional or intermediate non-manual posts overwhelmingly declared themselves part of the middle classes. However, those in routine non-manual occupations, mainly clerks, were much more divided with some 45 per cent suggesting they were lower, poor or working class and the rest claiming to be part of the middle classes with less than 3 per cent unable or unwilling to ascribe to any class.

While these show the uncertainty many clerks felt about their class and social identities as well as the differing ways they were considered by others, these are aggregated headlines and do not provide evidence of the feelings of individual clerks nor the reasons behind these assessments so I have based my research on two main primary sources – Mass Observation (M.O.A.) and transcripts of interviews with clerical workers collected as part of the Affluent Worker studies.⁸⁶ In this way I have been able to trace changing responses to similar questions asked in 1939, 1948 and in the interviews of affluent workers in the early 1960s. These have allowed me direct access to the voices of clerical workers and a different type of evidence beyond that of the aggregated, quantitative reports of sociological studies or opinion polls.

Mass Observation was fundamentally different from earlier social surveys, not focused upon social problems or representative samples but as a way of demonstrating everyday life – how people feel, how they behave, what they do – to create a ‘new anthropology of ourselves’.⁸⁷ Volunteers were recruited through newspaper articles initially in the *New Statesman* and then more widely in more popular dailies such as *News Chronicle*, *Daily Herald* and *Daily Express*.⁸⁸ According

⁸⁵ F. M. Martin, ‘Some Subjective Aspects of Social Stratification’, in Glass, *Social Mobility*

⁸⁶ [Mass Observation Online - Adam Matthew Digital \(oclc.org\)](#). Goldthorpe et al., The Affluent Worker Collection 1961-1962, University of Essex Special Collections GB302 Q045 and Goldthorpe et al., Affluent Worker in the Class Structure 1961-1962 data collection UK Data Service SN: 6512 DOI: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-6512

⁸⁷ T. Jeffery, ‘Mass Observation: A short History’, *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham University Occasional Paper*, (1978); P. Summerfield, ‘Mass Observation: Social Research or Social Movement’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 20.3 (1985)

⁸⁸ J. Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship online 2013) <https://oxford-universitypressscholarship-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199671045.001.0001/acprof-9780199671045>

to Hinton, although overall some 2,300 Mass Observers signed up, around a quarter answered only one directive and half fewer than four leaving about 1,000 volunteers at any one time, largely young with around two thirds aged under 35, and predominantly middle class.⁸⁹ Clearly the panel was not representative, Mass Observation attracted a specific type of person, one with the literary skills to write detailed responses to wide ranging questions on diverse subjects, from class and race to make-up and fashion choices and who were committed to the idea of social research and willing to share their thoughts and opinions with others. Nevertheless, an examination of individual response to the directives provides insights into how some people thought and felt about particular issues.⁹⁰ Directives were sent out monthly with the panellists promised anonymity and encouraged to be reflective and expansive in their replies. Responses to directives have survived and have been archived by Mass-Observation Online. Of those who replied to the June 1939 directive, I was able to identify eighty clerical workers, and all have been included in my analysis. Only four of these also answered the September 1948 directive and I carried out a similar exercise to that undertaken for the 1939 sample; identifying those in clerical occupations taken in the order they were filed in the archive, until I reached eighty. Where I have consulted other directives, I have confined my analysis to the replies from those included in the two samples.

Like the overall panel, my sample is heavily weighted towards the young with around 47 per cent aged under 25 and 80 per cent under 35 in 1939, although by 1948 this had changed to 16 per cent under 25 and 54 per cent under 35. It is only possible to speculate on this skew towards the relatively youthful. One reason might be that clerical posts were the province of younger workers with the older cohorts promoted into more professional or managerial posts, another might relate to the fact that a substantial majority were single, living with parents, and had the time to get involved in Mass Observation. They may also have been attracted by the radical modernity of Mass-Observation methodology wanting to be a part of a pioneering

accessed 8th November 2021 p.62. *New Statesman* was a left-leaning weekly with a largely middle-class readership

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.267 & p.271. In 1938, less than 8 per cent were factory or manual workers, 17 per cent office workers and the remainder teachers, lawyers, artists, housewives and shopworkers.

⁹⁰ [Mass Observation Online - Adam Matthew Digital \(oclc.org\)](https://www.mass-observation.org/).

organisation or as Jeffery has suggested, influenced by a desire to be heard, no longer to be ignored but to help create a popular front to respond to the growing threats of war and the rise of fascism.⁹¹ I have initially focused upon two main directives from 1939 and 1948 which asked about the class to which the volunteers felt they belonged, the reasoning behind their class assignment alongside supplementary questions about relationships with people from other class backgrounds and their neighbours. From these, together with responses to other specific directives, for example on family life, housing and education, I have been able to build pictures of the ways in which these clerks understood their place in society, not what society was but how it looked like to them. Then, by comparing the responses from 1939 to those in 1948, I examine how six years of war, the advent of a Labour government, continuing austerity and the beginnings of the welfare state impacted on ideas about identity and status.

Over a decade later, in 1961 Goldthorpe, Lockwood et al., conducted another investigation into class and status asking some very similar questions as those posed by Mass-Observation. Their research was focused upon affluent manual workers employed by large scale manufacturing companies in Luton and aimed to test the embourgeoisement thesis which argued that as manual workers become more prosperous, they took on middle class lifestyles and attitudes abandoning traditional working-class values. However, they also interviewed groups of clerical workers as comparators and the transcripts of these interviews have been deposited at the University of Essex. The interviews cover issues such as attitudes to work, politics, leisure activities, aspirations, home tenure, relationships with neighbours and patterns of consumption as well as question about class and status.

I carried out a detailed analysis of 32 transcripts of the clerical worker interviews to examine the ways in which non-managerial clerks from SKF and Laporte, two large manufacturing companies based in Luton, thought about their social identities – how they felt about themselves together with insights into their experiences as white-collar clerks and the impact of social, economic and

⁹¹ T. Jeffery, 'The Lower Middle Class in England' in Kosher, (ed.), *Splintered Classes; Politics and the Lower Middle Classes*, p.71-75

educational changes.⁹² I constructed my sample of 32 based on an examination of the responses to the questions on class structure and the ways these clerks understood class. I worked my way through the transcripts systematically as originally filed by Goldthorpe et al. I continued my analysis of each individual interview until I was confident that I had reached what Guest called 'data saturation' and that the interviews were not revealing new information, simply repeating what had been said by others.⁹³ In addition, I decided to extend my study to consider the thoughts of a different group of clerks - bank and building society clerks who had a much more structured career path within a closed labour market.⁹⁴ Prior to their Luton research, Goldthorpe, Lockwood et al. had carried out a pilot study in Cambridge using a similar questionnaire including the same questions on class. Transcriptions of 171 interviews have been digitised and are available via UK Data Service, of these 23 were conducted with bank or building society clerks and these have been analysed alongside those of Luton clerks to build up the broader picture.⁹⁵

Both the Affluent Worker Study transcripts and Mass Observation directive replies offer direct insights into individual respondents' views. Those from the Mass Observers were anonymous and entirely their own words. Respondents had time and privacy to write their own replies which were mediated only by the nature of the questions asked and conventions around what was considered socially acceptable to say. By contrast, the white-collar workers studied by Goldthorpe, Lockwood et al. were interviewed either in the office or in their own homes with their wives by highly educated strangers from an elite university who came with their own class baggage as well as apparently fixed ideas about class based not just on academic theories but also on subjective matters such as accent, dress or taste in furnishings, books or music.⁹⁶ The interviews were long and formal, a mix of closed questions with people simply asked to choose from a number of options and then a number of open

⁹² Goldthorpe et al. *The Affluent Worker Collection 1961-62*, University of Essex Special Collections,
⁹³ C. Guest, A Bunce, L. Johnson, 'How many Interviews are Enough? An experiment with Data Saturation and Variability', *Field Methods*, 18.1 (2006)

⁹⁴ See p.14 for discussion about different groups of clerical workers

⁹⁵ Lockwood & J. H. Goldthorpe, *Affluent Worker in the Class Structure 1961-62* [data collection] UK Data Service SN:6512 DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6512-1>

⁹⁶ J. Lawrence, 'Social Science Encounters and the Negotiation of Difference in early 1960s England', *History Workshop Journal*, 77.1 (2014)

questions on class and status to which people were expected to respond immediately around topics which, for many were nebulous, unfamiliar or contentious concepts. Furthermore, their responses were not taken down verbatim but were recorded as notes by the interviewers, whose fixed academic ideas about class may have tended to reflect the issues they felt to be important.

I felt it was essential to examine these contemporary testimonies of how individuals understood their place in society and the varying factors which they felt shaped their social identities. In the same way as contemporary fiction, they offer unique insights into the 'structure of feeling', the ways in which events, political ideas, social attitudes and economic conditions come together and mingle in differing ways to shape individual social identities. Moreover, these feelings cannot be shared by contemporary experts who will have had different experiences, nor can they be fully articulated retrospectively.⁹⁷ It was for this reason that I rejected the idea of an oral history approach. I had carried out a small pilot of five interviews immediately prior to the lockdown in 2020. However, my interviewees, who had started work as clerks between 1952 and 1963, all had difficulties in answering questions about class and status, they were hesitant, uncertain and often terse, remarking how it was impossible to put themselves back into how they had felt in the 1960s, over 60 years earlier, given the passage of time, their youth at the time and the ways in which their lives had changed. I therefore concentrated upon the contemporary sources and more specifically the open questions used both in Mass-Observation and by Goldthorpe and his team on class which allowed me to tease out aspects of social identity through the prism of class. While the responses of the clerks were often couched in the traditional language of class, they demonstrated how the clerks themselves, and not the experts who studied them, felt and understood the day-to-day impact of class on their experiences, on their lifestyles and their aspirations and how it shaped their social identities.

The Structure of the Thesis

The changing social identities of clerical workers will be explored over five substantive chapters. The first two chapters examine the differing ways in which the

⁹⁷ J. Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me: The Search for Community in Post-War England*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2019), p.6-7

clerk was depicted in literature and on screen. From a figure of fun, a pompous snob over-concerned about respectability and status; to an exploited, timid figure desperate to maintain his livelihood to a materialist social climber, these differing pictures of the clerk reflect the diversity of the workforce, and the strong stereotypes created in popular culture. They consider how the images changed from the stoic Mr Smeeth in Priestley's *Angel Pavement*, content with his position and terrified of losing it, to the disaffected and manipulative Joe Lampton in *Room at the Top* with his disdain for his roots in the working class, and willing to sacrifice lover, fiancée and his own self-respect to his ambition and consider how far these disparate images reflected the changing times.⁹⁸ Yet, other images hardly changed, the comical Mr Pooter, first published in 1892 was in many respects the twin of Captain Mainwaring who appeared seventy years later in 1968; both were pompous, self-important snobs who nevertheless engendered considerable affection from readers and viewers. The question to be explored is what these representations tell us about perceptions of the clerk and how did they help shape the social identities.

The next two chapters focus upon the factors acknowledged by clerks as key to their social identities which distinguish them from other elements of society, namely education and their lifestyles, the type of neighbourhood in which they lived, and how these changed over the course of the middle years of the twentieth century.

The third chapter considers the ways in which clerks were educated and how the state education system, at both national and local level, was reformed in part to help meet the need for a more educated workforce in commercial, technical and scientific fields. It examines the steady increase in numbers of available scholarships to secondary schools and the role of local education authorities in the introduction of central or higher-grade schools during the pre-war period which widened the pool from which clerks were recruited. The most fundamental changes were brought about by the 1944 Education Act which raised the school leaving age to 15 and introduced universal secondary education paid by the taxpayer with the type of school, grammar, technical or modern, determined by examination at the age of 11. This opened the possibility of a grammar school education to all bright

⁹⁸ J. B. Priestley, *Angel Pavement*, (London; Heinemann, 1930); J. Braine, *Room at the Top*, (London; Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1957)

enough to pass the 11 plus. While a grammar school education was not a pre-requisite for a clerical post, it was essential for jobs in, for example, the civil service, banks and insurance companies which offered the highest status and best opportunities for promotion into managerial and professional roles. At the same time, the raising of the school leaving age and the introduction of commercial subjects in some secondary modern schools together with the expansion of further education colleges and evening classes widened the pool of potential clerical workers.

A local case study focused upon Norwich has also been undertaken. Norwich had a large and very diverse clerical sector due to the presence of the headquarters of Norwich Union, a substantial local government workforce as the home of both the City and the County Council, along with mixed relatively small-scale manufacturing such as printing, engineering and boot and shoe factories, all of which required clerical workers. In 1931, some 12,500 people were employed in commerce and finance and as clerks or typists, together the largest single group at over 20 per cent of the workforce, considerably higher than the 6.7 per cent nationally.⁹⁹ The post-war period saw a continued expansion of white-collar employment in Norwich; the numbers employed in financial services rose from 2,630 to 7,940, over 300 per cent between 1951 and 1971, in business services from 1,302 to over 4,000 while those employed in public administration and defence grew from under 4,000 to 6,010.¹⁰⁰ This growth was driven by significant investment, Norwich Union spent £1.25 million in 1962 on new offices, Her Majesty's Stationery Office was relocated from London to Norwich in 1965 and in 1963 the new University of East Anglia was established; all of which demanded clerical labour which businesses were confident could be sourced in Norwich.¹⁰¹

Clearly clerical workers were essential to the economy and prosperity of Norwich and this case study explores the ways in which the local state education

⁹⁹ C. Clark, 'Work and Employment', in C. Rawcliffe & R. Wilson, (eds.), *Norwich since 1550* (London; Bloomsbury, 2004) p.403-404, table 16.3 & 16.4 sourced from Census; Routh, *Occupation and Pay* p.24

¹⁰⁰ P. Townroe, 'Norwich since 1945' in C. Rawcliffe & R. Wilson, (eds.), *Norwich since 1550* (London; Bloomsbury, 2004) p.476, table 19.3

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p.470-471

system helped to provide local children with the necessary education and skills to access these opportunities. It examines the efforts of Norwich City Council to enable more children to attend secondary schools and to improve the chances of those in the elementary sector by implementing the Hadlow recommendations and creating new senior schools so that by 1940, all children over 11 were educated in senior schools.¹⁰² Post 1944, this investment in education continued as Norwich provided more grammar and technical school places than the national average.¹⁰³

The study of Norwich schools allows a more detailed examination of the educational and training pathway of the two separate types of clerical worker, those with a grammar school education and those who remained in the elementary sectors. It helps to explore the full range of clerical education and to counter the impression that a secondary education was a pre-requisite for a clerical career. The study of Norwich shows that the elementary sector played a significant role in the education of clerks, one which increased over time, and which was particularly important in increasing the numbers of girls entering the clerical workforce. In this way, it complements the two cases studies by Goldthorpe et al; the Cambridge bank clerks and the general industrial clerks in Luton. In addition, the Norwich study also throws light on more general trends in social structure around the role of education in social mobility and the changing social and class backgrounds of clerical workers.

The fourth chapter focuses upon the home and domestic lives of clerks, to consider how the desire to own their own homes in the suburbs and patterns of consumption were driven by conventions around respectability and quest for status. Home ownership grew from around 10 per cent in 1914 to 30 per cent at the outbreak of war and increased still further to 45 per cent by 1964.¹⁰⁴ I explore

¹⁰² C. Rackham, *Education in Norwich 1920-1940*, (Norwich; Workers Educational Association Pamphlet, 1940)

¹⁰³ M. Sanderson, 'Education since 1750', in C. Rawcliffe & R. Wilson, (eds.), *Norwich since 1550* p.317. Norwich created grammar school places for 20.7% of pupils against the national average of 13% and technical school places for 10.9% compared with 7.5% nationally.

¹⁰⁴ A. Holmans., '2011 Census Analysis: A Century of Home Ownership', <https://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rek/census-analysis/a-century-of-home-ownership-and-renting-in-england-and-wales/sty-home-ownership.html> accessed September 2021

changing patterns of family life and consider how far these can be considered as important to the social identities of clerical workers.

The fifth and final chapter, chronicles and analyses the ways in which groups of clerks understood their social identities and their class position at three different points of time. 1939 when the country was under serious threat of war and emerging from economic depression and mass unemployment; 1948 after six years of war, strict rationing, austerity and the beginnings of a welfare state with state provided universal secondary education, health services and a safety net in case of unemployment or sickness and in 1960/61 when there was full employment, a narrowing of the gap in pay between manual and non-manual workers and an affordable supply of housing. How had these changes over course of over twenty years altered their sense of themselves, how had their social identities altered? I begin my thesis by examining the important role played by popular fiction in shaping a range of overlapping and enduring images of the clerk in British culture.

Chapter 1: Fictional Representations, Comedy, Masculinity and Domesticity

We know who we are because, in the first place, others tell us.¹

The image of the clerk in the middle years of the twentieth century, was, as will be discussed below, diverse and contradictory: he was a clown, boring and insignificant; he was an essential cog in the running of businesses and administering local and national government; he was a social climber, seeking a new or more secure place in the class structure; he sought respectability and he was a threat. He did not fit neatly into the social structure; his status was uncertain and in flux.

Times had changed since the mid-Victorian 'counting house' clerk, then he was seen as the trusted confidant of the owner dealing with all aspects of the business and in authority over others. His education, prior to the introduction of compulsory education for all children, gave him a premium which together with a higher-than-average income and job security put him into the middle classes. This status was reflected in the Registrar General's social classification in which clerks were included in Class 1 as professionals and one which had to be protected through separation from the manual working classes and the adoption of the form of dress and as far as possible the lifestyles of the respectable middle classes.²

However, as has been shown; the size of the clerical workforce was growing, both in absolute numbers and in terms of the proportion of the workforce from 888,000 in 1911 to 3,479,000 by 1971 and from 4.86 per cent of the workforce to over 13.9 per cent. More children from the working classes were becoming clerks as opportunities for education improved and demand for clerks soared. At the same time, more women were becoming clerks, both from the traditional middle classes, who, when forced to earn a living saw office work as a respectable pursuit or from ambitious daughters of manual workers taking advantage of the educational reforms in the same way as their brothers. The class and gender profile of clerks was shifting while changing business practices transformed the role of the clerk making

¹ R. Jenkins, 'Categorization: Identity, social process and epistemology', *Current Sociology* 48.3 (2000) quoted in B. Rogaly & B. Taylor, *Moving Histories of Class and Community: Identity, Place and Belonging in contemporary England*, (Basingstoke; Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.9

² S. R. S. Szreter, 'The Official Representation of Social Classes in Britain, the United States and France: The Professional Model and "Les Cadres"', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 35.2 (1993)

them responsible for more routine matters such as maintaining ledgers, recording and retrieving information or dealing with correspondence regarding orders, invoices and payments. A loss of status which was formally recognised in the 1921 census when clerks were moved into class II – management and technical staff and again in 1931 when they were recorded in class III, coupled with skilled manual workers where they have remained.³ This uncertainty and instability around clerk status helps to account for some of contradictory representations of clerks in the novels and films discussed below.

Moreover, it was not just the rapid growth and changing composition of the clerical workforce which was potentially disruptive but also the position of clerks within both the corporate and governmental sphere. Increasing bureaucratisation in the public and private sector made clerks more visible and more a part of everyday experience. For the working classes, for example, it was the clerks who staffed the labour exchanges and the housing offices, the face of the state with the power to accept or reject claims for support; in the workplace, it was the clerks who passed on the demands of the management and distributed the wage packets, who administered but made nothing and who enjoyed better working conditions, higher pay, pensions and more job security. The status of the established middle classes was also being disturbed by the presence of better educated white-collar workers from lower class backgrounds. Not only did they provide unwelcome competition even for the prestige positions in banking and insurance normally considered as middle-class bastions but their presence in positions of trust and authority was symptomatic of a decline of deference and a loss of middle class distinction.⁴ Threats which were compounded by the rising numbers of clerical workers moving into the suburbs as owner-occupiers, their acquisition of consumer goods and car ownership, embracing lifestyle previously deemed to be restricted to the established middle classes.

³ Ibid.

⁴ F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics and the Decline of Deference in England: 1968-2000*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2018), while largely focused upon a later period, she identifies a long-term cultural change starting after 1945 as class distinctions between parts of the working and middle classes blurred.

In addition, improved education, changes in the publishing industry which made books cheaper and more readily available together with soaring radio ownership and cinema going enabled more people from different backgrounds to develop an interest in culture, in literature, music and arts. Interests which, as Hinton claimed, were considered key features of middle-class identity.⁵ Furthermore, it was not just clerks as consumers of culture that gave rise to concerns, increasing numbers of clerks were becoming authors, producers of culture, from Bullock in 1907 to Priestley in the 1930s and Braine and Barstow in the late 1950s, presenting new images of clerks and society which challenged the literary elites.

Thus, the massive increase in the number of clerks over the course of the twentieth century shook the social status quo. Their social mobility within an increasingly bureaucratised society made them suspect to both the elite and the working classes and an easy target for mockery and scorn. On the other hand, the sheer number and their ubiquity made them impossible to ignore and the changing social and educational environment opened opportunities for clerical authors to challenge these stereotypes by painting more empathetic pictures of clerical life and their role in the changing social structure of England.

What does contemporary fiction tell us about how these changes impacted upon the social identities, character and attitudes of clerical workers and how did it help create and maintain specific pictures of clerks, images which shaped the perceptions of clerical identities both in the eyes of the wider public and of clerical workers themselves? This chapter begins with a discussion of the value of fiction as a source. I continue with a survey of the limited number of studies exploring representations of office workers in fiction followed by a more detailed examination of popular books and films in which clerks had a major role. My first section focuses upon the comic clerk highlighting the continuities in the ways he was represented from the 1890s through to the 1970s before turning to more serious works covering the period up to the 1950s. Post-1945, there was a shift in the ways in which the clerk was represented with new ideas about identity and social mobility and these together with the depictions of women in the office will be discussed in the following

⁵ J. Hinton, 'The "Class Complex": Mass Observation and Cultural Distinction in pre-war Britain', *Past and Present*, 199 (2008)

chapter. I illustrate the most visible and widely held depictions of clerical life and character allowing an exploration of how clerks were perceived by others and, particularly in those works written by clerks or former clerks, how they see themselves:

Clerks live routine and uneventful lives dictated by the times of commuter trains and the monotony of office life. According to their literary critics, they were passive creatures, devoid of finer feelings and high culture. They tended their little gardens, were mesmerised by advertisements for material things, and obsessed by the petty symbols of respectability and status.⁶

This, as Clapson describes in his work on post war suburbs which were ‘allegedly full of clerks’, is how books, films and television reflect the popular image of British clerks as small people living out routine and boring lives in dull, nondescript suburbs, fettered by domesticity, continually fussing about what others think of them, a picture of weakness, with stunted minds and narrow horizons. While it is indisputable that these stereotypes colour the generally held perceptions of clerical workers, it is only one picture of clerical workers, and this chapter examines contemporary fiction to build deeper more rounded depictions of clerks.

Contemporary fiction is a valuable source both as a way of illustrating what Raymond Williams has called ‘lived experience’ in which the different elements of identity are shown as ‘an inseparable part of a complex whole’ and also because of the impressions and images it builds in the minds of the public.⁷ These shape, not only how others perceive clerical workers but also influence the ways in which clerical workers understand their own social identities – one way in which others tell us who we are. Moreover, as Thomas suggested, ‘if we master the linguistic conventions employed by a particular writer [...] then we can use his or her text to

⁶ M. Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Towns*, (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 1998), p.6

⁷ R. Williams, *The Long Revolution*, (Parthian Books 2012)
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/UEA/detail.action?docID=1426446> p.103 First published London; Chatto & Windus, 1961

establish real contact with the historical world in which it originated'.⁸ Fiction opens a window into what Williams described as 'the most difficult thing to get hold of, in studying any past period, this felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living'.⁹ It provides a way of understanding what Williams defines as 'structures of feeling', the changing emotions experienced by particular groups of people in response to social, political or economic circumstances which convey the sense of the mood of the time.

In addition, fiction can be a major cultural influence in its own right helping to create or re-enforce a view or idea about people or groups which gradually becomes a norm, part of the everyday consciousness of the majority. Stories help develop our understanding of the world but, to be understood and accepted by the reader, as Gramsci suggested, they have to reflect the commonly understood rules of society drawn from everyday experience, what he termed 'common sense'.¹⁰ For example, the clerk in the office carries out routine tasks and earns a moderate income, everyone knows that so it immediately places limits on how he is portrayed, driving a Rolls Royce and living in a castle would be unbelievable.

Fiction is a particularly important source for this period, as the years following the First World War saw a huge growth in the reading public and the growth of cinema as a major leisure activity. The impact of near universal literacy, increased prosperity, the expansion of both public and subscription libraries and technical changes in publishing created a boom in reading. While figures for book sales are not generally available, evidence for the expansion of the book market was shown in the increasing number of books published which rose from around 2,700 in 1924, to over 4,900 in 1936 before dropping to 3,600 in 1950 following the disruption during the war. This was further confirmed by the growth in borrowing; around 15 million books were borrowed from public libraries in 1920 soaring to nearly 300 million by

⁸ K. Thomas, 'History and Literature: The Ernest Hughes Memorial Lecture', (Swansea; Swansea University 1988) quoted in M. Johnes, 'Postmodernism: The Novel as a Source in Sport History', *Journal of Sport History* 34.1 (2007)

⁹ Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p.103

¹⁰ A. Gramsci, 'Selections from the Prison Notebooks', A. Hoare & G. Nowell-Smith, (eds.), (London; Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p.322-4 & 419-25 quoted in C. Pawling, (ed.), *Popular Fiction and Social Change*, (London; Macmillan, 1984), p.12

1949 while the number of subscribers to the Boots Booklovers Library increased from 116,224 in 1922 to 440,234 in 1940.¹¹ Post war, the trend continued with over 350 new libraries built in Britain between 1960-1965 while the number of volumes in stock rose from 42 million to 71 million.¹² At the same time, the proportion of households having a radio licence soared from 24 per cent in 1926 to over 87 per cent by 1947 and those holding television licences rose from 0.1 per cent in 1947 to over 88 per cent by 1967.¹³ Outside the home, people were also exposed to fiction via the cinema, in 1934 the first national survey of cinema-going found that 40 per cent of the British population regularly attended, by 1943, the figure was over 70 per cent with over 1,600 million admissions.¹⁴ Fiction in all its various forms had never been so easily accessible to the public, while this boom created new opportunities for new writers from all social backgrounds.

As it would clearly be impractical to survey all works of fiction involving office workers, I have examined those with a clerk as a major character which were also popular with the reading public. While each work is individual demonstrating a multitude of different situations, plot lines and characters, it is possible to draw out common recurring themes which help to build up a particular picture of a 'clerky' character, elements of which are reflected in Clapson's summary above. Several of the works discussed were written prior to my period of study, this is because ideas about identity are built up over many years, so it is important to consider those from earlier which stood the test of time, and which continued to influence popular perceptions.

While it is impossible to ascertain precisely how individuals were influenced by the depictions of clerical workers, the popularity of specific novels and films and the endurance of particular traits indicate their impact. Certain characteristics of clerks, such as concerns about status, the need for distance from the working classes,

¹¹ J. McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing Britain 1914-1950*, (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1992), p.48-49

¹² A. Nash, C. Squires, & S. Towheed, 'Reading and Ownership' in A. Nash, (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain Vol. 7, The Twentieth Century and Beyond*, (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2019) Chapter 7; Historic England, <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/the-english-public-library-1945-85> accessed 21st August 2021

¹³ Halsey, & Webb, (eds.), *Twentieth Century British Social Trends*, p.640

¹⁴ R. James, 'Cinema-Going in a port town 1914-1961: film booking patterns at Queens Cinema, Portsmouth', *Urban History*, 40.2 (2013)

attachment to the home or questionable masculinity, were highlighted in late nineteenth century novels such as *Diary of a Nobody*, and were still important in 1960s television programmes like *Dad's Army* or *The Likely Lads* which suggests the continued resonance and influence of these tropes.¹⁵ The repetition of these representations in differing forms over long periods re-enforces ideas about the identities and characteristics of office workers, so they gradually become the norm, part of everyday consciousness. It is through such images and how they mesh with the everyday experiences of the public that perceptions of the office worker are wedged into people's minds and which, in turn, impact on the subjectivity of the clerk.

Yet, while some images persist, other elements shift. Authors from different backgrounds bring new voices, events such as war or economic turmoil disrupt the everyday experiences of readers. Increased access to education and greater prosperity creates new audiences who may not share the attitudes and opinions of earlier generations. All of which are reflected in the evolving pictures of office workers in fiction.

Literature Review: the clerk in fiction

This section examines academic studies on the representations of the clerk in English fiction. As discussed in the introduction, men and women occupied separate occupational spheres within the office and this has resulted in divergent images of male and female clerks in books and film. Similarly, studies into the fictional treatment of office workers concentrate either on male or female workers. As will be shown, the stereotype discussed above, is largely based upon portrayals of the male clerk, women in the office have a different profile, a factor which will be discussed in the next chapter.

'A haunting and heretofore ghostly figure in fiction' is how Wild introduces the male clerk in *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture 1880-1939*.¹⁶ While lamenting the relative neglect of clerks, he explores the many faces of male office

¹⁵ G. Grossmith & W. Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody*, (London; Penguin, 1999), first published by Arrowsmith 1892; J. Perry & D. Croft, *Dad's Army* (BBC TV 1968-77); D. Clement & I. La Frenais, *The Likely Lads*, (BBC TV 1964-66)

¹⁶ J. Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture 1880-1939*, (London; Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.1

workers as depicted by a wide range of authors from the canonical such as Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster to popular best sellers, J. B. Priestley, Arnold Bennett, Frank Swinnerton and Henry Williamson. He argues that the changing representations of clerks could be construed as symbols of social change, responsive to specific historical events and trends, windows into the 'structures of feeling' of the time. Through the breadth of his examples, Wild offers a much more complex picture of clerks than that suggested in Clapson's stereotype. From the half educated, weak Leonard Baste in 1910, to the brave, patriotic John Bullock, bank clerk turned soldier fighting in the trenches published in 1930 and the determined, reliable Mr Smeeth, proud of his position but ever fearful of losing it as the Depression bites, these differing images of clerks provide insights into contemporary circumstances.¹⁷ Wild also suggests that, the continued representation of clerical workers helped to create a kind of group consciousness among individuals who shared these experiences – in other words, they contributed to telling the clerks who they were.¹⁸

Carey's *Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880-1939* covers the same period as that studied by Wild.¹⁹ He does, however, expose a much more negative view of the clerk and his lifestyle as depicted in the writings of Virginia Woolf, E. M. Foster, Evelyn Waugh, D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot, designated as the literary intelligentsia. In his polemic against the literary elites, he maintains that they typically portray the 'masses' as unfit for education, as 'dead inside', incapable of experiencing feeling or appreciating the arts with minds too feeble to understand anything other than lurid thrillers, cheap romances or vulgar newspapers.²⁰ Although Carey does not define precisely who makes up the 'masses' other than some large, undifferentiated other, the fact that he devotes one chapter to the suburbs and clerks indicates that he considers them a significant part. In this chapter, he argues that the literary elite created a

¹⁷ E. M. Forster, *Howard's End*, (New York; Penguin, 2000) first published London, E. Arnold 1910; H. Williamson, *The Patriot's Progress*, (London; Geoffrey Bles, 1930); J. B. Priestley, *Angel Pavement* (London; William Heineman, 1930)

¹⁸ Wild, *The Rise*, p.169

¹⁹ J. Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880-1939*, (London; Faber and Faber, 1992)

²⁰ Ibid., p.5 & p.16-17 quotes T S Eliot as arguing that educating everyone simply lowered standards while Huxley wrote that 'universal education created a new class of the 'New Stupid'.

disapproving picture of the suburbs, reputedly the homes of the clerks, as ugly and despoiled, 'a sprawl destroying the countryside and upsetting the long established balance of the English way of life'.²¹ These suburban characteristics are transferred to the clerks themselves painting them as soulless, lacking in individuality and aping their betters by acquiring an education for which they were not fitted with Cyril Connolly accusing the suburbs of being 'incubators of apathy and delirium' and Q. D. Leavis criticising the 'emptiness and meaningless iteration' of suburban life.²²

By way of contrast, Carey also suggests examples of work in which the clerk is portrayed in a more sympathetic light by more accessible, widely read, popular, authors such as Shan Bullock, Arnold Bennett and J. B. Priestley.²³ Their books portrayed clerks, despite being burdened by routine, as enterprising, clever and resilient. These writers, all formerly office workers themselves, were not part of the literary elite and their work was scorned as middle brow driven by the need to sell their books and not by their art.²⁴

Carey, in his crude diatribe against the intellectual modernists, exaggerates his case both in conflating the views of fictional characters with the personal opinions of writers and his inclusion of overblown references, often with little context, to support for eugenics, fascism and even Hitler.²⁵ Yet, despite, the weaknesses of Carey's book, there is no doubt that many of the literary elite produced unsympathetic and negative representations of clerks and their lifestyles, arguably fixing these images in the minds of many of their readers.²⁶ Moreover, the status of the literary elites both in intellectual and social terms, gave their writings a more lasting power which perhaps would not be accorded to a bestselling author from a lower social

²¹ Ibid., p. 40; for example C. E. M. Joad, *The Horrors of the Countryside* (London; Hogarth Press, 1931), p.8, & T. W. H. Crosland, *The Suburbans*, (London; John Long, 1905)

²² C. Connolly, *The Unquiet Grave: A Word Cycle by Pallinurus*, (London; Horizon, 1944), p.26 & Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, (London; Chatto & Windus, 1932), p.181 quoted in Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, p.42

²³ For example, S. Bullock, *Robert Thorne*, (London; T. Werner Laurie, 1907); A. Bennett, *A Man from the North*, (London; J. Lane, 1898); *The Card*, (London; Methuen & Co, 1911); Priestley, *Angel Pavement*

²⁴ Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, p.48-52

²⁵ Ibid., chapters 1 & 2; S. Collini., *English Pasts; Essays in History and Culture*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1999), p.289-297; O. J. Baylen, 'Intellectuals versus the Masses', *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, 38.2 (1995), p.267-270

²⁶ For example, Forster, *Howard's End*; T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, (New York; Liveright Corporation, 2013) first published New York, Boni & Liveright 1922

background. According to Carey, by adopting more experimental literary forms, the modernists also made their works inaccessible to the less well-educated members of the new reading public.²⁷ This further heightened the social and educational divisions between the established middle classes and the more marginal clerks with their so-called inferior mass culture and restricted education. Furthermore, much of their writings have been included in the literary canon and thus taught in schools and universities which ensured that these negative images were shared with subsequent generations.

However, these works of the literary elites, formed only a part of the expanding pre-1945 fictional output and, it can be argued that they had a limited impact on the contemporary general reading public who, according to Q. D. Leavis, mainly read newspapers, magazines and popular novels, findings which were confirmed by Mass Observation in their survey of reading habits in 1940.²⁸ Most commonly, books were purchased second hand or borrowed from public or subscription libraries and research into the type of books stocked showed them to be classics, reprints and both older and contemporary popular light fiction.²⁹ For the most part the cost of newly published books such as those by modernist writers such as D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf or E. M. Forster was prohibitive, at least until the introduction of paperbacks such as Penguins in the late 1930s.

Jonathan Rose in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* argues strongly against the idea of the clerk as a 'mean, suburban man', 'machinelike and dead inside'.³⁰ His research provides a very different perspective on the representation of the clerk from the late nineteenth century to the outbreak of the Second World War by examining the ways in which clerks or former clerks paint themselves. In contrast to the modernists, looking at the lives of clerks from the outside, Rose contends that far from being intellectually stunted, clerks' memoirs and

²⁷ Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, p.5

²⁸ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p.5-6; Mass Observation Online, File Report 1222, *Book Reading Survey*, April 1942

²⁹ Ibid., Chapter 1, The Book Market p.3-19; Leavis suggests the cost of books such as Forsyte Saga or Priestley's Good Companions was 10s 6d or half a guinea; McAleer, *Reading and Publishing in Britain* p.58-59

³⁰ J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, (New Haven & London; Yale University Press, 2001), Chapter 12, What was Leonard Bast Really Like? p.393-438

diaries tell a different story of lively intellectual debates and an office-boy intelligentsia created by more educational opportunities, libraries, second-hand book sellers and cheap theatre and concert tickets with too many examples to be isolated cases.³¹ It was from this group that a coterie of writers emerged with direct experience of clerical work who offered more balanced and sympathetic depictions of white collar work. Compared to the modernists, they framed their world differently, their life histories meant they shared more of the experiences of the general reader and their engagement with a wider culture, both classic and contemporary, made it possible for them to challenge existing images of the clerks and create more nuanced, more realistic pictures of clerks and clerical lifestyles.³² Thus, novelists such as Arnold Bennett and J. B. Priestley, both of whom were former clerks and bestselling authors, were able to break away from the stereotypes and, as will be discussed below, created new, more realistic and human pictures of clerks and office life.³³

Nicola Bishop's work on the ways fictional clerks fought back against the regimentation and crushing routine of the office also looks beyond the stereotypes drawing a much more complex picture. She highlights the differing approaches taken by clerks to 'create a space for himself' whether this be through the surreptitious reading of books and newspapers in the office, the valorisation of the home or even the ramble in the countryside, areas where he can throw off the cloak of conformity to reveal individuality, creativity, and personality; not an emasculated cog but a man in his own right.³⁴

³¹ Ibid., p.406-417 quoting autobiographies from lesser known clerks, for example V. J. Brown, *I Meet America*, (London; George Routledge & Sons, 1942) and T. Burke, *The Real East End* (London; Collins, 1947) and those who later became established authors, V. S. Pritchett, *Cab at the Door: An Autobiography*, (London; Chatto & Windus, 1968); N. Cardus, *Autobiography*, (London; Collins, 1947) and R. Church, *Over the Bridge*, (New York; E. P. Dutton, 1956). Rose, *The Intellectual life* p.420 – during First World War, there were free concerts at Manchester Town Hall and at the Ancoats Settlement and a standing ticket for the Halle cost 6d; similarly it was possible to hear grand opera and Shakespeare at the Old Vic for 6d or go to Wigmore Hall for nothing. .

³² Ibid., p.6-7; Rose uses Goffman's concept of frames i.e. the way people interpret the world is drawn from their experience and that reading and exposure to wider culture opens up the mind to greater possibilities, thus the office-boy intelligentsia were able to challenge established ideas about the role and image of the clerk.

³³ See for example, Priestley, *Angel Pavement*; Bennett, *The Man from the North* and *The Card*.

³⁴ N. J. Bishop, *What thought of Head Office to One off his Head: Escaping Clerkly Lives in Middlebrow Fiction 1900-1945*, Ph.D. Thesis, Lancaster University (2014) and 'Ruralism, Masculinity and National Identity: The Rambling Clerk in Fiction 1900-1940', *Journal of British Studies* 54.3 (2015)

The following section analyses key texts and films in which clerks occupied a central role to demonstrate the ways in which fictional images of office workers were shaped. While there are considerable overlaps and recurring images, I take a thematic approach. First, I examine the enduring image of the clerk as a comic figure playing upon concerns about class, status, domesticity and masculinity before considering the ways in which the literary elite portrayed clerks as inferior creatures, materialistic and lacking in finer feelings. I then explore the impact of the world wars and the clerks' experience as fighting men and how this altered the 'structures of feeling' raising questions about masculinity, class and the place of the clerk in British society. The third section examines a core characteristic of clerks, that of the clerk as a 'good husband', a domesticated man, emotionally committed to the home and family. Across these themes, there are many repeated images around masculinity, domesticity and status which, in some circumstances and from some writers, invite scorn and at other times a more positive reaction. Other portrayals are more specific to particular social or economic contexts. However, despite these differences, there are also common characteristics which come together in various combinations, and which contribute to the ways in which people thought about clerks and office workers.

The Clerk as a Figure of Fun: From Mr Pooter to Captain Mainwaring

Of all the fictional representations of clerk, the most enduring is as a comic figure, a line which stretches from Mr Pooter in *Diary of A Nobody* at the end of the nineteenth century through to Captain Mainwaring and Sergeant Wilson in *Dad's Army* and to *The Likely Lads* in the 1960s and early 1970s.³⁵ It was in Mr Pooter in the *Diary of A Nobody* that the abiding caricature of the clerk was born. First issued in serial form in *Punch* in 1888, it was published as a book in 1892 when, perhaps for the first time, a suburban clerk appeared as a central figure in a novel. The diary records the life of Mr Pooter, a middle-aged clerk in a City office and his wife Carrie over a period of about fifteen months describing their banal routine of work and home alongside their small domestic triumphs and tribulations. Mr Pooter is pompous and opinionated with an inflated view of his own importance as a respectable and respected member of

³⁵ Grossmith, & Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody*; Perry & Croft, *Dad's Army*; Clement & La Frenais, *The Likely Lads*

the middle class arguing that that there was no reason that 'because I do not happen to be a 'Somebody'—why my diary should not be interesting'.³⁶

Yet the events and occurrences he portrays are not interesting, they are ordinary, domestic and often ridiculous – the comedy arising from his efforts to appear superior. He recounts his arguments with tradesmen over the freshness of eggs; the impudence of a visiting butcher; the cheek of a junior clerk who tells him to 'keep my hair on' when reprimanded for being late.³⁷ His masculinity is called into question as he worries about issues usually considered to be of importance only to women, his appearance, his hair, the meals to be served to guests and home decor.³⁸ Yet despite his efforts to cut a dashing figure, Grossmith's illustrations show him to be thin and narrow chested, of weak appearance. Furthermore, while he is keen to keep his supposed inferiors in their place, he is overly deferential to those he considers his social betters – recording, for example, the honour he felt when his employer, Mr Perkupp, agreed to attend his son Lupin's engagement party.³⁹

Yet for all his pomposity, his unconscious assumption of his own superiority and his snobbishness, Mr Pooter is an endearing character as he battles with the various misfortunes which befall him. His triumph at being invited to a reception for 'Representatives from Trade and Commerce' by the Lord Mayor of London ended in humiliation when he was greeted by the local ironmonger putting Pooter, not in the superior class to which he felt he belonged, but on a par with the lower-class tradesmen.⁴⁰

Diary of a Nobody is a humorous satire on lower middle-class life which poked fun at the pretensions and conceits of a clerk who revealed himself to be an absurd, bumbling, self-important, somewhat emasculated snob riddled with social anxieties and the desire to appear respectable. Mr Pooter's endurance is confirmed by the fact that *The Diary of a Nobody* has never been out of print since it was first published.⁴¹ The *Daily Mail* recommended *Diary of a Nobody* as one of the 10 Best

³⁶ Grossmith & Grossmith, *The Diary*, p.5

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.8, p.12, p.13

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.50-51, p.136, p.31

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.76

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.31, p.38

⁴¹ P. Morton, Flinders University, <https://sites.google.com/site/petermortonswebsite/home/grossmiths-diary-of-a-nobody> The *Diary* has never been out of print since 1892. Examples of other editions are:

Books for the Air Raid Shelter in 1940.⁴² It was serialised on radio in 1929 and again in 1946, it was adapted as a play and produced in the West End in 1954 and further adapted for BBC in 1964.⁴³ Wild credits the book as the first work of fiction which ‘establishes the substantial character of a class replete with distinctive houses, workplaces, amusements, culture and codes of behaviour’ – the clerkly class.⁴⁴ Hammerton sees it as ‘a claim to gentility, independence and mastery far above his actual station as a struggling suburban bank clerk’ and a metaphor for lower middle class pretension, weakness and diminished masculinity.⁴⁵ While Young categorises it as a piece of bourgeois class propaganda suggesting that ridicule and scorn results in ‘the lower-middle class man so reassuringly tamed.’⁴⁶ However it is read, as a slice of life or as an attack on the lower middle classes, it provided a vivid picture of a clerk’s character and his lifestyle, one which formed the basis of a long lived, deeply seated image of the clerk which has endured for over a century. Pooter’s snobbery; his deference to his social superiors; his domesticity; and his preoccupation with respectability have become embedded in the popular perceptions of clerkly character through to the present day.

Some of the same clerkly characteristics were in evidence in the hugely popular misadventures of the suburban clerk, Sam Briggs, which appeared in the mass market *Strand* magazine between 1904 and 1915.⁴⁷ These stories reinforced the image of the clerk as comic, absurd and pretentious. They told of Sam’s romantic adventures as well as financial and social success. He was constantly chasing a

Arrowsmith (1905); Arrowsmith, (1924); Everyman/Dent, (1940); Collins, ed. Pryce-Jones (1955); Folio, 1969; Penguin (1945, 1965, 1979); Collins, (1981); Elm Tree (1984); Sutton, (1991); Arrowsmith, (1992); Oxford, edition (1995); Bloomsbury (1997); Prion, (1999); Penguin Classics, (1999).

⁴² *Daily Mail*, 6th June 1940 p.4. <https://www.gale.com/intl/c/daily-mail-historical-archive>

⁴³ *Daily Mail*, 22nd June 1929 p.16 and 9th November 1946 p.2– radio schedules; *Daily Mail*, 2nd September 1954 p.3 review of play; *Daily Mail* 14th December 1964 p.3 review of TV production. <https://www.gale.com/intl/c/daily-mail-historical-archive>

⁴⁴ Wild, *Rise of Clerk*, p.60

⁴⁵ J. Hammerton, ‘Pooterism or Partnership: Marriage and Masculine Identity in the Lower Middle Class 1870-1920’, *Journal of British Studies*, 38.3 (1999)

⁴⁶ A. Young, *Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel: Gentlemen, Gents and Working Women* (Basingstoke; Macmillan, 1999), p.89 quoted in Wild, *Rise of Clerk*, p. 60

⁴⁷ R. Marsh, (author) & M. Vuohelainen, (ed.), *The Complete Adventures of Sam Briggs*, (Kansas City, MO; Valancourt 2013). *The Strand* was a popular monthly publication founded in 1891 costing around 6d, about half the cost of similar periodicals. It aimed at the mass market with an average circulation of around 500,000 copies between 1900 and 1930.

lifestyle beyond his means and his occupational status. In *The Girl on the Sands*, his attempts to impress a girl by treating her to a trip to a pier ended in humiliation when he ran out of money and could not pay the bill for their tea.⁴⁸ While in *A Dip in the Briny*, his clothes were stolen from the beach by a love rival and he was forced to take someone else's rendering himself ludicrous in 'a shirt, it would have made three of mine'.⁴⁹ A 'soft little boy' with 'pretty little hands', Sam was portrayed as the stereotypical clerk, sharing Pooter's characteristics in his concern about 'show', mocked for his pretensions, for his physical size and for being weak and unmanly.⁵⁰

Yet, the final series published in 1916, showed a very different Sam. He was conscripted into the army 'I have never set up to be a fighting man [...] I am too short and, so to speak, too plump' but while he still stumbled into ludicrous misadventures, he became a brave and resilient soldier eventually earning the Victoria Cross.⁵¹ This shift in the characterisation of clerks reflected the changing circumstances, a popular magazine like *The Strand* could not publish stories which portrayed Sam, a clerk, and by inference the thousands of other clerks fighting in the army as weak and timid; so the bumbling, ridiculous, Sam was transformed into a symbol of Englishness, just as patriotic and brave as those who had previously scorned him. A change which was common to other depictions of clerks called up to fight in both World Wars as will be discussed in a future section.

That the Pooter-like image of the clerk as comic, pompous and a snob remained fixed in the minds of the public into the second half of the twentieth century is confirmed in the depiction of the bank clerks in *Dad's Army*, first shown in 1968 but set in the early 1940s, looking back to the imagined class relationships which still had resonance with viewers in the 1960s. This recognition of the continuing salience of clerky character was firmly re-enforced in *The Likely Lads* shown between 1964 and 1974.⁵²

⁴⁸ Marsh, 'The Girl on the Sands', in *The Complete Adventures* quoted in V. Margree, D. Orells, M. Vuohelainen, *Richard Marsh, Popular Fiction and Literary Culture 1890-1915: Rereading the Fin De Siecle*, (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 2018), p.114

⁴⁹ Marsh, 'Dip in the Briny', in *The Complete Adventures*, p.163

⁵⁰ Marsh, 'The Gift Horse' in *The Complete Adventures*, p.27

⁵¹ Marsh, 'Sam Briggs becomes a Soldier', in Margree et al, *Richard Marsh*, p.119

⁵² Perry & Croft, *Dad's Army* BBC 1968-1977; Clement & La Frenais, *The Likely Lads*, BBC 1964-66 and sequel *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads*, BBC 1973-74

The main character in *Dad's Army*, Captain Mainwaring was the self-appointed commander of the local Home Guard Unit and manager of the local bank. Like Pooter, he was puffed up and self-important with absolute confidence in his own abilities as bank manager and as a military 'mastermind'. His subordinate, the Chief Clerk at the bank and his sergeant in the Home Guard, Wilson was his complete opposite. The comedy and the insights into clerical attitudes lay in the interplay between these two characters. Mainwaring was officious, pretentious and a snob. His journey from the margins of the lower middle classes, as the son of a draper, to the recognised middle classes as a bank manager via a scholarship to grammar school and working his way up from junior clerk to manager, made him class conscious and over prickly about status. He looked down on tradesmen particularly those he considered to be acting 'above their station' such as the Chief ARP warden, Hodges, the local greengrocer with whom there was a constant competition for prestige; whether the Home Guard or the ARP wardens would lead the church parade or who would organise the welcoming ceremony for a visiting Russian VIP.⁵³ However, despite sneering at those he considered lower class, Mainwaring adopted a dual attitude to the upper classes. On the one hand, he was resentful and jealous arguing that their private education and connections made everything easy while he had had to work hard for his position, his career and his status. He attributed his failure to move on from Walmington-on-Sea to manage a larger, more prestigious branch as a response to his being a 'scholarship boy', not privately educated and without connections. Yet, at the same time, he was anxious to be seen as one of the elite within the town heading up fund raising efforts for the troops and trying to ingratiate himself with the town worthies such as the Town Clerk and other dignitaries.⁵⁴ These efforts made him appear foolish and pushy and his attempts to converse with those he considered his social equals were awkward and clumsy.

⁵³ Perry & Croft, 'The Honourable Man,' *Dad's Army* BBC TV, first aired 28.11.1973

⁵⁴ Perry & Croft, 'My Brother and I,' *Dad's Army* BBC TV, first aired 26.12.1975. Mainwaring organised a sherry party for local dignitaries with the platoon acting as stewards, it ended in chaos as Mainwaring's drunken brother, a practical jokes salesman, is smuggled out of the church hall to try to prevent him revealing their family background and puncturing Mainwaring's image as a respectable middle-class banker.

By contrast, Wilson had been brought up in a wealthy household and educated at a public school. He oozed charm and sophistication and had natural assurance about his social status. He was comfortable in his own skin and glided effortlessly through social occasions able to connect with all classes treating everyone with politeness and courtesy. To Mainwaring's intense chagrin, he was accepted as an equal by the elite in the town, even invited to join the local golf club, a mark of status while Mainwaring had been 'trying to get in for years'.⁵⁵ Despite his lowly position as clerk, his status as an 'honourable' and his good manners rendered him more socially acceptable than Mainwaring who constantly proclaimed his superiority by harking on about his position as bank manager and in command of the local Home Guard.

This reversal of roles of the upper-class man as the subordinate, and the lower-class man as superior both at work and in the Home Guard allowed the viewer to look at class attitudes from a different perspective. While there was certainly exaggeration in the depictions of Mainwaring and Wilson for the purposes of comic satire, the upper-class man was careless and self-assured while the lower-middle-class Mainwaring shared many of the characteristics of the stereotypical clerk, socially awkward, insecure and a social climber, his authority coming not from his character but from the pips on his shoulder and the name plate on his office door.

As a soldier, Mainwaring had an absolute confidence in his own abilities, yet his appearance, like that of Sam Briggs, was far from heroic, he was around 60, short, rotund, balding and clumsy. This created opportunities for slapstick humour as he, in attempting to lead from the front and to do everything he expected his men to do, ended up face down in the mud or stranded in the river. Yet, Mainwaring was, like Briggs, a patriot and capable of personal bravery albeit amid chaos and farce. For example, on one occasion, the members of the platoon were trapped in a bombed pumping station, Mainwaring put himself at the front of the group clearing the rubble from the doorway with the whole building in danger of collapse.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Perry & Croft, 'The Honourable Man', *Dad's Army*, BBC TV

⁵⁶ Perry & Croft, 'Asleep in the Deep', *Dad's Army*, BBC TV, first aired 6.10. 1972. Part of the platoon became trapped in a room in a bombed water pumping station. The only way out was to clear rubble from the doorway which was in danger of collapse, Mainwaring put himself at the front of the rescue

However, Mainwaring's bravery did not make him a heroic or masculine figure, he was vain, buying himself a toupee and dyeing his hair to make himself look younger, and completely under the thumb of his wife, Elizabeth, who was never seen but whose demanding telephone calls necessitated immediate responses. This idea of the emasculated male is taken further in the character of Private Pike who was also the junior clerk at the bank. He was a pale, skinny boy mollycoddled by his mother, always fretting about his health and again very conscious of his social superiority as a bank clerk and quick to denigrate Hodges, the ARP warden greengrocer with 'his dirty figure nails'. Yet, as in the case of Pooter, Mainwaring was ultimately a sympathetic character despite his snobbery, his social faux pas and his bullying, he was always trying to do his best both for himself, his platoon and his country.

While it could be argued that the writers of Dad's Army were looking back to the past, to a time when the class barriers were clearer and more pronounced, the popularity of the programme showed that these fictional social identities were widely understood and accepted in the 1960s. The continuing salience of these clerky characteristics were substantiated in *The Likely Lads* and its sequel *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads* broadcast between 1964 and 1974. Perhaps not at first sight an obvious example, *The Likely Lads*, set in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1964, chronicled the lives of two lifelong friends: one Terry, a resolutely working-class stereotype and the other Bob, from a similar background, but seeking to better himself by moving into an office job. The main thrust of the comedy lay in this contrast, Bob was conciliatory, always trying to do the 'right', the acceptable, respectable thing, willing to work hard for what he wanted whereas Terry was focused upon immediate gratification and was argumentative, vulgar and loud. Bob went to night school, obtained qualifications and by the time of the sequel was a suit-wearing office worker, married to a librarian from a middle-class background to whom he always deferred, with a mortgage and a house on a suburban housing estate – the archetypal lower middle-class white-collar man. Terry, on the other hand, after a spell as a squaddie in the army, was unemployed, on the dole and still

party in the most hazardous location. However, after saving the men, they lock themselves back into the room and flood it and only narrowly escape through a fortuitously discovered manhole.

living with his mother. The episode *The Other Side of the Fence*, first aired in January 1965, explores snobbery and the concerns about maintaining distance between the office workers and those on the shop floor.⁵⁷ Bob, who had been promoted from the shop floor, invited Terry to join him at the annual office dinner dance. It was a formal dinner, a black-tie affair but despite being properly dressed, Terry was refused entry on the basis that the dinner was exclusively for 'staff' and not shop floor workers. Aping the customs of the upper and middle classes in the wearing of dinner jackets plus turning the worker away poked fun at the insecurities of white-collar workers, their sense of superiority and their claims to be part of the middle classes, refined, properly dressed and knowing the correct way to behave. The series, and more especially the sequel, lampoons exaggerated class stereotypes. It compares the working class, Terry, with his tirades against the bosses, his lackadaisical attitude to any job, his interest in racing and betting, his beer drinking and fanatical support of Newcastle United to Bob's journey towards the middle classes. It traces Bob's concerns to progress his career, his fear of losing his respectability, for example when pulled over for drunk driving, his desire to show off his home and possessions through aspirational dinner parties, his hiding drinking sessions with Terry from his wife. It mocks his membership of the badminton club, ridiculed by Terry as effete and feminine unlike the more manly football and his embarrassment when Terry shares stories of his working-class youth.

However, while the image of Mr Pooter and his successors are the most famous and enduring comic clerks, other humorous novels and films placed more emphasis on other so-called stereotypical characteristics of the clerk, specifically timidity, social inadequacy, conformity and unmanliness. These clerks were not domesticated but were bachelors living in digs, trapped by routine, shyness and convention and they had to escape these bonds to get a proper fulfilling life.

For example, in *Mr Finchley Discovers His England*, by Victor Canning, at that time a clerk in Oxford City Council's Education Office, the clerk Edgar Finchley, a 'neatly clad, harmless looking little man' takes a holiday, the first in his life, and acquires a new identity.⁵⁸ In a series of light-hearted adventures, he is caught up in

⁵⁷ Clement & La Frenais, 'The Other Side of the Fence', *The Likely Lads*, BBC, first aired 6.1.1965

⁵⁸ V. Canning, *Mr Finchley Discovers His England*, (London; Heinemann, 1934)

the theft of a car, has a fist fight, tries skinny dipping, sleeps rough and roams freely round the countryside. He no longer worries about respectability – his trousers are torn, and he needs a wash; he is no longer anxious about class and status; he eats and sleeps when he needs to, not controlled by the clock, the commute and the timetables imposed by his overbearing landlady.⁵⁹ As a rambler, 'he was Edgar Finchley; he was a man....he was no timid clerk'.⁶⁰ Yet he reverts to type when he returns to his landlady, creeping into the house and dressing himself in suit and tie. Canning played on a widely accepted stereotype of the clerk, conventional, respectable, timid, scared of women, painting a picture of a different, more exciting, less ordinary, more masculine way of life if he found the courage to escape. Largely forgotten now, this novel was very popular, the first edition of 7,700 sold out in a month with three reprints in 1934 and around 12 more by 1942.⁶¹

This theme of the clerk as a comic but rather pathetic figure seeking a new identity continued to have resonance. Films, such as *Last Holiday* and *The Lavender Hill Mob*, released in 1950 and 1951, both starring Alec Guinness, showed how the overlooked, timid, unappreciated clerk finds success but only after shedding his clerical identity.⁶² In *Last Holiday*, a clerk working for an agricultural machinery company was erroneously diagnosed with a fatal illness. Friendless and without family, he cashed in his insurance policies and moved into a luxury hotel to enjoy his remaining weeks. There, expensively dressed in second hand clothes; money, job offers, promises of investment in his ideas for improving farm machinery and social success immediately fell into his lap. The message was clear, as a clerk, he was a nobody, ordinary, ignored and lonely, well dressed and appearing to have money made him socially acceptable and worth knowing. In *The Lavender Hill Mob*, Guinness played a bank clerk whose timid demeanour, long service record and insistence on following all the rules, removed him from all suspicion when he engineered a daring robbery and escaped with a cache of gold bullion– at least for a

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.53

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.58

⁶¹ N. Bishop, 'Ruralism, Masculinity and National Identity: The Rambling Clerk in Fiction 1900-1940', *Journal of British Studies* 54.3 (2015)

⁶² H. Cass, (director), *Last Holiday*, [film], Associated British Pictures (1950); C. Critchton, (director), *The Lavender Hill Mob*, [film], Ealing Studios (1951)

time before his arrest – to a life of luxury in South America. It was beyond belief that the quiet, retiring clerk could be a thief. The casting of Alec Guinness in these films was also fitting – he was slight, about 5ft. 9in, with a soft voice and rather ordinary in appearance – not loud and not the masculine hero type, embodying the stereotype.

These two faces of the comic clerk; one who was self-important, pretentious, domesticated and snobby and the other, shy, conventional and somewhat resentful at being ignored and overlooked, while exaggerated for comic effect, form the basis of public perceptions of clerical workers. While there are differences in degree and in how their traits were manifested, the key characteristics – uncertain or marginal status, a need to be seen as respectable and respected, snobbery and questionable masculinity lie at the heart of these clerical representations. However, for the most part, while the reader/viewer is invited to laugh at the clerks' excesses, there are also redeeming characteristics, whether this be, Mainwaring's patriotism and care for his men, Bob and Terry's friendship despite their differences or George Bird's innocence and pleasure as the insincere people in the posh hotel accept him, which makes them sympathetic and relatable.

The longevity of the comic stereotype shows how deeply these ideas are embedded into the common psyche and suggests that perceptions of clerks go no further than a weak, snobbish, social-climbing and emasculated figure of fun. However, not all the literary representations of clerks are humorous, the next section examines much bleaker depictions of office workers, mostly from the upper-class literary elites sneering at the lifestyles, education and aspirations of clerical workers.

Weak, Pathetic and Dead Inside – Literary Elite Images of clerical masculinity

A further long-lasting theme in representations of clerks lay in the assertion that they lacked a soul and were therefore unable to appreciate beauty, art, music or literature; their minds were closed to the realm of feeling and the spirit and that they understood the world only in concrete, material terms. These depictions were particularly prominent in the images of clerks contained in the works of the literary elite, high-brow authors such as E. M. Forster, Virginia Wolfe, D. H. Lawrence and George Orwell.⁶³ They have variously been considered as a way of expressing

⁶³ Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, Chapter 3, The Suburbs and Clerks, p.39-55

class superiority and of maintaining the pre-eminence of high culture and literature as art by disparaging the emerging mass culture and materialism which they associated with the clerical classes.⁶⁴

Leonard Bast, in Forster's 1910 novel, *Howard's End*, was an influential example of a apparently weak, pathetic clerk.⁶⁵ Bast was an insurance clerk, on the 'edge of gentility' who sought to escape by acquiring culture which he hoped would lead to social and intellectual fulfilment believing 'if he kept on with Ruskin and Queen's Hall concerts [...] he would one day push his head out of the grey water and see the universe'.⁶⁶ However, his aspirations were mocked by his so-called betters, the middle class intellectual sisters, Margaret and Helen Schlegel, and the rich business family, the Wilcoxes. They argued that Bast's 'cramped little mind' was unable to appreciate art or music and that he would never be able to rise above the ordinary or 'reach the life of the spirit'.⁶⁷ Moreover, it was not just his intellect which was wanting but also his physique, Bast's 'spine could have been straighter, his chest could have been broader'.⁶⁸ Similarly his marriage to Jacky, was not one of passion or a sign of higher feeling but a more tawdry arrangement in which his wife, an ex-prostitute, aged 33 to his 20 had preyed on his sense of decency, his lower middle class moral code and need to be respectable to trap him into matrimony.⁶⁹

Other examples of the clerks' limited and undiscerning minds were contained in D. H. Lawrence's *Twilight In Italy* published in 1916 through his references to an London clerk travelling in Switzerland who failed to appreciate his experiences, religiously keeping to his pre-planned tour ticking off the towns 'He must be in Lucerne at a certain hour, and at Interlaken in the evening', a route march rather than a journey of discovery and preferring shopping for 'bits of edelweiss pottery' to enjoying the beauty, the people and culture of the country.⁷⁰ Virginia Woolf

⁶⁴ D. H. Lawrence, the son of a miner was an exception. See Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, Chapters 1 & 2; S. Collini, *English Past: Essays in History and Culture*, p.289-297; O. J. Baylen, 'Intellectuals versus the Masses', *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, 38.2 (1995) p.267-270

⁶⁵ E. M. Forster, *Howard's End*, (New York; Penguin, 2000), first published (London; E. Arnold, 1910)

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.50

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.122

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.109

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.55

⁷⁰ D H Lawrence, *Twilight in Italy*, (New York; B W Huebsch, 1919) p.275

expressed similar sentiments in her 1920 novel, *Night and Day*, when the Hiberys, daughter and granddaughter of a well-known Victorian poet, discussed the habits of Mr Clacton, a clerk who read 'new French authors at lunch time or squeezed in a visit to a picture gallery'.⁷¹ When the mother suggested that it was 'nice' that clerks read poetry, the daughter responded, 'no, because they don't read it as we read it'.⁷² Attitudes also reflected in the character of Septimus Smith, the clerk in *Mrs Dalloway*, who was described as 'half educated, self-educated [...] all learnt from books borrowed from public libraries', the implication being that, as in the case of Leonard Bast, there was no real understanding or appreciation just a rehash of other people's ideas.⁷³

These patronising sneering images of the clerk as mindless, lacking finer feelings and dead inside were repeated in two novels by Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *Coming Up for Air* published in 1936 and 1939 respectively.⁷⁴ In these, it was the routine, the mindlessness of the work and the constant struggle to maintain his middle class status and his standard of living in his semi in the dreary and dismal suburbs which killed the spirit of the clerk. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* featured Gordon Comstock, an erstwhile copywriter, who believed his job in an office, the 'pursuit of the money god' and the smothering routine destroyed his spirit and his imagination thwarting his ambition to be a poet and it was only by throwing up his career that he could rediscover this inspiration. He summed up his conviction that office work and suburban existence led to a dull, boring emasculated life, in the following image, 'to settle down, to make good, to sell your soul for a villa and an aspidistra. To turn into [...] the little docile cit who slips home by the six-fifteen to a supper of cottage pie and stewed tinned pears; half an hour's listening to the BBC symphony concert and then perhaps a spot of licit sexual intercourse if the wife is in the mood – What a fate!'.⁷⁵

⁷¹ V. Woolf., *Night and Day*, (London; George Doran, 1920) p.82

⁷² Ibid., p.100

⁷³ V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, (Herts; Wordsworth Edition, 1996) p.64, first published by Hogarth Press 1925.

⁷⁴ G. Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, (London; Penguin, 1970), first published Gollancz 1936; *Coming Up for Air*, (London; Penguin, 2000), first published Gollancz 1939

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.52

The life of the insurance clerk, George Bowling, in *Coming Up for Air*, published in 1939, was no less bleak. George was portrayed as trapped by his job, his family, by the expectations of his class and what he saw as his 'meaningless life [...] nothing seemed real in Ellesmere Road except gas bills, school fees and the office on Monday'.⁷⁶ His life revolved around his work and earning enough to pay the mortgage and the school fees. He found no comfort in his home, describing it and the road in which he lived as 'a line of semi-detached torture chambers where the poor little five-to-ten-pound-a-weekers quake and shiver'.⁷⁷ He had lost all his joy in life, his inner spirit, hating the unending sameness and tedium, ground down by his responsibilities and the suburban dreariness. He compared his working life unfavourably to that of the working classes, 'the prole suffers physically but he is a free man when he isn't working. But in every one of these little stucco boxes, there's some poor bastard who is never free'.⁷⁸ To escape and because 'I only wanted to be alive', he made a trip back to the village where he grew up, looking back to a time of freedom, when his life had meaning and joy.⁷⁹ Yet, the visit only confirmed his feelings, he felt like 'a ghost, I am dead'.⁸⁰ Furthermore, his village had been despoiled, packed with new estates; houses like his own, all the same of the type he despised.

It was not only in novels that clerical workers were disparaged, Betjeman in his 1937 poem, *Slough*, wrote about 'bald young clerks' who could not tell 'the birdsong from the radio', whose conversations were confined to sport and cars in 'bogus-Tudor bars' and who 'daren't look up and see the stars'.⁸¹ Again clerks are portrayed as unable to appreciate nature or beauty and to be interested only in the banal and the concrete. Furthermore, Betjeman's insistence they should be spared from the bombs as it was 'not their fault' but that of the 'stinking cad' and his demand for profit as well as the statement that they 'daren't look up' further implied that clerks were weak, timid and exploited, creatures without will, emasculated pawns.

⁷⁶ Orwell, *Coming Up for Air*, p.246

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.12

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.13

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.172

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.208

⁸¹ J. Betjeman, 'Slough', in *Continual Dew*, (London; John Murray, 1937)

Yet, even within these bleak stereotypes of clerical workers, there were also complexities and ambiguities. Howard's picture of Bast was drawn from the point of view of the Schleger sisters; to them, Bast was pathetic and unable to appreciate culture. However, he can also be read as aspiring and ambitious, determined to better himself, to learn about art, culture and acquire the education he had been denied as a child; unlike the Misses Schleger, 'leisured women who have been reading steadily from childhood'.⁸² He was not weak or devoid of spirit but a fighter against the economic and social constraints of Edwardian Britain. Similarly, Orwell's depictions of the self-pitying Comstock and the angry Bowling seemed to confirm the picture of clerical life as unsatisfying and conforming. Yet one can also see a more complex picture, not simply a diatribe against lower middle class suburban lifestyle, but men who are struggling to escape their stultifying work. Men who, over the course of the novels, come to fix their identities and purpose in family and domestic life, as Bowling states home and family are the 'only thing I care a curse about'.⁸³ Orwell, while demonstrating some of the frustrations and limitations of white-collar suburban existence, also shows the value of quiet domesticity and family life as something which could sustain and make his life good. Furthermore, Forster, Orwell and Betjeman all highlighted that it was the impact of larger economic and social forces outside of their control which restricted the freedom of choice of clerical workers and made them dependent.

However, both the comic caricatures and the somewhat ambiguous portraits of clerks drawn by the literary elites, provided only partial pictures of clerical lives and there were other more rounded representations which shed a positive light on aspects around domesticity, masculinity, status and worth.

Heroes and Anti-heroes: Reformulating Masculinities in Wartime

This section examines realist literary representations of clerks set during the two world wars and provides an alternative view of aspects of their social identities, in particular differing ideas about masculinity, not the weak, enfeebled version from the comic caricature or the literary elite, but a more positive vision of a different type of manliness. It also considers how the crisis of war provided the opportunity to

⁸² Forster, *Howards End* p.32

⁸³ Orwell, *Coming Up for Air*, p.269

reassess the perceptions of clerks and how it shifted the clerk from the margins of depictions of Britishness to pictures of the clerk as the everyman, a symbol of Britishness.

The outbreak of war in 1914 saw a rush to volunteer for the Army and by 1916, prior to the introduction of conscription, over half a million clerks, more than 40 per cent of the finance and commerce workforce, had enlisted, the highest percentage of any major employment group.⁸⁴ J. B. Priestley described his own decision to join up as a way of 'accepting the challenge to our untested manhood. Other men who had not lived as easily as we, had [...] borne arms – couldn't we?'⁸⁵ R. C. Sherriff, at this time a junior clerk, saw the war as a 'merciful, heaven-sent release' from his suffocating job.⁸⁶ Similarly the literary obsession with hollow chests and bent spines was shown to be unfounded as medical assessments demonstrated clerks were usually healthier and fitter than their working class counterparts.⁸⁷

This enthusiasm of clerks for soldiering was perhaps surprising and out of kilter with the well-worn stereotype of physical weakness, timidity and unmanliness although Tosh argues that it was precisely because of the association of clerks with effeminacy that they rushed to enlist - they wanted to show they were men.⁸⁸ Simply joining the forces, as in the case of Sam Briggs, elevated the representation of clerks while Kipling's 1919 poem, *The Ex-Clerk*, gave the army credit for freeing 'a timid slave' and giving him 'strength of body, will and mind'.⁸⁹ Furthermore the images which emerged from the literature about clerks' service post war celebrated a new, more dynamic and positive picture of clerical prowess in war. They were painted as having an integral role in the defence of the country, 'doing their bit', ordinary men, not swashbuckling heroes but quietly and efficiently getting on with the routine of the job. Their representations reflected what Alison Light described as an

⁸⁴ J. M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People*, (London; Macmillan, 1985), p.34 quoted in Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk*, p.124

⁸⁵ Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk*, p.124

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.126

⁸⁷ Ibid., p.126

⁸⁸ J. Tosh, 'Masculinities in an Industrialising Society 1800-1914', *Journal of British Studies*, 44.2 (2005)

⁸⁹ R. Kipling, 'Ex-Clerk, Epitaphs of War' in *The Years Between*, (London; Methuen & Co, 1919) quoted in J. Wild, J., 'A Merciful Heaven-sent Release', *Cultural and Social History*, 4.1 (2007)

'anti-heroic' mood, a reaction against the imperialist and gung-ho attitudes of the pre-war era when faced with the horrors of industrial warfare.⁹⁰

Works such as *The Patriot's Progress* and *The Spanish Farm Trilogy* illustrate these shifts.⁹¹ *The Patriot's Progress*, by Henry Williamson a former insurance clerk who served in the Great War, told the story of John Bullock, a bank clerk, who volunteered in 1914, 'anxious lest the war might end before he saw some of the fun'.⁹² After basic training in which he had to learn, not only how to fight, but as a private, to mix with other men mainly from the working classes and to lose his sense of distinction and class superiority, he was sent to the trenches in France. There he remained, in the mud and gore until 1917 when he was wounded and sent back to England. It was a story of stoicism and resilience in unrelieved hell. It was not a tale of heroic deeds, of storming machine guns and enemy trenches but one of duty and doggedness, of long marches, of boredom, fear and death. It harked back to the old stereotype of the anonymous, undifferentiated clerk slogging away as a cog in the office, but it invited admiration not scorn, it celebrated strength of spirit, steadfastness, ability to endure and manhood creating a revised image of the clerk as central to Englishness.

Written by R. H. Mottram, himself a bank clerk and volunteer, the *Spanish Farm Trilogy* chronicles the war experiences of another bank clerk, Stephen Dormer. Initially consigned to the ranks, he was then appointed, like many other clerks, as a temporary officer for the duration.⁹³ Unlike Bullock who had to adjust to living and fighting alongside the working classes, Dormer, for the duration of the war, was declared a gentleman mixing in much higher social circles and enjoying the privileges of rank, such as better food, more comfortable billets, a personal batman and first class travel on trains. While this temporary elevation caused, for many, class disorientation and feelings of uncertainty about status, for Dormer, it brought an education about a different sort of life and a better sense of his own worth. The

⁹⁰ A. Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*, (London; Routledge, 1991), p.8

⁹¹ H. Williamson, *The Patriot's Progress*, (London; Geoffrey Bles, 1930); R. H. Mottram, *The Spanish Farm Trilogy*, (London; Chatto & Windus, 1924)

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.9

⁹³ From 1916, faced with shortage of infantry officers, the Army granted temporary commissions - the majority to clerks.

novel celebrates the qualities of clerk; 'a tidy mind' and 'a precise [...] spirit, and the 'thoroughness and care' he brought to the necessary routines of organising his men.⁹⁴ The attributes of his pre-war life, his good safe job, his pension, and even proper teas, were shown in a new light, not as the butt of jokes and satire, not as banal, suburban and domestic but as something to be valued and desired.

These books helped to create a new vision of the clerk, not as weak or mindless but as strong, adaptable and capable. His values were not to be mocked while his stoicism and self-reliance were admired. They opened the way to a more inclusive view of the clerk, not as an outsider trying to be something he was not or subject to jibes about masculinity, as in the case of the sneering images produced by the literary elites or the pictures of clerks as comic. Instead, the depictions drawn from these works were of the clerk as manly, as integral to the nation, key to the idea of Britishness.

These characteristics were also reflected in the literature and films of the Second World War, for example in propaganda films such as *Millions Like Us* released in 1943.⁹⁵ Although primarily seeking to showcase the contribution of women from all classes to the war effort, in the character of Fred Blake, a former insurance clerk, called up to RAF Bomber Command, it reinforced those images of the stoic, resilient anti-hero from the Great War. Fred was an archetypal clerk, quiet and shy; his dreams for the future were domestic focused upon affording a house with a garden and returning to his job at the insurance company. His diffidence might have raised questions about his manliness but his role as a gunner in a bomber flying on raids over Germany, one of the most hazardous roles with short life expectancy and the understated way he described a raid as 'not bad' while admitting his nervousness, contradicted this.⁹⁶ He was not portrayed as heroic but stoic, ordinary, a 'little man' determined to do his duty to protect his home, family and way of life.

⁹⁴ Mottram, *Spanish Farm*, p.616, 620, 650

⁹⁵ F. Lauder & S. Gilliat, (directors), *Millions Like Us*, [film], Gainsborough Studios, (1943)

⁹⁶ Over 51% of air crew were killed and gunners averaged no more than 5 sorties.
<https://iwm.org.uk/history/life-and-death-in-bomber-command> accessed 31st January 2024

On the home front, similar ideals were celebrated in Norman Collins' novel, *London Belongs to Me*.⁹⁷ The central character, Mr Josser, was retiring after forty two years as a clerk and the description of his final presentation ticks all the stereotypes about clerks; he was small and introduced as 'four large ledgers with a pair of stripped trousers underneath'.⁹⁸ His life was one of routine, 'waiting about in the rain for the same old tram' every day. His prime concerns were domestic; his home, his wife and daughter, his married son and his granddaughter and his dreams of a retirement cottage in the country. But Mr Josser was much more than a boring, dull clerk – he was interested in politics being a member of a local 'shadow parliament'; when his neighbour was accused of murder, unlike others, he provided both financial and emotional support, then when his son was killed at Dunkirk, he took in his daughter-in-law and the baby. Later as younger men and women were conscripted, he went back to his old office to his old stool, to be 'as during all those years, just to be the clerk at the end desk' following the unexciting routines to help keep the business going.⁹⁹ He was strong and reliable; a caring husband and father and a supportive friend; who just tried to make the best of what was thrown at him. A symbol of the ordinary man doing his best and a celebration of an unsung hero without whom the war would not have been won.

While *London Belongs to Me* might be considered something of a propaganda piece highlighting the role of the ordinary man during the war when 'we were all in it together' and perhaps suggesting that a similar effect was required for the re-building of Britain and its economy, it provided an affectionate image of an essential man, the type of man who personified the British, quietly but effectively getting on with things and more pertinently for this thesis, he was a clerk.

These novels and films focusing upon the actions and experiences of clerks during wartime perfectly illustrate the shift away from the heroic public rhetoric of masculinity and Englishness as claimed by Light and Rose's concept of 'temperate

⁹⁷ N. Collins, *London Belongs to Me*, (London; Gollancz, 1945)

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.14 & p.15

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.724

masculinity'.¹⁰⁰ For Rose, this meant a commitment to the home and family, to self-reliance and sense of duty while also exhibiting emotional and physical toughness, the ability and willingness to fight, not for glory or territory but as a way of protecting home, family and way of life.

Released at the end of the war but set in the interwar period, the film *This Happy Breed* exemplified this idea of 'temperate masculinity' and Englishness with the clerk and his family at the centre, the embodiment of British values.¹⁰¹ It chronicled the life of Frank Gibbons, a travel agent's clerk and how he and his family faced up to daily life; there were weddings, deaths, family splits and reconciliations, all of which were met with stoicism and fortitude. The big events of the interwar period, the General Strike, the Abdication, widespread unemployment were recorded but simply as background, they did not impact upon the family dynamic as they took both national crisis and personal disasters in their stride. Although there was some disquiet about the threats from Germany, the focus was on the family who were depicted as uninterested in political matters and largely contented with their lot. Moreover, it was propaganda, the film was released in 1944 as a reminder of what had been at stake, the British family and an unassuming, ordered way of life based around virtues such as determination, optimism, hard work and the strength of family bonds. The timing of the film's release as the war was ending and the final outcome not in doubt, suggested that it was also intended as a model for the reconstruction. However, what is important in terms of understanding the shift in the social identities of clerks was that it placed the clerk as the centre of British life, the backbone of the country, the domesticated everyman with his family and way of life depicted as the epitome of Britishness.

The 'little man': Suburban Husbands and Domesticated Family Men

Yet while these invocations of British values as tied to the idea of home and family and the source of their fighting spirit first emerged during the 1930s and were dominant in the wartime images, domesticity was a long-standing feature of the

¹⁰⁰ Light, *Forever England*; S. O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939-1945*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2003), Chapter 5, Temperate Heroes: Masculinity on the Home Front p.151-196

¹⁰¹ D. Lean, (director), *This Happy Breed*, [film], J. Arthur Rank, (1944) based on 1939 play of same name by Noel Coward

social identities of clerks throughout the twentieth century and one which cuts across nearly all the literary depictions of clerical workers. As has been discussed, domesticity was a key element in the characterisation of the comic clerk and mocked as a sign of weakness and a lack of manliness. It was also depicted as a trap, confining clerks to a mundane, spiritless existence which crushed individuality and prized convention and respectability.

Yet, there are other images of domesticated clerks which are more positive and nuanced than these associations of the domestic with effeminacy, monotony and the desire for respectability. Tosh argued that, from the late nineteenth century, a distinct bourgeois masculinity emerged, based upon the work ethic and the duty to provide for one's family and that this was characterised by an emotional attachment to domesticity, straightforwardness, self-restraint and self-reliance.¹⁰² While Alison Light claimed that the 1920s and 1930s saw a shift in literary perspectives 'a move away from formerly heroic and officially masculine public rhetoric of a national destiny [...] to an Englishness at once less imperial and more inward looking, more domestic and more private in the picture of the "little man", the suburban husband pottering in his herbaceous border [...] we can discover a considerable sea-change in ideas of national temperament'.¹⁰³ This section traces alternate images of clerks, one in which domesticity or its lack formed a central but not the only element of the social identity of the fictional clerk.

The clerk as domesticated stretched back to the nineteenth century and Charles Dickens who established some early ideas, not only for his contemporaries but more importantly for my study, for subsequent generations. His classics were read and taught throughout the twentieth century and captivated millions through film, radio and television adaptations.¹⁰⁴ In both *Christmas Carol* and *Great Expectations*, Dickens celebrated the home as a refuge, as a place where the clerk was his own man, given the love and respect missing from his employment as a

¹⁰² J. Tosh, 'Masculinities in an Industrializing Society: Britain 100-1914', *Journal of British Studies*, 44.2 (2005)

¹⁰³ Light, *Forever England*, p.8

¹⁰⁴ 24 film and TV adaptations of *Christmas Carol* have been released including a silent version in 1923 and what is generally considered the definitive version in 1951. *Great Expectations* was first filmed in 1917, then as a talkie in 1934 with a celebrated version in 1946. It was also serialised on BBC in 1959 and 1967

clerk.¹⁰⁵ In the office, Bob Cratchit was passive and timid, enduring the bullying and parsimony of Scrooge and totally dependent upon his employer, but at home, he was pictured as the cog around which the family revolved. Similarly, John Wemmick, the clerk in *Great Expectations*, although harsh and unfeeling when debt collecting, was at home a domesticated man, taking care of the 'aged parent' and taken up with his 'castle in Walworth' where he was 'my own engineer', my own carpenter'.¹⁰⁶ This contrast between home – the warm, safe haven, filled with kindness – and the tedious routine of the office at the beck and call of a grasping employers and thus unable to be true to one's own nature, was a recurring theme in depictions of white collar workers.

This idea of the home as a place of safety where a clerk could be his own man was continued by writers such as Arnold Bennett and Shan Bullock, described by Rose as representatives of the 'office boy intelligentsia'.¹⁰⁷ Both began their working lives as clerks writing in their spare time and offered detailed and realistic accounts of the daily lives of clerks. They did not ignore the harsher sides of clerical life, the boring, repetitive routines and the struggle to provide for their families but their clerks were men with dreams, aspirations and spirit, men with the strength to make their own choices about how they spent their lives.

Bennett's *A Man from the North*, published in 1898, told the story of Richard Larch, a clerk who moved to London with ambitions to be a writer.¹⁰⁸ However, lonely and distracted and ultimately lacking ability, he failed to get his work published. Yet, as a clerk, he was a success, his salary increasing from £65 to £234 per annum.¹⁰⁹ Then, about to be married, he had to choose between a precarious career as an author or to remain in his steady, reliable post as a clerk. He settled for safety and respectability as 'the suburban husband – dutiful towards his employers

¹⁰⁵ C. Dickens, *The Christmas Carol*, (London; Everyman's Library Classics, 1994) first published Chapman and Hall 1843; *Great Expectations*, (London; Penguin Popular Classics, 1994) first published Chapman and Hall 1861.

¹⁰⁶ Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p.188 & 190-91

¹⁰⁷ Rose, *The Intellectual Life*, p.406-417

¹⁰⁸ Bennett, A., *A Man from the North*, (New York; George Doran, 1911)

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.161

[...] keeping his house in repair; pottering in the garden; taking his wife out for a walk or occasionally to the theatre and saving as much as he could' ¹¹⁰

Robert Thorne, in Bullock's novel of 1907, was a clerk in the London Tax Office.¹¹¹ Unlike Larch, he found the work depressing and mind numbing, describing himself as a 'slave of the desk' relived only by the presence of congenial colleagues. He was constantly worried about money. He and his wife needed to account for every penny, they had no servant and Thorne had to share chores, helping with shopping, lighting fires, cleaning grates and even on occasion cooking meals, a situation which distressed him, 'I feel small [...] and not much of a man'.¹¹² Ultimately he threw up his career in the Tax Office to join his brother in New Zealand 'in an attempt to become a man' and 'to get the children away [...] to give them a chance of being something better than typists and clerks.'¹¹³

Both these examples offer mixed messages and demonstrate a more nuanced consideration of domesticity and its association with masculinity. Richard Larch abandoned his dreams and ambitions to settle for safety and a dull, unadventurous, life in the suburbs; Robert Thorne intruded upon the feminine sphere when forced to take on household tasks. But it can also be argued that they both demonstrated another kind of masculinity, one which Tosh described and Hammerton labelled as 'moral manliness' in which the over-riding duty of every man was to provide for his family and to ensure a better life for his children.¹¹⁴ In this reading, it was not from weakness that Larch opted for suburbia but a pragmatic choice which confirmed his masculinity – he fulfils the first duty of a man. Similarly, Thorne was not unmanned by sharing the housework but by his failure to provide adequately for his family, his choice to emigrate was equally pragmatic, not just about adventure and a more traditionally masculine occupation but the need to support his family. They showed a different picture of the clerk, not just as weak and feeble, not ground down by routine

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p.260

¹¹¹ S. Bullock, *Robert Thorne: The Story of a London Clerk*, (London; T Werner Laurie, 1907)

¹¹² Ibid., p.190

¹¹³ Ibid., p.283

¹¹⁴ Tosh, 'Masculinities in an Industrializing Society'; J. A. Hammerton, 'The English Weakness? Gender, Satire and 'Moral Manliness' in the Lower Middle Class 1870-1920', in Kidd, and Nicholls, *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism*, p.165-166

but as pragmatic, capable, stoic, a breadwinner able to make his own way in the world.

By the 1930s such ideas about domesticity and the 'little man' had become a literary mainstay.¹¹⁵ Novels such as R. C. Sherriff's, *The Fortnight in September* published in 1931 re-enforced the stereotype of the domesticated clerk as a creature of habit, unwilling to try anything new but it also celebrated family life presenting it as an ideal, a place of happiness, comfort and security.¹¹⁶ It was a simple story of a clerk, his wife and their two teenaged children embarking on their annual holiday to Bognor, the same holiday, in the same two weeks in the same boarding house, that they had taken for the past twenty years during which little happened of note, small anxieties about train times, days by the sea, games of cricket and evenings in the pub. Sherriff's clerk was a happy man, easily satisfied by small pleasures, secure in his own bubble, inward looking, somewhat complacent about the future with little interest in the wider world or cultural matters.

The Clerk and the Spectre of Unemployment

The tone of other interwar works which focussed upon the 'little man', was much darker, overshadowed by fears about unemployment and penury. The commonly held belief in the security of white-collar work was shaken by the Great Depression. While, less vulnerable than manual workers, in 1931 around 5.3 per cent of male clerks were unemployed and a survey of London Labour Exchanges identified a fourfold increase in the numbers of unemployed clerks between 1928 and 1932.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the majority of clerks were uninsured workers and ineligible for unemployment benefits, so forced to rely upon means tested dole payable only after savings and the proceeds of the sale of assets, including homes and valuables, were exhausted. Long term unemployment therefore resulted in destitution. As was discussed earlier, the value system of clerks was based upon self-help, respectability, and self-reliance which stigmatised claiming benefits or accepting charity. Unemployment and financial hardship were therefore compounded by

¹¹⁵ Light, *Forever England*, p.8

¹¹⁶ R. C. Sherriff, *The Fortnight in September*, (London; Victor Gollancz, 1931)

¹¹⁷ Klingender, *The Condition of Clerical Labour in Britain*, p.91-2. Official statistics for 1931 show around 5.3 per cent of male clerks were unemployed compared to 12.7 per cent of the total workforce.

feelings of shame, isolation and the loss of face with peers and this fear pervaded the clerks depicted in the novels discussed below.

These values and fears were illustrated in J. B. Priestley's novel, *Angel Pavement*, published in 1930.¹¹⁸ A popular success, both at the time of its publication and throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the book focused upon the office staff of a small run-down company selling veneers which was ruined by the owner's incompetence and an unscrupulous fraudster. Priestley created an authentic picture of office life in the late 1920s with detailed descriptions of the social identities of the individual workers, their roles within the office and the gendered and class relationships between them. The staff comprised Mr Smeeth, the chief clerk and cashier; Mr Turgis, a clerk; the secretary, Miss Matfield; the typist, Poppy and an office boy, Stanley. This section focuses upon the two male clerks and the differing ways in which they both contributed to and contested the stereotypes built up around the social identities of clerks. Representations of the women in the office will be discussed in a later section.

In appearance, both men conform to the common image as dull and physically unprepossessing; the middle-aged Mr Smeeth had drooped shoulders and a narrow chest and Turgis, a 'total lack of colour and bloom'.¹¹⁹ Yet, Smeeth's appearance was deceptive, while 'he looked what he ought to have been [...] and what he is not – a grey drudge'¹²⁰. He was not just the chief clerk, not a simple cog, but 'the lynchpin of the business without which it could not function'.¹²¹ Unlike clerical stereotype he was not overly deferential to his employer although he knew his place and he was confident about his abilities and his worth, having worked his way up over thirty-five years starting as an office boy from a Council School. However, he was kept awake at nights by the fear of losing his job and joining the 'shabby broken men, trudging round from office to office, haunting the Labour Exchanges [...] gradually sinking in to the workhouse and the gutter'.¹²² Yet, when the firm was

¹¹⁸ Priestley, *Angel Pavement*, popularity can be measured by fact that there were 3 reprints in 1930, 3 in 1932, 2 in 1933 and further reprints in 1934, 1935, 1937, 1940, 1941 and 1947

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p.42

¹²⁰ Ibid., p.66

¹²¹ Ibid., p.41

¹²² Ibid., p.42

defrauded and his worst fear was realised and he lost his job, his inner confidence persisted and although 'he might be staring at another and smaller world, and it was a world that could play all manner of tricks with Herbert Norman Smeeth, but it could never capture, swallow and digest the whole of him'.¹²³

Outside of work, Smeeth was a domesticated man; a 'really good husband' and 'old home-bird', happy to spend an evening with a detective story or listening to the wireless, having a genuine but unambitious passion for music.¹²⁴ He saw his home, for 'which he saw himself ever planning and working' as his refuge, a place of safety and a sign of respectability for him and for his children protecting them from 'poverty, disgrace, shame'.¹²⁵ He valued stability and security and worried about his son who, he thought, flitted from job to job, having 'no desire to stick at anything [and] to work himself steadily up to a good position', as he had done. Ultimately when the disaster happened and he found himself without a job, it was his family and his home which sustained him; his children and his wife all came together, they would find work to keep the home while he found another post. In the character of Smeeth, Priestley portrayed a clerk, not as weak, ineffectual, subservient or unresponsive to things of the spirit, but as resilient, loyal and pragmatic; not defeated by the loss of his job but ready, with his family, to face the challenges of the future. However, as a clerk, he was ultimately powerless, a victim caught between the inept, upper-class employer and the predatory speculator who swindled the company, but this did not unman him, he was brave and unbowed. He fitted into the model of moral manliness.

Priestley's character Turgis, by contrast, matched more neatly the negative clerical stereotype. Even his name suggested he was boring and dull. He was an unattractive, pathetic figure in his mid-twenties, poorly paid, and living in seedy lodgings without the domestic security enjoyed by Smeeth. He had little interest or pride in his work finding it tedious and unrewarding and had nothing in common with his colleagues. Outside the office, he was solitary, spending his time lying on his bed, reading twopenny film magazines and going to the cinema in the vain hope of

¹²³ Ibid., p.454

¹²⁴ Ibid., p.69-70 & p.75

¹²⁵ Ibid., p.66

picking up a girl. He was also a snob, scorning the typist due to her accent, the way she dressed and her father's job on the London Underground. Moreover, when he was sacked, his reaction was to attempt suicide – he failed because he did not have a shilling for the gas. He was the opposite of Smeeth, weak and emasculated.

In these two characters, Priestley gives two opposing representations of clerks, one fulfilled in both his work and domestic life, a man who had worked his way up from a Council School through his own efforts. The other, lacking in ambition and spirit was an exaggerated vision of the down-trodden, emasculated clerk and moreover, a man lacking a domestic life, a proper home which was such a key part of Smeeth's identity.

The idea that a privatised family home was central to the clerk's sense of identity, masculinity, self-respect and status – a defining line between the middle and working classes – was explored in two novels by Frank Tilsley, a left-wing writer and former clerk. These novels which, like *Angel Pavement*, examined the impact of the Depression, unemployment and the fears of white-collar workers were very popular when first published but quickly fell out of fashion. The first, *The Plebeian's Progress*, traced the downfall of Allen Barclay, an audit clerk who was hung for the murder of his wife following a failed suicide pact.¹²⁶ As a clerk, he was earning £5 a week with a comfortable home, he was then let go due to the economic downturn. After a series of dead-end jobs during which his savings were exhausted, he obtained a post dealing with the accounts in a small restaurant whose owners practice shady dealings such as short measures and dodging taxes from whom, in desperation, he stole money to cover the rent. He was dismissed and unable to get another job, he lost his home and with it his respectability, status and all hope. Suicide seemed the only way out, but he survived and was convicted of the murder of his wife and sentenced to death.

¹²⁶ F. Tilsley, *The Plebeians Progress*, (London; Seven House Publishers, 1976) first published Gollancz, 1933. Mentioned as among the books of the year in *Daily Herald* 26.12.1933 p.13 quoted by Hopkins, C., *Reading 1900-1950* Sheffield University Special Collections <https://reading19001950.wordpress.com/2022/02/20/the-plebeians-progress-1933-by-frank-tilsley> accessed 2nd March 2024

His second, *I'd Do It Again*, told the story of a clerk working for a mail order company.¹²⁷ After three years with no pay increases and aware that the clerk previously doing his job had been paid at a higher rate, he asked for a pay rise. This was refused and knowing that alternative jobs were scarce, he turned to crime and embezzled regular sums to top up his salary to the level he needed to keep his home and wife in a respectable manner, arguing that, in effect, he had no choice. "I'd sooner be honest than dishonest. But I'd sooner be dishonest and have five pounds a week and live in this bungalow with this garden [...] than be honest on three pounds a week and live how we were living in Camberwell."¹²⁸

These clerks were depicted as 'little men', alone at the mercy of an unfair economic system. Their clerical values of self-help and individualism could not protect them, they received little or no support from the state and, unlike those in the established middle classes and their employers, they possessed neither the financial resources nor the social networks to help them. While they can be described as materialist, feeble and unable to face hardship, it can also be argued that their attachment to the home and their role as a breadwinner was core to their social identities and drove them to crime. These were both men from the working classes who had been educated in council schools and for whom a post as a clerk was a step up the social ladder. Their job and their homes were the concrete signs of their social mobility and their respectability. Barclay was destroyed by his failure to keep his home while the unnamed narrator in *I'd do It Again* fought back considering himself just as good as his employer even if he had not benefited from a father who could pay for a private education. But it was a solitary fight, he did not combine with colleagues, there was no joining a union to fight for fair pay as a working-class man may have done, instead he relied upon himself to obtain what he saw as his due. Anger was also a driving force and in this, he could be seen as a forerunner of the 1950s 'angry young men', he compared himself to his employer, 'the only difference between him and I was educated at a Council School, and he was educated at a Public School and had lots of money and influence and credit. I'd just as much brains

¹²⁷ F. Tilsley, *I'd Do It Again*, (London; Martin Seeker and Warburg, 1936)

¹²⁸ Ibid., p.131

as he had.’¹²⁹ Like Joe Lampton, he was ambitious and materialistic, he wanted the good things in life but felt his class held him back. Furthermore, in keeping with the image of the clerk as lacking in spirit and imagination, these were not daring or audacious crimes but petty, small-scale theft – the efforts of ‘little men’.

Conclusion

As has been shown, there was no single image of the clerk. Generalisations such as Clapson’s picture of routine, uneventful lives, passivity, humdrum domesticity and weakness clinging on to respectability and status have been shown to be only part of the picture.¹³⁰ From comic clown to stoic soldier; from family breadwinner committed to providing a good home to the criminal; from the upwardly mobile to those held back by class mores or prejudices; from the margins to epitomising British family life, these are other identities claimed by the literary clerk.

Despite this, there were some common themes although treated very differently. For example, the domestication and quest for respectability of clerks was made fun of in works such as *Diary of a Nobody* and *The Likely Lads*, patronised and sneered at by Orwell in both *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *Coming Up for Air* and celebrated in *Angel Pavement*. Similarly, aspiration was a frequent refrain, although what this meant and how it was attained varied considerably; Mr Pooter bought ‘plaster stags’ heads’ in imitation of the upper classes; Leonard Baste sought to improve his mind by reading Ruskin and studying art and high culture; Mr Smeeth spent thirty-five years working his way up from Council school boy to chief clerk while Bob Ferris attended night classes.

A further common theme focused upon keeping a distance from the working classes and more particularly their way of life even though many were from working class families. Mr Smeeth dreaded unemployment as it would undo the thirty-five years progression since he had left the council school, the narrator in *I’d Do It Again* was determined not to return to the two upstairs rooms in working class Camberwell. In the main, the works discussed above were stories of the everyday, of quiet lives which impacted only on those close to them, tales about ordinary people which reveal shifting ‘structures of feeling’, the ways in which people felt about the effects

¹²⁹ Ibid., p.34

¹³⁰ Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs*, p. 6

of social and economic change. In the interwar years, this meant a fear of unemployment and the subsequent losses of savings, home and even educational opportunities for their children which, in turn, kept clerks in their place and fostered deference and passivity.¹³¹ These snapshots of home and office life offer insights in the wider social identities of clerical workers as novelists, an increasing number of whom had experience of office work, who sought to give voice to an important aspect of urban modernity. As we have seen, the fortunes of the suburban 'little man' waxed and waned with the growth of suburbia and the onset of mass, mechanized warfare. If by the 1940s, clerical stereotypes provided the template for a moderate, 'temperate' masculinity of the kind celebrated in wartime propaganda, the post-war period saw an explosion in misogyny as the next chapter shows.

¹³¹ Clerks, earning over £250 per annum were uninsured workers and not eligible for unemployment benefits. Limited means-tested public assistance was paid but only after savings and sale of other assets were exhausted. Priestley, *Angel Pavement* p.209. Smeeth's daughter's apprenticeship as a milliner would mean no pay for initial six months and then minimal pay until qualified during which time she would have to be supported by her father; Orwell, *Coming Up for Air* p.12, Bowling paid school fees so his two children could go to middle class secondary school rather than council elementary school.

Chapter Two: A New Look at the 'Angry Young Men': Ambition, Misogyny and Gender Relations in the Office.

This chapter explores the impact of affluence, the feminisation of the work force and ideas about meritocracy in the 1950s on the portrayal of clerical workers. After a brief survey of the historiography, this section will focus upon the work of Braine and Barstow and Waterhouse, three of the so-called 'angry young men' and the ways they reflected this anger about class and meritocracy in the characters of three white collar workers in *Room at the Top*, *A Kind of Loving* and *Billy Liar*.¹ I then turn to an investigation into the ways women were portrayed in those novels but also looking back to examine how far these depictions had changed over the twentieth century. Was the misogyny evident in *Room at the Top* and *A Kind of Loving* characteristic the ways women were painted?

Literature Review

There is little in the post war literature on fictional clerks, it was not that clerks disappeared from fiction but rather that, as a group, they have not attracted academic attention. According to studies by Ferrebe, Laing and Allsop, by the 1950s the literary focus centred upon new ideas about identity, authority, belonging and revolt against what was seen as the complacent establishment. These were exemplified in the writing of the 'angry young men' who explored social mobility, the persistence of class barriers, changing ideas around masculinity and the impact of affluence and consumerism, questions which reflected the shifting 'structures of feeling' of the post war-era.² The ways in which office workers responded to this changed mood are explored in works such as *Room at the Top*, *A Kind of Loving* and *Billy Liar*. Each of these offered a new layer and vision to the social identities of clerical workers which are discussed in the subsequent sections.

As far as the fictional depictions of women in offices are concerned, the main areas of study have centred either on the 'new woman' of the late nineteenth and

¹ J. Braine, *Room at the Top*, (London; Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1957); S. Barstow, *A Kind of Loving*, (London; Michael Joseph, 1960); K. Waterhouse, *Billy Liar*, (London; Michael Joseph, 1959)

² A. Ferrebe, *Literature of the 1950s: Good Brave Causes*, (Edinburgh; Edinburgh University Press, 2012); See also S. Laing, 'Room at the Top: The Morality of Affluence', in C. Pawling, (ed.), *Popular Fiction and Social Change*, (London; Macmillan Press, 1984); K. Allsop, *The Angry Decade; A Survey of the Cultural Revolt of the 1950s*, (London; Peter Owen Ltd, 1964)

early twentieth century when women were first entering the office workforce or on the office as a space for romance and sexual encounters. Mullin's *Working Girls: Fiction, Sexuality and Modernity* shows how in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, typists and female clerks were portrayed as modern, lively, independent and free-thinking, an interloper into a masculine world.³ However, other studies of the same subject by Keep and Gray suggest a more nuanced picture with contradictory messages about independence, retaining femininity and gentility and the importance and role of marriage and children to the identity of women.⁴

Furthermore the office as a place for romance was a key theme in many magazines and popular novels as was shown in Shapiro Sanders discussion on romance weeklies in the 1920s and McAleer's research on the popularity of Mills and Boon.⁵ In these, Cinderella fantasies around the poor struggling typist/secretary, who after a series of obstacles and misunderstandings fell in love, married her employer and lived happily ever after in material comfort, protected by the love of a good man, abound. Berebitsky argues that while the office was a place for romance, it was also a place of danger.⁶ Women working in offices were portrayed variously as innocents looking for love and marriage; as materialistic gold-diggers; as marriage breakers; or as victims of sexual harassment.

Therefore, the picture of the fictional woman in the office contrasted strongly with that of the male clerk. In the early years of the twentieth century, she was pictured as strong, independent and pioneering, markedly different to the men crushed by the routine of the office while later images focused largely on her sexuality and have mainly been confined to romantic fiction in which the secretary, typist or clerk is portrayed as in search of a husband, a threat to the wife or simply as

³ K. Mullin, *Working Girls: Fiction, Sexuality and Modernity*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2017)

⁴ C. Keep, 'The Cultural Work of the Typewriter Girl', *Victorian Studies* 40.3 (1997); J. Gray, 'Typewriter Girls in Turn of the Century Fiction: Feminism, Labour and Modernity', *English Literature in Transition* 58.4 (2015)

⁵ L. Shapiro Sanders., 'Making the Modern Girl: Fantasy, Consumption and Desire in Romance Weeklies of 1920s' in C. Clay, D. Diczynski, B. Green & F. Hackney, (eds.), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain* (Edinburgh; Edinburgh University Press, 2018); McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing*, Chapter 4, 'Take the Place of Valium: Mills and Boon Ltd', p.100-132

⁶ J. Berebitsky, *Sex in the Office: A History of Gender, Power and Desire*, (New Haven; Yale University Press, 2012)

glamorous 'eye candy'. This change came about as the number of women in the office increased.

The Angry Young Clerks

The post war novels in which the white-collar worker was the central protagonist did not fit into the comfortable vision of family life portrayed in *This Happy Breed*, rather they depict the clerk as discontented and disaffected in similar ways to Tilsley's clerks. This section examines three novels, all of which were also made into films, *Room at the Top*, *A Kind of Loving* and *Billy Liar*.⁷ The books were well received but it was the films which brought them to the wider public with *Room at the Top* nominated for six Academy Awards while *Billy Liar* received six British Academy for Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) awards.⁸

These films were part of the 'British New Wave' which sought to engage directly with the changing landscape of contemporary Britain and were credited with bringing a new voice to the country, that of the so-called 'angry young men', disaffected men railing against the prejudices and conventions of the entrenched establishment.⁹ They articulated a new 'structure of feeling' expressing how the changing political, economic and social environment impacted upon them and those who shared similar backgrounds and mentalities.¹⁰ Barriers between classes were said to have lowered due to the influence of war time propaganda which had promulgated the idea of Britain as an inclusive family in which 'we were all in it together' while conscription both into the Forces and into factories facilitated more mixing of people from different classes.¹¹ This blurring of class divisions was continued by establishment of the

⁷ J. Braine, *Room at the Top*, (London: Eyre & Spottiswood, 1957), released as a film directed by J. Clayton, British Lion Films, (1959); S. Barstow, *A Kind of Loving*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1960) released as a film directed by J. Schlesinger, Anglo-Amalgamated, (1963); K. Waterhouse, *Billy Liar*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1959) released as a film, directed by J. Schlesinger, Anglo-Amalgamated, (1963)

⁸ A. Roberts, 'The Film that changed British Cinema', The Guardian 21st June 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/jun/21/room-at-the-top-film> accessed 20 August 2021; *Billy Liar* – <https://www.bfi.org.uk/films-tv-people/4ce2b6a530c3e> accessed 28 August 2021

⁹ A. Ferrebe, *Literature of the 1950s*, p.7; Other examples include K. Amis, *Lucky Jim*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1954), released as a film directed by J. Boulting, British Lion Films, (1957); A. Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, (London: W. H. Allen & Co Ltd, 1958), released as a film directed by K. Reisz, Bryanston Films, (1960) and J. Osbourne, *Look Back in Anger*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), released as a film, directed by T. Richardson, Warner Bros (1959)

¹⁰ Williams, *Long Revolution*, p.368

¹¹ See for example, Rose, *Which People's War*, Chapter 1

welfare state and the prosperity from the mid 1950s with almost full employment, a doubling of average earnings and a boom in house building.¹² These shifts were accompanied by a rhetoric of meritocratic classlessness and opportunity for all in which every child was to benefit from a secondary education; a system which was intended to offer bright children the chance of social mobility but in fact, largely maintained the class hierarchy.¹³ Educational attainment, ability and not class, wealth or connections were said to determine the path to success, the reality suggested otherwise and it was within this context – this ‘structure of feeling’ that these ‘angry young men’ wrote; men who had benefited from education, albeit in the years leading up to the war, but felt held back by the establishment, the pre-war elites who still held power in Government, the Universities, business and in institutions like the BBC and the Arts Council.¹⁴ That this feeling of anger was shared or at least understood by many of the reading and cinema going public was reflected in the reception their work received. These ‘angry young men’ were usually painted as enraged working-class men railing against the chauvinism and conventions of a resolutely middle-class Britain. Yet when one looks more closely, a more complex picture emerges, social mobility, clerical work and lower-middle class sensibilities were entwined. While Waterhouse, the son of a costermonger and Barstow, a miner’s son were from traditional manual working-class families, they both had lower middle class office jobs before their success as writers and Braine, the son of a local government worker was formerly employed as a librarian. Thus, like Hoggart’s grammar schoolboy, they were ‘uprooted and anxious’, they no longer clearly belonged to either the working or the middle class and were at ‘the friction point between two cultures’.¹⁵ Their education and different paths in life had separated them from family, neighbours and the wider working classes but neither

¹² Housing Supply: Historical Statistics for England; 162,110 new homes were completed in 1951, only 12.5% of which were built by private developers, by 1954 the numbers had increased to 293,100, 29% by private developers and by 1960 257,620 of which 60% were private.

<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk> accessed 13th September 2020

¹³ P. Hennessy, *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties*, (London; Allen Lane, 2006), p.76. In 1950, 60% of children of professional and businessmen won grammar school places compared with 10% of children from working class families who made up 75% of the population

¹⁴ A. Davis, & A. Sinfield, A., (eds.) *British Culture of the Post War: An Introduction to Literature and Society 1945-1995*, (London; Routledge, 2000), p.84

¹⁵ R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, (London; Chatto and Windus, 1957), p.238-249

did they possess the cultural and social capital of the established middle and upper classes.

Joe Lampton in Braine's *Room at the Top* was one of these men, of working-class origin, educated and ambitious seeking both financial and social advancement. His story sheds light on shifting attitudes to class, money, education and women, and, in its complexity, showed both continuities and change in the images of clerical identities, not only in the person of Joe but also through the contrasting depictions of other clerks, both men and women.

The son of a mill worker in a depressed northern town, Joe won a scholarship to the local grammar school and at 16 obtained a post as a clerk in the local council. When war broke out, he joined the RAF where, as a working class enlisted man, he became a sergeant and not an officer. He found the sneering and condescending attitudes of many of the officers unbearable and resented the fact that their class granted them an automatic commission and privileges. After being shot down, he spent three years as a prisoner of war during which he studied accountancy rather than trying to escape explaining, 'those three years were the only chance I'd get to be qualified. Let those rich bastards who have all the fun be heroes'.¹⁶ Post war, Joe's education, his war service and the deaths of his parents separated him further from the traditional working classes and he had to escape from 'dead Dufton' and his remaining family who were not 'my sort of person any longer'.¹⁷ He obtained a post in the accounts department of a local authority in a prosperous town in the midlands, the fictional Warley. His lodgings in a comfortable middle-class household, his white-collar job and his introduction to the 'Thespians', a local amateur drama group where he mixed with the middle-class elite brought him into direct contact with a different world, one in which money opened doors. He saw a man with a girl, 'the ownership of the Aston-Martin automatically place the young man in a social class far above mine; but that ownership was simply a question of money [...] the girl, her ownership too, was simply a question of money [...] I made my choice, I was going to enjoy all the luxuries which that young man enjoyed'.¹⁸ At the Thespians, he met

¹⁶ Braine, *Room at the Top*, p.118

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.7 & p.16

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.28-29

two women, the married Alice and Susan, the young daughter of a rich and powerful industrialist. Despite a passionate affair with Alice, he abandoned her in favour of Susan, 'the princess in the fairy stories [with] the necessary face and figure and the right income group.'¹⁹ Susan brought money, social status and the offer of an well-paid job in her father's engineering business while the future with Alice would have meant the disgrace of divorce courts, the loss of his reputation and career and thus any prospect of financial success.

This novel painted a different image of the clerk, the portrait of Joe was not particularly attractive but his journey to 'the top' allowed questions about class, meritocracy and materialism to be examined. Joe's grammar school education and his job in local government allowed him to escape from the working classes but it was his experiences in the RAF and his move to the fringes of middle-class society via his lodgings and subsequent membership of the theatre group which motivated him and showed him that his opportunities were restricted and the promise of meritocracy a sham. He compared his struggles; his education ended at 16, his accountancy training in the prison camp which would not have been available in peace time, the long career ladder in local government; to the prospects of the upper middle class, Jack, who had everything Joe wanted, handed to him on a plate; wealth, connections, a university education, a job as managing director in his father's company. To get to the top, one had to have money and connections which were simply not available to local government clerks, it took marriage to Susan and the job in her father's company to achieve this.

While, as we have seen, other fictional clerks have been ambitious, from Robert Thorne to Smeeth, Tilsley's unnamed narrator and Bob Ferris from *the Likely Lads*, Joe Lampton pursued his dreams much more fiercely and doggedly to the exclusion of everything else, even the love he supposedly felt for Alice and as for Susan, as his friend stated 'in love with her! Drivel! In lust with her and Daddy's bank balance'.²⁰ In other ways, Joe did not fit with the timid and feeble clerk stereotype, he served in RAF, he was 'five foot eleven in my socks' and as Mansfield notes, Braine emphasised Joe's heterosexuality not only in his relationships with

¹⁹ Ibid., p.57

²⁰ Ibid., p.88

Alice and Susan but in his musings about office colleagues, his previous lovers and women in pubs.²¹ Yet despite this, his masculinity was compromised, he did not conform to the idea of bourgeois masculinity, he was not independent, he was not self-reliant, his ambitions were realised not through his own work or talents but through his marriage, through a woman, without Susan and her father, he would remain a clerk. His thoughts when Susan demanded he choose between her and Alice, were purely materialistic 'good-bye big car, good-bye big house, good-bye power'.²² He saw social status entirely dependent upon the acquisition of money and possessions alongside the connections with equally moneyed people, not on family or breeding, a belief shared, at least in part, as will be discussed in chapter five, with the post-war respondents to Mass Observation and Goldthorpe's research.²³

Yet, in Braine's Lampton, there were also echoes of the social anxieties felt by clerks, 'the rich were my enemies, I felt they were watching me for the first false move'.²⁴ However, these were his private thoughts, he had learnt enough through his work and from the mixing of the social classes during the war to appear confident and socially assured in his dealings with Susan's wealthy parents and her ex-RAF officer friends, fighting back when they try to put him in his place by playing the 'Do You Know So and So game [...]' its object being the humiliation of those with less money'.²⁵

While the main thrust of the novel focussed upon Joe's relationships with Susan and Alice, it also discussed his working environment and relationships within the office. Unlike the grim stories of the inter-war period with the emphasis on boring, repetitive work in dingy offices, Braine gave an upbeat vision of the working life in local government. There were no complaints about working conditions and Joe was shown as both efficient and valued. However, it was very hierarchical and formal; first names were only used with colleagues of equal or lower status, while superiors, even on social occasions, were always referred to as Mr. He was also

²¹ Ibid, p.19; J. Mansfield, 'The Brute-Hero: The 1950s and Echoes of the North', *Literature and History* 19.1 (2010)

²² Braine, *Room at the Top*, p.151

²³ See below, Chapter 5, Ordinary lower middle class? The Social Identities of Clerical Workers, p.184-241

²⁴ Braine, *Room at the Top*, p.75

²⁵ Ibid., p.163

expected to maintain certain standards in both work and in his private life. Mr Hoylake, the Chief Treasurer considered it his duty to caution Joe about his relationship with Susan as her father was chair of the Establishment Committee with responsibility for appointment and this could stymie his prospects. In this, Braine was reminding his readers of the vulnerability of clerks, at least in local government, if they overstepped social conventions, class barriers or respectability.

While the depiction of Joe offered a harder, more ruthless picture of the clerk, it still had much in common with the older images. He distanced himself from his working-class background, his social confidence was brittle; he was a social climber; he was materialist only interested in money. In other ways, he was different; he was not domesticated, his emotional attachment to his home was as a means of getting wealth and the privilege and power it brought. Moreover, Joe was portrayed as an exception, his character was contrasted with the traditional stereotypical images of the clerk. He saw himself as separate, one of his great fears was being seen as the 'Town Hall clerk, the subordinate pen-pusher, half way to being a zombie'.²⁶ He mocked the limited ambitions of his colleagues, after a twenty or thirty year career in local government, the Chief Treasurer could only afford to buy a second-hand Austin Seven, Joe had his eyes on an Aston-Martin.²⁷ Furthermore, even the physical descriptions of his colleagues suggested staidness, dullness and a lack of enterprise and modernity placing them alongside the older stereotypes with their 'pasty faces' and 'as about 35 and didn't look as if he'd ever been any younger'.²⁸ It was not Joe but his local government colleagues who were 'ordinary, respectable and aspiring'.

If *Room at the Top* was a story of a clerk abandoning and escaping from his class, then *A Kind of Loving* told a different tale, one of a man trapped by the conventions and morality of the upper working and lower middle class.²⁹ Joe broke with convention, he ignored morality to obtain the luxuries and privileges he desired, Vic Brown, by contrast, was unable to break free. Vic, the son of a pit deputy, worked in the drawing office of an engineering company. He was grammar school educated, interested in literature and classical music with ambitions to go into

²⁶ Ibid., p.29

²⁷ Ibid., p.29

²⁸ Ibid., p.176

²⁹ Barstow, *A Kind of Loving*

business with a friend selling and repairing televisions, record players and other electrical equipment.³⁰ Ingrid, his girlfriend, was a typist in the same firm, living with her father, an engineer, and mother, a status conscious snob, in a typical middle class suburban semi. Throughout their courtship, Vic blew hot and cold, he was sexually attracted to Ingrid but found her dull and dim, interested only in 'yawping crooners', with her conversation limited to whether she liked 'Criss Cross Quiz better than Double Your Money or Take Your Pick better than both'.³¹ Then Ingrid became pregnant and, as the social mores of the time demanded, they married. Vic's reaction was telling 'you're trapped and there's no way out. Oh, what a fool; what a bloody, bloody fool'.³²

Vic was imprisoned, not by the prejudices and vested interests of the upper and established middle class, the ones Joe Lampton rode rough shod over, but by the moral conventions of his own class. As he confided to his sister, he had no choice, 'it doesn't matter whether you love her or not as long as you make her respectable'.³³ This code of respectability, key to the social identity of the working and lower middle class office worker, made abandoning Ingrid absolutely unthinkable, even his father said, 'if Victor's had his fun, he's a right to pay for it'.³⁴ Equally, Ingrid's mother, who thought Vic was too common, too working class, did not oppose the marriage. While it could be argued that this code, this family pressure to do the right thing as they saw it, emasculated Vic; the wedding was arranged and the decision to live with Ingrid's mother was made without any meaningful involvement from him. Vic could be seen as weak and feeble, he wanted to end his relationship with Ingrid but did not have the guts neither did he have the courage to flout the rules of his class. However, it could equally be the opposite, that Vic, in standing by Ingrid and facing the consequences was acting as a man should; he was prepared to sacrifice himself and his future – he had to give up the idea of the partnership in the television and record business – to preserve his reputation as well as that of Ingrid and their families. Yet, the emasculation of Vic after his marriage was clear; living with his

³⁰ Ibid., p.60-61

³¹ Ibid., p.164 & p.223, all popular ITV quiz shows

³² Ibid., p.184

³³ Ibid., p.240

³⁴ Ibid., p.189

mother-in-law, treated no better than a lodger with no key, not permitted to play his records or even have a satisfying sex life as Ingrid constantly worried about her mother hearing them. It was only after he left Ingrid and found a flat, a place where he could make a proper home, that they were reconciled, and he felt himself a man again. Like the earlier clerks, Vic's sense of 'manliness' was, at least in part, dependent upon his home and his role as 'provider' reliant upon himself and not the charity of in-laws.

Aside from the personal relationships, the text also threw light on the attitudes of male office workers, both within the hierarchy and towards the increasing numbers of women in the office. As in *Room at the Top*, status divisions between manager and others were stark, managers had separate offices and were referred to as 'Mr' while the staff were addressed by surnames, furthermore as a sign of their even lower status, the female typists were simply known as 'the girls' and by their first names.

While, usually bracketed with the 'angry young men' in *Room at the Top* and *A Kind of Loving*, *Billy Liar* offered yet another version of the clerk, one which had much in common with the comic clerks discussed previously.³⁵ Billy was a teenaged clerk working for a firm of undertakers and living with his parents in the suburbs of a northern town. He found both his home and work stifling and escaped to a world of fantasy. In his dreams, his lower-middle class conventional parents were transformed into the 'modern, London kind' indulgent about manners, late nights and smoking as well as being free with their money while he became a war hero and saviour of a make-believe country, Ambrosia.³⁶ His life was a web of lies; trying to keep his two fiancées from finding out about each other, to cover up his failure to post two hundred and eleven calendars to local businesses and even pretending his mother had a broken leg to cover up his lies about a non-existent sister.³⁷ His job was 'dull and comfortable' and he spent his time avoiding his employer, rehearsing comic routines with a colleague and dreaming about becoming a scriptwriter. He had received a vague letter of encouragement from a TV comedian and this, in his

³⁵ Waterhouse, *Billy Liar*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.11, p.15 & p.87

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.7, p.17-18 & p.41

imagination, became an offer of a job in London, a way of escape to a more fulfilling and exciting world. However, the escape was only a dream, he got as far as the railway station and then failed to get on the train returning to his job, his home and his fantasies.

On the face of it, a comic novel but also a parody in which Waterhouse mocked the 'angry young men', suburbia, consumerism and what Hoggart described as the 'shiny barbarism of American mass culture' through a clerk addicted to daydreaming.³⁸ Unlike *Room at the Top* or *A Kind of Loving*, it was not class or the struggle for social mobility which thwarted Billy, it was his own failings, his timidity, his ultimate conventionality, his inauthenticity; in other words, his clerical character.

Billy's apparent rebellion from the controlling world of home and work occurred only in his imagination. There, he was a masculine warrior, a leader, powerful and respected; in reality he lived a soft banal existence, chaffing against his parents' oppressive domesticity and at the beck and call of his employer, scared that his misdemeanours would be discovered. Waterhouse reprised the established stereotype of the clerk; comical, locked into routine, conventional, a rebel only in his head. However, he also gave glimpses of a new modern, more affluent world within a provincial northern town with its newly opened record shops, the Kit-Kat café and its shiny espresso machine and the 'all-top; nights at the Roxy, a place where there were opportunities for Billy. His song 'Twisterella' was a success locally as was his weekly stand-up in a local pub which showed that his ambition to become a scriptwriter were not completely a fantasy but to succeed, he had to be strong, more like Joe Lampton, and, as he had demonstrated in failing to get on the train, he was not. He fitted the stereotype of the clerk, timid, unwilling to break away from his roots.

These novels by the 'angry young men' show both continuities and change from those of earlier periods. The clerks appeared more secure, less threatened by unemployment and the fear of dropping back into the working class instead the emphasis focused upon the barriers which held them back from achieving their

³⁸ Hoggart, *The Uses*, p.24; A. Sliwinska, 'Different Faces of Parody in Billy Liar', *Images: The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual communications*, XIV, 23 (2014)

ambitions; ambitions which were wider than those of earlier clerks; getting to the 'top', running a television retail and repair shop or being a scriptwriter. Yet, remaining a clerk signalled a life of boredom and routine.

Gender Wars: Misogyny and the Representation of Women in the Office

In *Room at the Top*, the women clerical workers were strictly in the background, shown only as young, giggly girls in reception or as typists who made the tea and with whom the men flirt.³⁹ Only one female worker is mentioned by name, June, a typist who, Joe considered was 'within his reach', an ordinary girl who would have been satisfied with 'one of the concrete boxes of houses on the new Council Estate', not something which would have suited Joe.⁴⁰ Similarly, in *A Kind of Loving*, Ingrid was portrayed as interested only in clothes and TV quiz shows, sexually attractive but lacking culture, banal and boring while all the other women are referred to in misogynistic language as 'bints' and considered only as potential sexual partners⁴¹.

This misogyny was a significant shift from the portrayals in the early years of the twentieth century, when there had been few women in the office and they were depicted as pioneers, as escapees from domesticity, as interlopers into the masculine world of business; pictures which contrasted strongly with contemporary representations of the male clerk. He was dull, boring and somewhat effeminate, she was adventurous, independent and free-thinking but at the same time, dangerous and transgressive. This excitement was expressed by Bennett's *Hilda Lessways* who described herself as 'in heaven' despite the dirty, dismal office, her dusty dress and inky fingers in her job as a shorthand writer and clerk in a newspaper office. It freed her from the 'everlasting cookery, everlasting cleanliness, everlasting stitchery' and liberated her from the suffocation of home life.⁴²

Other works from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, highlighted the tension between the independence and freedom offered by work outside the home and the concerns about retaining femininity and gentility together with the importance of marriage and motherhood. For example, Grant Allen's *Typewriter Girl*,

³⁹ Braine, *Room at the Top*, p.58 & p.197.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.58 & p.197

⁴¹ Barstow, *A Kind of Loving*, see for example, p.16, p.144 & p.191

⁴² A. Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, (London; Penguin, 1975), p.10 First published by Methuen & Co in 1911

from 1897 focused upon the 'new woman' who earned her living as a secretary. She was educated and efficient, but she was also disruptive and unwomanly in her determined pursuit of her employer with whom she had fallen in love. This forwardness, this lack of proper modesty compromised her femininity and gentility which made her unfit to fulfil her natural role as a wife and mother.⁴³

This dichotomy was also seen in several novels set during and just after the Great War which were particularly popular in the 1920s and 1930s. In these, the secretary was the hero; brave, efficient, independent, educated, clearly well brought-up, patriotic and strong. *Miss Brown of XYO* foiled a plot to acquire documents containing details of revolutionaries, while Miss Western unmasked a foreign spy targeting her boss, a Member of Parliament.⁴⁴ In both stories, the women are portrayed as brave, resourceful and decisive but underestimated because they were simply secretaries, female and subordinate. However, despite threats and dangers, they outwit their adversaries with logic and efficiency while never losing their femininity and poise and not unexpectedly, the stories end in love and marriage. Images of bravery and resolve which ran counter to the prevailing depictions of the male clerk.

By the 1930s, when the presence of women in the office became more common, these depictions shifted. The small office of Twigg and Dersingham in Priestley's *Angel Pavement* was a rare example of a nuanced and rounded picture of women in the workplace allowing an exploration of the social hierarchy of men and women as well as between women office workers. Priestley divided secretaries and typists into three classes; 'the daughters of professional gentlemen [who] condescend to the office [...] as girls once married beneath them; those who take it all simply and calmly because they are in the office tradition [...] those who rise to the office [...] who may not make any more money than their sisters and cousins who work in factories and cheap shops[...] but nevertheless are able to cut superior

⁴³ G. Allen, *The Typewriter Girl*, (London; C. Arthur Pearson, 1897)

⁴⁴ E. Phillips Oppenheim, 'Miss Brown of XYO' in 'The Secret Service Omnibus' (London; Hodder & Stoughton, 1932) quoted in E. Grundy Haigh, 'The Adventures of the Lady Typist: Redefining the heroic in early twentieth century Women's Spy Fiction' in C. Ehland, & C. Wachler, (eds.) *Middlebrow and Gender 1890-1945* (Leiden; Brill 2016), p.152-156; Mrs B. Reynold, 'Cazelet's Secretary', *Strand Magazine* LIX/351 March 1920 quoted in Grundy Haigh, 'Adventures', p.157-160

and ladylike figures [...] because they have succeeded in becoming typists.⁴⁵ In *Angel Pavement*, Miss Matfield, secretary to Mr Dersingham fell into the first class and Poppy Sellers, the typist into the third. Miss Matfield, (and in the office, she was always referred to in this way, was in her late twenties), the daughter of a country doctor, better educated and socially superior to the other staff. She had to work to earn her own living and apart from teaching, secretarial work was one of the few respectable options open to unmarried women of her class. Disdainful and aloof with nothing in common with her colleagues whom she considered common, she was depicted as unhappy and unfulfilled. Socially and educationally, she had more in common with her employer, Mr Dersingham, but as a woman, her options were restricted to the subordinate role of secretary, a job which provided little to interest or challenge her. She lived in a hostel and detested the institutional atmosphere, the lack of privacy and the presence of other women, in particular, those 'older than herself, downright spinsters, who had grown grey and withered at the typewriter and telephone [and] whose lives narrowed down to a point in which washing stockings became the supreme interest'.⁴⁶ The future terrified her, her life appeared drab and unfulfilling but, unlike the men in the office, the threat of unemployment was not the cause, she wanted to be married, she wanted a man to take care of her. As a spinster, she would be condemned to a lonely, narrow future, looked down upon and pitied. Poppy Sellers, the typist was at the other end of the spectrum, she was young, ambitious and moving up in the world. The daughter of a man who worked on the London Underground, she had left school at 14 and learning to type at evening classes had worked her way up to a position as a typist. She was depicted as optimistic and eager, moving up the social scale, a contrast to her colleagues, despite the patronising and misogynistic attitude of the disaffected, drab Turgis who sneered at her cockney accent, her dress and her ignorance. In these depictions, the sense of excitement and liberation which marked the earlier images of women in the office was missing from the middle-class secretary but still present in the working-class Poppy. She saw herself as a pioneer, but it was as a representative of her class rather than her gender.

⁴⁵ Priestley, *Angel Pavement*, p.97

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.208

While *Angel Pavement* offered a realistic view of life in an office, it was not the most powerful or enduring picture. A more constant theme focused upon female sexuality and the search for love and marriage, usually to men of wealth and superior social status. From 'gold-diggers' to Cinderella stories and tales of marriage breakers or ruined women, there were numerous novels and films about women office workers throughout the whole period of this study.

An early example of an apparent gold-digger was *Lilian*, heroine of Arnold Bennett's novels published in 1922.⁴⁷ The young typist Lilian was seduced by her employer and travels around Europe with him as his mistress. He then became ill, and they marry. When he died, she inherited his business. Contrary to the mores of the 1920s, Lilian was not condemned by her former colleagues but welcomed back as the 'most romantic figure, she was all picture-paper serials and cinema films come to life and reality'.⁴⁸ The picture painted of the woman in the office was one where the use of sex to gain advantage was the norm and that success was to be celebrated at least by other office women regardless of what the readers might think.

This idea of the secretary/typist as sexually available was also exploited in films such as *Wife vs. Secretary*, a 1936 film starring Clarke Gable as a married magazine publisher.⁴⁹ His wife was suspicious that he was having an affair with his young glamorous secretary. Furthermore, his mother fanned the flames when she explained that 'you wouldn't blame a little boy for stealing a piece of candy if left with a whole box full'. Sex with the employer was not considered out of the ordinary and it was the secretary who was the transgressor, the temptress. A presumption which was also the basis for *Day Time Wife*, in which a wife suspected her husband of being unfaithful with his secretary so she found a job as a secretary herself both to check up on him and to incite his jealousy.⁵⁰ Again, a reminder that the secretary was sexually available – the headline on the advertising poster stated 'what have secretaries got that wives haven't?'

However, most works about women in the office were firmly in the romantic fiction category from publishers such as Mills and Boon. Most were unrealistic

⁴⁷A. Bennett, *Lilian*, (London; Cassell, 1922)

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.247

⁴⁹ C. Brown, (director), *Wife vs. Secretary*, [film], MGM, (1936)

⁵⁰ G. Ratoff, (director), *Day Time Wife*, [film], 20th Century Fox, (1939)

Cinderella stories, there was little difference between *This Mad Love*, published in 1924 and *Flight to the Stars* in 1959. In both, a poor secretary, who by dint of her job was allowed to mix in high social circles, fell in love with her rich and powerful employer and after a series of misunderstandings, they marry. These books peddled a pure fantasy but they were very influential and popular and, while most secretaries did not come into contact with aristocrats, there was a belief, as noted in *Anne in Electronics*, a 1950s career book for girls, that secretarial work offered the opportunity to meet 'the right kind of man and get married [...] what kind of chance will you have of meeting the right sort of man in a factory' - a white-collar man as a potential husband.⁵¹

Yet, for the most part, outside romantic fiction, there was little interest in the female office worker despite their growing numbers. That was not to say that they were completely ignored, for the most part, they were painted much as June in *Room at the Top*, as background figures, on the switchboard, taking dictation or making the tea. She was marginal, as light relief or to make a point about the status of another character, for example in *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads*, Bob's elevation into the middle-class management was signalled by the presence of a secretary as a gatekeeper when Terry visited him at work.⁵²

There was an exception to this in Rona Jaffe's *The Best of Everything* published in 1958 and filmed a year later.⁵³ Written by a woman and told through the eyes of women, it chronicled the lives of a group of young college educated secretaries working in a New York publishing house and explored issues around ambition, career choices, office politics, sex and marriage. While, in part, a story of the various sexual relationships with their male colleagues, most often with men in much more senior positions within the company, it also showed women taking control of their careers, finding fulfilment in their work and seeing that marriage was not the only pathway to a satisfying life. It pictured a changed world in which

⁵¹ L. Cochrane, *Anne in Electronics*, (London; Chatto & Windus, 1960) p.49 quoted in S. Spencer, *Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s*, (London; Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p.114.

⁵² Clement and La Frenais, 'The Ant and the Grasshopper', *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads*, BBC, first broadcast Jan 1974

⁵³ R. Jaffe, *The Best of Everything*, (New York; Simon & Schuster 1958), film of same name directed by J. Negulesco, 20th Century Fox (1959)

educated women needed to start living for themselves and not just living through and for the men in their lives. Although set in America, the book and film were popular in Britain and offered a different picture of the secretary not just as an 'office wife' at the constant beck and call of the boss but as a person with ambitions and career goals of her own.

In conclusion, the literary identities of women in the office shifted as the century progressed from the daring and educated pioneer to the ordinary, subordinate, almost invisible woman painted in most of the literature from the 1930s and into the 1950s.

Conclusion

The pictures drawn of clerical workers in the 1950s were very different to those of the pre-war era. Instead of the domesticated family men such as Mr Smeeth, Mr Josser or Frank Gibbons, we are shown three young ambitious and aspiring men trying to make their way in the world.⁵⁴ Their focus was on issues around social mobility, the myth of meritocracy and class barriers and while each story was different, they all felt held back by their class. Joe Lampton's upward mobility would stop in the treasurer's department of a local authority unless he broke the class barrier to marry money and connections.⁵⁵ Vic Brown's ambitions of owning his own business ended when he married to conform to the mores of his class, to be respectable.⁵⁶ Billy Liar's ambitions, by contrast, were dashed not by his class but his timidity, his fear of taking a chance, his clerical character. Unlike the earlier clerks, they were not domesticated, in the case of Joe and Vic, a domestic life was forced upon them. However, in other ways, there were continuities, their masculinity was compromised, Joe was dependent upon a woman, Vic lived a miserable life in his mother-in-law's home and Billy Liar feared his girlfriends, his parents and his employer. The 'angry young' clerks were not a break from the past, but they added another layer to the complicated picture of the fictional clerk.

As for the depictions of women clerical workers in fiction, the misogyny contained in *Room at the Top* and *A Kind of Loving* certainly was not new. It was

⁵⁴ Priestley, *Angel Pavement*; Collins, *London Belongs to Me*; Lean, *This Happy Breed*

⁵⁵ Braine, *Room at the Top*

⁵⁶ Bairstow, *A Kind of Loving*

only when there were few women in offices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that they were noticed but even then, there was always a warning that they were a threat, that they were interlopers in a man's world with a focus upon her sexuality. From the 1930s as numbers increased, they were no longer exceptional. Those from the educated middle classes were augmented by women from the lower middle and working classes, from elementary and secondary modern schools and all were corralled into subordinate roles and their literary representations reflect this, they are painted as in the background and marginal. My next chapter moves away from fictional clerks and examines how the educational system prepared clerks for their future careers.

Chapter Three: The Making of the Clerk – Education and Training

I think the biggest class forming tendency is education. People tend to coalesce around the type of school/university they have been brought up in. I was brought up in an elementary school, passing to a more select secondary and later graduated externally from London [...] I put myself therefore in the higher grade secondary school, lower grade university, moderate income class [...] I, for my own purpose classify people entirely by their intelligence and education.¹

So wrote a 44-year-old civil servant in response to a Mass Observation directive in 1939. They are sentiments which were fully shared by a Birmingham buyer:

I consider I belong to the middle class; I think this is so by my education, habits, the company I keep and my occupation. I had a good education, both elementary school and secondary school as so have most of the other thousands of fellows in my class.²

And a London clerk in 1948, who despite his dissatisfaction with the quality of his own education, recognised its impact on his social identity:

I cannot say that I am always consciously aware of belonging to a particular class of the community. I am usually only aware of differences between myself and other people as individuals [...] Of course, when the question is put, I realise I must belong to some class and as I understand the classes into which the population is divided, are distinguished mainly by the degrees in the standard of education and the possession of wealth, I can easily ascertain that the class to which I belong. I belong to the upper working class. [...] because my education was really not more than learning the 3Rs. I was thirteen years old before I was able to go to the newly built central school (now county modern schools) and by then it was a bit too late to start teaching me French, science, art, algebra etc.³

By the 1960s, education was still cited as a key dividing line between the classes, albeit something that was changing, as this Luton clerk claimed:

¹ M.O.A. 1365, male, born 1897, Civil Servant, reply to DR June 1939

² M.O.A. 1216, male, born 1905, Buyer, reply to DR June 1939

³ M.O.A. 3853, male, born 1918, Clerk, reply to DR September 1948

I think education is a vital factor, but this is something that will gradually die out in the younger generation once they get into the working world,[...] what used to be termed the lower class and the middle class will blend into one class before long.⁴

Or the Cambridge bank clerk who highlighted the gulf between the educated person and the rest:

I think the class structure is partly the result of economic status and partly the result of the level of education, a sort of intellectual bar as it were.⁵

These were not isolated voices. Over two-thirds of the Mass Observation respondents to the 1939 class directive, and around half of those in 1948, explicitly identified their education as fundamental to their status and self-assigned social class. In the affluent 1960s, more than a decade after the introduction of universal free and “equal” education for all, three quarters of the Cambridge bank clerks and two thirds of the Luton clerks also felt that education was critical to class identity.⁶ As ‘brain workers’ rather than workers by hand, this is not surprising. Yet, it is more difficult to ascertain precisely what the respondents meant by education, its level and its content, its role in preparation of a clerical career and how it shaped their wider social identities.

This chapter explores the ways in which the English educational system equipped a growing army of people with the skills to become clerks and how it shaped their attitudes and social identities.⁷ I look at the changing national and local educational policies and their impact upon the career prospects of children both across England and at a local level in Norwich. As discussed above, Norwich had a larger than average white-collar sector with significant numbers employed in high status financial services as well as large numbers of general clerks in its mixed industrial sector and the case study demonstrates the ways in which the City

⁴ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 542, Documentation Clerk, Laporte, Luton

⁵ *Affluent Worker in Class Structure*, 040, Principal Clerk, Correspondence Department, Barclays, Cambridge

⁶ Replies to Mass Observation directives June 1939, September 1948, April 1942, January 1949; Goldthorpe et al. interviews Cambridge and Luton clerks 1960-63

⁷ Routh, G., *Occupation and Pay*, p.24, the number of clerks grew from around 1.3 million in 1921 to over 3.4 million by 1971

organised its education system to help ensure that there was an appropriately educated workforce.⁸

The first section examines the period between the end of the First World War and the 1944 Education Act during which elementary schools educated the majority, and secondary education was available only to the few whose parents could afford fees or who were clever – or lucky – enough to be awarded scholarships. Through the writings of clerks responding to Mass Observation directives, I explore how they felt about their educational experiences and the impact on their future lives. I then turn to the years between 1944 and 1965, during which there was universal secondary education under a tripartite system. Under this system, pupils were allocated to a particular type of school on the basis of academic ability as measured by an examination at the age of 11. Here, I compare evidence from Mass Observation in the 1930s and 1940s with that of the Cambridge and Luton clerks interviewed by the 'Affluent Worker' team in the 1960s to explore changing experiences and attitudes.

Literature Review

There is extensive literature on the development of education during the twentieth century. Much of the focus has been on administrative and political history; on the battles, both those between the Conservative and Labour parties and between central government and the local authorities, around access to secondary education, the types of schools and the methods for the selection of pupils to particular categories of schools. Brian Simon in two volumes, *The Politics of Educational Reform 1920-1940* and *Education and the Social Order 1940-1990* offered a comprehensive overview of education policies at both national and local level, arguing that 'policy making in education relates closely to the differing conceptions of the social order [...] since education mediates social structures'.⁹ Gordon et al. in *Education and Policy in England in the Twentieth Century* and Sanderson's *Educational Opportunity and Social Change in England* demonstrated that social class was both a key element in the type of school attended and that school was

⁸ C. Clark, 'Work and Employment' & P. Townroe, 'Norwich since 1945' in C. Rawcliffe & R. Wilson, (eds.), *Norwich since 1550*, (London; Bloomsbury Publishing 2004) p.403-4 & p.476

⁹ B. Simon, *The Politics of Educational Reform 1920-1940*, (London; Lawrence and Wishart, 1974) & *Education and the Social Order 1940-1990*, (London; Lawrence and Wishart, 1999)

also a determinant of future class position; a situation which continued even after 1944 and the introduction of free universal secondary education with the declared intention of creating equal opportunities for all.¹⁰ Sanderson also explored another key issue, which still resonates today, namely the higher value given to classical academic education over technical and commercial learning.¹¹ Although his focus were the deficiencies of technical and scientific education, the same arguments about low status and lack of interest on the part of employers applied to commercial education of the kind sometimes on offer to would-be clerical workers.

However, these works do not fully capture the diversity of schools and the experiences of pupils. While state education policies were set at a national level, the local authorities ran schools funded in part by government grants but largely by local ratepayers. This resulted in significant variances across the country in the balance between the types of schools, the provision of scholarships and the spending per pupil, so local studies focused upon particular authorities such as Parker on Hertfordshire, O'Flynn on West Ham or Morris in Birmingham offer a complementary picture.¹² Furthermore, it was not only geography which created variations in provision. Research by Hunt, Summerfield and Spencer has explored the impact of gender and the significance of curriculum differentiation, which reinforced ideas about the role of women as wives and mothers pushing them into specific pathways and occupations, for instance in office work into typing, shorthand or secretarial posts, and into routine, less valued, lower status jobs.¹³

¹⁰ P. Gordon, R. Aldrich, D. Dean, *Education and Policy in England in the Twentieth Century*, (London; Woburn Press, 1991); M. Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change in England*, (London; Faber and Faber, 1987)

¹¹ M. Sanderson, *Education and Economic Decline 1887-1990s*, (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1999)

¹² D. Parker, 'Just a Stepping Stone – the growth of vocationalism in elementary school curriculum 1914-1936', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 35.1 (2003); K. O'Flynn, *Post Primary Education in West Ham, 1918-1939*, Ph.D. Thesis, Institute of Education, University College London (1996); R. N. Morris, 'Fifth Year Courses in Birmingham's Modern Schools', *Educational Review* 12.1 (1959)

¹³ F. Hunt, *Gender and Policy in Secondary Education Schooling for Girls: 1902-1944*, (London; Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991); P. Summerfield, 'Family, School and Work: Girls' Education and Employment in Lancashire 1900-1950' in M. Dick, (ed.), *Education and Employment: Initiatives and Experiences 1780 to the Present, Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the History of Education Society of Great Britain* (1988); S. Spencer, 'Reflections of the "Site of Struggles": Girls' Experience of Secondary Education in the late 1950s', *History of Education* 33.4 (2004)

Studies by Heller on male London clerks and Carnaffan on female office workers focus on the period between 1880 and 1914, during which time the basic structure of commercial education was established.¹⁴ Heller showed that in London, the growth of new secondary schools, with fees set between £4 and £8 a year and from 1907, scholarships for those who 'merited' them, opened the door to a clerical career for children of clerks, artisans and skilled workers.¹⁵ According to the Fabian Society, these schools educated a large proportion of those entering city offices and 'practically all the bank and insurance staff and the civil service, and nearly all the sons of business men who are destined to succeed to their fathers' positions'.¹⁶ Over the same period, post-school commercial education, through evening classes run by London County Council and private commercial colleges, was extended and by 1908, over a third of all London clerks were undertaking further study.¹⁷ This, Heller attributed to aspiration and a belief in 'self-improvement, independence and the value of work, principles which continued to shape the social identities of clerks'.¹⁸ Evidence from Carnaffan, while focusing upon women, demonstrated that the appetite for commercial education was not confined to the capital as other education boards, mainly in the cities, followed suit and the numbers of private colleges offering correspondence courses grew.¹⁹ However, while this created opportunities for some, the limited number of places in secondary schools helped to create a two-tier labour market in which the less well-educated clerks, without accredited qualifications or a leaving certificate from a well-regarded secondary school, were shut out of the higher-status careers.²⁰

¹⁴ M. Heller, *London Clerical Workers 1880-1914: The Search for Stability*, Ph.D. Thesis, University College, London (2003), Chapters 5 & 6; G. Carnaffan, 'Commercial Education and the female office worker', in G. Anderson, (ed.), *The White-Blouse Revolution: Female Office Workers since 1870*, (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 1988)

¹⁵ Heller, *London Clerical Workers*, Chapters 5 & 6. By 1912, there were over 25,000 secondary school places in Greater London around a third of which were scholarship places catering for around only 6 per cent of the age group.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.218 quoting Sydney Webb, 'The London Education Act: How to Make the Best of it', *Fabian Tract No.117* (1904)

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.267

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.285-287

¹⁹ Carnaffan, 'Commercial Education and the female office worker' in G. Anderson, (ed.), *The White-Blouse Revolution: Female Office Workers since 1870*, (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 1988), p.72-78

²⁰ Heller, *London Clerical Workers*, p.42-45

For the period with which I am concerned (ca.1918 to late 1960s), little has been written specifically about clerical education. Rather, it has been addressed within wider research on all aspects of education policy.²¹ It can be argued that the overriding interests of scholars have focused upon demands for universal secondary education and improving access to grammar schools as a stepping stone out of the working classes and, after 1944 on the fairness or otherwise of the tripartite system, issues which reflected the political priorities of the time.²² Moreover, as Carter and McCulloch point out, although senior elementary schools and, after 1944, the secondary moderns, educated the mass of children, research into their role in the preparation of children for a changing labour market has been very limited.²³ This chapter, which maps the diversity of schooling, and shifting provision for clerical training between 1918 and the end of the 'tripartite' system with the introduction of comprehensive schools from 1965, adds substantially to our understanding of the schooling and training of office workers – experiences which were, as I will show, central to their social identities.

My first substantive section focuses upon the period between 1918 and the 1944 Education Act and examines the efforts to improve the standard of education for post 11-year-olds and to create more opportunities to acquire the higher-level skills required for clerical work. I look at how class, income and occupational background of pupils' parents affected their educational experiences and explore the responses of Mass Observation volunteers who were also clerical workers to discover how their education impacted upon their own future careers, class position and sense of self.

²¹ For example, Simon, *The Politics of Educational Reform*; and *Education and the Social Order*, Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change*

²² O. Banks, *Parity and Prestige in English Secondary Education: A Study in Educational Sociology*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1955); G. McCulloch, 'Parity and Prestige in England Secondary Education Revisited', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29.4 (2008); P. Mandler, 'Educating the Nation 1. Schools', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 24 (2014)

²³ Parker, 'Just a Stepping Stone'; examines the attempts of Hertfordshire County council to prepare elementary school pupils in rural areas for local jobs as agricultural workers discouraging them to think of jobs as clerks or technicians; L. Carter, 'Experimental Secondary Modern Education in Britain '1948-1958'', *Cultural and Social History*, 13.1 (2016); G. McCulloch & L. Sobell, 'Towards a Social History of the Secondary Modern School', *History of Education*, 23.3 (1994)

Education for the Office - 1918–1944: Expansion and New Opportunities

The period following the First World War saw increasing calls for reform of the education system. The growth of service industries such as insurance, banking and distribution; the expansion of welfare services like pensions, unemployment benefits and housing, all created demand for more and better educated staff, and for more clerks.²⁴ The existing system comprised secondary grammar schools catering largely for the middle classes, for those rich enough to pay the fees or clever and lucky enough to win one of the few scholarships. They offered an academic curriculum for children between 11 and 16 or 18. They prepared children for the School Certificate – the passport to the universities and increasingly for clerkships in banks, insurance, financial services and the professions. Parallel, but distinct, the elementary schools were aimed primarily at the working classes and educated more than three times the numbers of over 11-year-olds than the secondary grammar schools. However, most provided little more than basic instruction in the 3Rs and pupils were leaving school at 14 ill-equipped to meet the needs of industry and commerce. Alongside these practical economic considerations, there was a widespread belief that the system was unfair, that the talent of bright children from families who could not afford fees was being wasted and that the aspirations of working and lower middle-class families were being stifled.²⁵

In response, many local education authorities, including Norwich, sought to increase the number of secondary school places, both through building additional schools and widening access by funding more scholarships, but this was piecemeal and dependent upon the priorities of local ratepayers.²⁶ In addition, the 1921 Education Act gave local authorities powers, but no obligation, to provide ‘advanced instruction for older or more intelligent children’ within the elementary sector.²⁷ These

²⁴ M. Thomas, ‘The Service Sector’ in R. Floud and P. Johnson, (eds.) *Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain, Vol.II, Economic Maturity 1860-1939*, (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2004) p.101

²⁵ G. McCulloch, ‘Secondary Education’ in R. Aldrich, (ed.) *A Century of Education*, (London; Routledge, 2003) p.36

²⁶ M. Sanderson, ‘Education since 1750’, in Rawcliffe & Wilson (eds.) *Norwich since 1550*. A boys’ grammar, City of Norwich School had been established in 1910 and a new secondary school for girls was built in 1929.

²⁷ M. Sanderson, *Education and Economic Decline 1870-1990*, (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1999) p.56

reforms increased opportunities for some poorer children in some parts of the country, mainly in the cities and larger towns, to access better quality education past the age of 14, but the two-tier, classed system stayed, and it was not 'secondary education for all' as campaigned for by the Labour Party and the trade unions.²⁸ However, in light of the widespread concerns and fears on the part of the Conservatives about social unrest, the Hadow Committee was established in 1923 to consider further reform. Their report in 1926 recommended a single system of state education for all children up to the age of 11 after which they would be assigned, according to academic aptitude, to fee-paying secondary grammar schools or local authority-funded central, technical or senior elementary schools – although the strict division between the elementary and secondary codes was maintained. While the recommendations were accepted by the government, no additional funding was forthcoming and it was left to local authorities to implement over time: as late as 1938, around 50 per cent of pupils in elementary schools were still in all-age schools.²⁹ Norwich City Council was among those which reformed their schools, opening two central schools in 1924 and five new senior elementary schools between 1926 and 1939 and by 1940 all children aged over 11 were educated in senior schools.³⁰ In the pages that follow, I explore how these two separate systems prepared children for an office career and how the division between the two codes impacted not only on the opportunities for clerical work, but more fundamentally upon social identity.

The Secondary Grammar School Pathway c.1918-1944

As discussed above, secondary grammar schools catered only for a small minority of children, around 7 per cent in 1922 and just under 10 per cent by 1937 with attendance dependent upon ability to pay fees or winning a scholarship. These schools followed a wide academic curriculum including English Language and Literature, a foreign language, Latin, Mathematics, History, Geography, Music and

²⁸ R. H. Tawney, *Secondary Education for All: A Policy for Labour*, (London; George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1922); Simon, *The Politics of Educational Reform*, p.121-122

²⁹ Simon, *Education and the Social Order* p.26. It might also be noted that even after the war, there were still all age schools and when I started school in 1960, St Dunstons R.C. school in Manchester took children from 5 to 15.

³⁰ Sanderson, 'Education since 1750', in Rawcliffe and Wilson, (eds.), *Norwich since 1550*, p.313

Science before allowing pupils to specialise in either Arts and Humanities or the Sciences (and in some schools Commerce) at 14, leading up to the School Certificate at 16. Success in the School Certificate was important in that it was a passport into the professions and for clerkships in banks, insurance companies and the higher ranks of the civil service, as well as providing exemptions to the first stage of professional qualifications such as the Institute of Bankers or the Chartered Insurance Institute. In addition, some schools introduced commercial courses for pupils not intending to take the School Certificate. For example, in 1926 Hemsworth Grammar School began courses for 4th and 5th formers to enable children to take Royal Society of Arts (R.S.A.) examinations in shorthand, typing and book-keeping and in 1936, Blythe High School for Girls, the new secondary school, in Norwich established a commercial sixth form, again offering R.S.A. examinations.³¹

For many, this type of education provided a natural and guaranteed pathway into white-collar employment, as a retired businessman from Norwich recalled:

I went to the City of Norwich School [...] I left in 1944 [...] In those days, I think most of us were classified as potential office material – we were going out into the world to be clerks. I can clearly remember I had two interviews, one at Norfolk County Council and one at Norwich Building Society and didn't get either job. However, my Dad knew a guy who was Assistant Head Cashier at Steward and Patterson's Brewery and he got me an interview and I was in – as the office junior.³²

As a secondary school leaver, neither he nor his father ever considered anything other than a clerical career. Furthermore, this boy was part of a privileged minority, throughout the interwar years, only a very small, albeit increasing, number of children benefited from a secondary education: around 7.2 per cent of all 11 to 16-year-olds in 1922 rising to 9.9 per cent by 1937.³³ Between 1922 and 1938, an additional 92,000 places were provided and the number of free places more than

³¹ www.hemsworthgs1921.org; *Yarmouth Independent* 26th December 1936, p.13

³² WISEArchive, *From Beer to Print via Shoes*, www.wisarchive.co.uk/story/from-beer-to-print-via-shoes accessed November 2022

³³ Simon, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change*, p.29

doubled from just over 107,000 to over 231,000, although if you include those paying partial fees, the number increased to 279,654.³⁴

Table 3.1 : Numbers of children attending grant-aided secondary/grammar schools and percentage of free places.³⁵

Year	Boys	Girls	Total	% of free places
1922	171,393	160,427	331,820	32.5%
1930	188,035	168,707	356,742	43%
1938	223,975	200,643	424,618	54%

Floud's 1949 survey of the educational experiences of adults clearly demonstrated the classed nature of secondary grammar education in the first half of the twentieth century as table 3.2 shows. Over 65 per cent of those who had attended secondary grammar schools were children of professional, managerial or higher non-manual workers, and less than 4 per cent with parents who were unskilled or semi-skilled manual workers, of whom around two thirds had free or special places. The lower non-manual group, which would include children of routine clerks, made up 15 per cent – of whom half had been awarded scholarships.³⁶

³⁴ D. Gilliard, *Education in the UK: A History*, Chapter 7, <https://education-uk.org> accessed May 2020. Scholarships were originally introduced in 1907 when up to 25 per cent of places were reserved for former elementary school pupils selected by examination and with fees paid by the local authority. After 1931, full scholarships were replaced by a special place scheme under which a means tested contribution was required

³⁵ *Education in 1922: Being the Report of the Board of Education and the Statistics of Public Education for England and Wales* Cmd.2179; *Education in 1930: Being the Report of the Board of Education and the Statistics of Public Education for England and Wales* Cmd.3856; *Education in 1938: Being the Report of the Board of Education and the Statistics of Public Education for England and Wales* Cmd.6013 www.parlipapers.proquest.com accessed June 2020
1938 figures show the proportion awarded free places, if those paying partial fees are included, the proportion rises to 279,654 or 65 per cent

³⁶ J. Floud, 'Educational Experience of Adult Population of England and Wales as at July 1949' in D. V. Glass, (ed.), *Social Mobility in Britain*, (London; Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), table 9, p.130.

Table 3.2: Distribution of attendance at, and of free or special place holders in secondary/grammar schools according to occupational status of father³⁷

Occupational status of father	% attending secondary/grammar	% of those holding free or special places
1. Professional, Managerial and executive	38.4	32.2
2. Inspectional, supervisory and higher non-manual	27	45.7
3. Lower non-manual	15	50.9
4. Skilled manual and routine non-manual	7.9	69.8
5. Unskilled or semi-skilled manual	3.6	64.5

However, within this wider picture, there were changes over time, as Floud's research demonstrated. Of the sons of lower non-manual workers born between 1900 and 1909, around 10 per cent went to secondary schools, increasing to over 25 per cent of those born in the 1920s. The sons of skilled manual and routine non-manual workers rose from under 7 per cent to nearly 11 per cent over the same period, and sons of semi-skilled and non-skilled manual workers increased from 1.2 per cent to 8.9 per cent. Figures for girls followed a similar pattern. Clearly there were increasing opportunities for children from the working and lower middle classes to access the type of education which prepared them for clerical work.

What is surprising, however, was the number of manual workers' children attending secondary schools and paying fees. Given the cost of secondary education during the 1930s, when fees averaged between nine and twelve guineas a year with additional costs for uniforms, sports equipment, books and travel, it is a sign of the value attributed to a secondary education that around a third of pupils from manual and routine non-manual families were fee-paying.³⁸ With average annual earnings of

³⁷ Ibid, table 7, p.129

³⁸ *Education in 1930: Being the Report of the Board of Education and the Statistics of Public Education in England and Wales*, Cmd.3856; *Education in 1938: Being the Report of the Board of*

an unskilled manual worker at around £129 and a clerk at £192, the cost of school fees and the additional costs – the 1940 survey by the Worker's Educational Association suggested that the cost of kitting out a girl for entry to Blyth High School in Norwich was £8.14s 5d – would be a considerable drain on family finances.³⁹

Something which was reflected in the response of a young London clerk who noted:

both my parents were born in the working-class areas of Stepney, their children have succeeded better than they did due to our parents' sacrifices and better chances coming with improved education.⁴⁰

In my own family, my maternal grandparents were forced to refuse scholarships for their three daughters as my disabled grandfather was unemployed for much of the 1930s, however, by 1941 when my uncle passed his 11 plus, they were able to accept his scholarship as his sisters were working and able to contribute. In 1936, my father was only able to attend a secondary school on a full scholarship because he was an only child, and his mother got a job at the Avro aircraft factory to help with the costs.

Education as a tool in shaping social mobility and identities

The impact on the lives of those winning a scholarship to secondary schools was substantial, not only with respect to an office career and the potential for higher incomes but in terms of class, status, interests and a different way of life to that of their parents, as evidence from the Mass Observers responding to the class directive in June 1939 revealed. For some, including the clerk quoted below, education created uncertainty and confusion. He identified with the working class as a poor wage-earner, but he did not share his bus driver father's sense of what it meant to be working class. Rather, like the 'anxious and uprooted grammar schoolboys' so memorably depicted by Richard Hoggart, he felt 'betwixt and between':⁴¹

Economically I am working class. Intellectually I am of the middle class.

In this I am like the meat in a sandwich. This curious state of affairs has

Education and the Statistics of Public Education in England and Wales, Cmd. 6013

<https://parlipapers.proquest.com> In both years, 9 to 12 guineas was the median fee charged.

³⁹ C. Rackham, (ed.), *Education in Norwich: An Independent Survey 1920-1940*, (Norwich; Workers Educational Association, 1940), p.21

⁴⁰ M.O.A, 1630, male, born 1920, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁴¹ Hoggart *The Uses of Literacy*, p.290

arisen because I won a scholarship. Winning a scholarship does not always cause this subsequent floundering in society but it did in my case [...] If I was examined at a nudist camp, (I chose that location because it would prevent my examiners from observing my clothes and thus deducing something of my economic status) I believe the verdict would be middle class. I do not think my speech would betray my origins, if I was asked to talk, I think I could avoid newspaper opinions, divorced from my economic background, I would pass as middle class [...] To sum up, I have no idea of my social status, if it is a question of income, then working class, if it's interests, outlook, education and habits, it's middle class. I do not share working class interests. I don't watch football matches; I don't gamble on horses [...] I find it difficult to talk to working men. This is one of the results of winning a scholarship which is not always realised. You may alter a man's intellectual status, you may increase his powers of observation, of deduction and capacity for thought but if you don't alter his social status then a serious maladjustment occurs. I find my parents' friends boring and find it difficult to make conversation with them. On the whole, I think I move in different class; I am able to meet people in the course of my work without feeling that I have to touch my hat every few minutes as I am sure my father would feel bound to do.⁴²

This long explanation of the differences that a secondary school education made to this young clerk's life clearly demonstrates that, for him at least, it opened completely a new door, not only in terms of occupation, but also socially and intellectually. He has moved away from his birth class and his family, feeling comfortable in middle class society, something he felt sure his father would not. He was disparaging and sneering about working class interests and found family friends boring, stressing his intellectual superiority and creating a distance from the working class. He was proud that neither by his speech nor his opinions could he be mistaken for a working-class person although at the same time, he demonstrated

⁴² M.O.A., 1394, male, born 1919, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

insecurity with regard to his dependence on his job, as he had to rely completely on himself without family and their status to bolster his middle-class position. In many ways, he reflected the feelings of Joe Lampton when he described his aunt's family; 'I was too much of the T'Top now [...] I found myself thinking of them as foreigners [...] they weren't my sort of person any longer'.⁴³

This shift from the working class to a higher status was also reflected in the responses of two other clerks, who both acknowledged their winning of a scholarship as the start of an upward journey away from their family backgrounds.

The class to which I feel I belong is the lower middle class. My reasons for so thinking are as follows; my profession as banker has always been recognised as being superior and middle class. Against this, however, is to be set the fact that I come from a working-class family. Thus, I feel to be in a transitional class between the working and the middle classes. Income, so far, has not much to do with it as young bank clerks do not get much more than any other clerks. As I get older, my salary will definitely place me in the middle class and indeed I should be expected to take such a place, [...] My friends are, for the most part middle class people. The steps which led to this are based on education, I went to a secondary school, and this enabled me to become a bank clerk. In this position, I came into contact with middle class people both at school and at night school⁴⁴

As the above observer notes, transitioning from one class to another did not inevitably result in feelings of status anxiety or uncomfortableness. Indeed, some respondents were proud that their educational experiences enabled them to 'hold their own' with their social superiors:

From the point of view of origin and family, there is no doubt that I am a member of the lower middle classes or the class of 'ordinary' blackcoated workers, probably the lower half of that. [...] I definitely mix with people from a higher social class than my parents and grandparents judged from a financial point of view and educational standard. This is originally due to

⁴³ Braine, *Room at the Top* p.85

⁴⁴ M.O.A. 1314, male, born 1919, Bank Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

the fact that I won a scholarship to secondary school which none of them received and met as friends those regarded as social superiors[...] have been able to hold my own with the superior class.⁴⁵

These clerks from working class backgrounds talked of 'winning scholarships' and of mixing with people they felt were of a higher status than their parents. Whether they felt comfortable or not in crossing the class divide, they persistently portrayed themselves as socially mobile and aspiring.

In contrast, the comments of those office workers from established middle class backgrounds about their secondary education had a different slant. For them, such as respondent 2065, a secondary education was not about aspiration or wanting to improve their chances in life but about the consolidation of their middle-class status:

Middle Class [because] Father is professional (Manager of Labour Exchange) As a rule [I move in the same circles as my parents] although in several matters of minor importance. I differ from my parents. Most of my friends are of the same class as they are mostly school pals. In our position, I must go to secondary school, (scholarship won but income over the limit) and must be kept respectable which is not easy without carefully budgeting.⁴⁶

An attitude which had resonance with that of a Muswell Hill bank clerk, who considered that his class position was dependent upon a level and breadth of education clearly above that offered in elementary schools:

Middle class neither upper middle nor lower middle class. Income has much to do with the fixing of class and I should place my group on about £300 to £1000 or possibly wider. But income is not, however, the whole story as working class men earn as much as £300 a year in some cases. It is also a question of education, and the type of upbringing enjoyed as a child, the home and the type of comforts taken as essential [...] I feel my class is fixed by a certain standard of education, acquaintance with good literature and music, knowledge of history, geography etc., by the ability to

⁴⁵ M.O.A. 1244, male, born 1907, Insurance Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁴⁶ M.O.A. 2065, male, born 1923, Bank Clerk, reply to DR June 1939, his underlining.

speaking correct and grammatical English, and by being accustomed to certain standards.⁴⁷

A secondary education therefore bestowed on these clerks many attributes: it gave them social skills which either allowed them to improve or consolidate their social standing, it opened eyes to culture, literature and music but it also, as the Norwich businessman quoted above and this Hull audit clerk asserted, led them to a clerical career.⁴⁸

I don't feel I belong to any class. Viewed objectively, I should define myself as upper working class, although my nature of my vocation, I should classify myself as 'superior, oh, very superior clerk class', that is the class to which audit clerks feel themselves to be. This feeling of superiority is very definite, believe me, even among the lowest paid audit clerks. My first classification is based on the vocation (turner) and then the income (£3.6s.0d) of my father. The people I mix with are clerk class as distinct from the manual labour class of my parents. The change from manual labour class to clerk is quite easily traceable to the scholarship system – elementary school – secondary school and **most naturally** clerkship.⁴⁹

This belief in a natural progression from secondary school to clerkships was borne out by statistics from the Board of Education which consistently showed that the highest proportion of school leavers from secondary/grammar schools entered professional, commercial or clerical occupations: 38.4 per cent of boys and 33 per cent of girls in 1932; and 40.3 per cent of boys and 30.3 per cent of girls in 1938.⁵⁰ For the first time, the 1938 report broke down the figures further. Of all those leaving, almost equal proportions of boys and girls entered the civil service or local government: 6.9 per cent and 6.2 per cent respectively. However, there was a

⁴⁷ M.O.A. 1325, male, born 1908, Bank Clerk, reply to DR June 1939.

⁴⁸ WISEarchive, From Beer to Print via Shoes, www.wisearchive.co.uk/story/from-beer-to-print-via-shoes accessed November 2020

⁴⁹ M.O.A. 1294, male, born 1919, Audit Clerk, reply to DR June 1939, my emphasis.

⁵⁰ *Education in 1932: Being the Report of the Board of Education and the Statistics of Public Education in England and Wales*, Cmd. 4364; *Education in 1938: Being the Report of the Board of Education and the Statistics of Public Education in England and Wales*, Cmd. 6013; <https://parlipapers.proquest.com>

substantial gap between the proportion of boys and girls obtaining professional, banking or finance posts: 6.4 per cent of boys against 1.8 per cent of girls in the professions and 4.8 per cent of boys against 1.9 per cent of girls in banking and finance.⁵¹ Significantly lower numbers of girls were being employed in areas generally considered to be the aristocracy of clerks, sectors which had closed labour markets and a defined career ladder, most often leading to professional qualifications.⁵² The report does not reveal details of the nature of posts within these sectors but, given that the first female bank manager was not appointed until 1958 and that she was recruited as a shorthand typist in 1934, and that no women were listed among the successful candidates for the Chartered Insurance Institute examinations published in the Norwich Union staff magazine during the 1930s, it suggests that these girls were mainly intended for lesser back office roles.⁵³

A similar pattern was revealed in Norwich as the 1940 survey of the occupations of Norwich secondary/grammar school leavers between 1931 and 1939 showed. 42 per cent of boys became clerks, 25 per cent commercial clerks, 10 per cent local government officers and 7 per cent professional clerks. For the girls, 46 per cent of girls went into clerical work, which included shorthand and typing, with a further 2 per cent undertaking further training at the local commercial school which opened in 1937.⁵⁴

While these figures reveal the high proportion of secondary/grammar school pupils who became clerks in the interwar period, it has to be remembered that only a very small proportion of children attended these schools: just over 7 per cent in 1922, and rising to less than 10 per cent in 1937.⁵⁵ A secondary education was unquestionably important – if not essential – for careers in the civil service, banking, or insurance. However, the small numbers involved meant that secondary/grammar schools could not meet the demand for clerks and that therefore it was not the only pathway into white collar employment. Just over 26,000 secondary school leavers

⁵¹ Ibid., *Education in 1938*

⁵² <https://home.barclays/news/2017/03/hilda-harding-britains-first-woman-bank-manager/> accessed November 2021; Aviva Archive, *The Norwich Union Quarterly Staff Magazine 1930-1936*

⁵³ Aviva Archive, *Norwich Union Quarterly Staff Magazine, 1930-1939*,

⁵⁴ C. Rackham, (ed.), *Education in Norwich: An Independent Survey 1920-1940*, (Norwich; Workers Educational Association 1940), p.28

⁵⁵ Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change*, table 10, p.29

entered professional, commercial or clerical employment in 1932. In 1938 it was around 29,000. These figures made a very small contribution to the growing army of office workers which by 1931 reached 1.4 million rising to just under 2.4 million by 1951.⁵⁶ It seems likely therefore, in terms of absolute numbers that most of those who went onto a clerical career between the 1920s and 1940s were educated in elementary schools as I discuss below.

The Elementary School Pathway, c. 1918–1944

Elementary schools catered for the mass of children. In 1922 they provided education for just over two million 11- to 16-year-olds, around ten times the number in secondary grammar schools.⁵⁷ Classes were large, of mixed ability, often multi-age, with a limited curriculum, teaching basic English, arithmetic, some history and geography, and handicrafts, but no Latin, foreign languages or music (apart from singing). As one teacher remembered ‘it was gruelling work [...] with fifty to sixty boys of all ranges of ability [...] with the clever boys kept droning through work they had already mastered’.⁵⁸ These schools had none of the kudos of the secondary schools, their pupils were drawn from the surrounding neighbourhoods and thus their quality and reputations reflected their location. How did these schools prepare pupils for the more intellectually taxing work in an office?

As discussed earlier, by the 1920s in response to serious concerns about the quality of elementary schools and the needs of the more able children, local education authorities were given new discretionary powers to provide ‘advanced instruction’ for older and more intelligent children, those more likely to aspire to apprenticeships or a commercial career. No additional government money was provided, so provision was dependent upon local political priorities and the willingness or ability to raise funding from the rates.⁵⁹ Some authorities, such as

⁵⁶ *Education in 1932*, p.22, figures for professional, commercial or clerical occupations are not separated; *Education in 1938*, separate figures are given for those entering professional employment – 3,407; civil service and local government 5,359, commercial clerks and other commercial 17,560. www.parlipapers.proquest.com accessed November 2020. Routh, *Occupation and Pay* p.24, Figures taken from census for clerical workers.

⁵⁷ Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change* p.29

⁵⁸ P. Cunningham, ‘Primary Education’, in R Aldrich, (ed.), *A Century of Education*, (London; Routledge, 2002) p.13-14

⁵⁹ Gordon et al., *Education and Policy*, p.29; LEA expenditure varied significantly across the country, in 1920-21 expenditure per child ranged from 40.1d (16p) to 289.6d (£1.20), the largest proportion of which was spent on elementary education. Disparities were a result not only on political priorities but

London and Manchester, where there was significant demand for more clerical workers, expanded their network of Central Schools for 11 to 15 year olds selected by examination, and who followed a four-year course with either an industrial or commercial bias specifically as preparation for employment. At the Ardwick Central School in Manchester for example, pupils followed a general course for the first two years and then specialised, with those undertaking the commerce option studying French, shorthand, typing, business correspondence and the principles of bookkeeping. On satisfactory completion, pupils would earn a leaving certificate which would 'give employers a guarantee as to the efficiency of instruction and the capabilities of pupils.'⁶⁰ Between 1933 and 1937, 47 per cent of Ardwick boys entered clerical occupations with a further 7 per cent employed in the civil or municipal services, while an incredible 70 per cent of girls took up office work and a further 15 per cent became civil servants or local government workers.⁶¹ An imbalance between genders reflected the increasing numbers of women working in offices: from 43 per cent of the clerical workforce in 1921 to nearly 60 per cent by 1951, as well as the absence of alternative occupations considered as 'respectable'.⁶² Others like Leicester, Bradford and Norwich, all Labour controlled, opened new higher schools, and some simply created senior sections for older and more capable pupils within their existing schools. Norwich City Council built two Central schools with a commercial bias in 1924 and five new senior elementary schools between 1926 and 1939 so that by 1939 all pupils over 11 were given a senior school education. In addition, a specialist junior commercial school was established in 1937 for more able pupils leaving elementary schools at 14.⁶³

also of rateable values within an area and the fact that local authorities were also responsible for funding benefits for the unemployed so many authorities especially in deprived areas had less to spend.

⁶⁰ *Ardwick Central School Prospectus 1918-1919*. School leaving certificate was considered more appropriate for local employers than 'the not altogether satisfactory examinations in vogue with many quasi semi-public bodies and others when dealing with youthful applications for employment. <http://manchesterhistory.net/adwick/CENTRAL/centralopen.html> accessed 26 Feb 2019

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Occupations to which Ardwick boys and girls go as shown by enquiry among leavers 1933-1937

⁶² Routh, *Occupation and Pay*, p.24

⁶³ Simon, 'Education since 1750' in Rawcliffe and Wilson (eds.), *Norwich since 1550*, p.313 and Rackham, 'Education in Norwich 1920-1940', p.3: B. Doyle, 'Politics 1835-1945', in Rawcliffe and Wilson, (eds.) *Norwich since 1550*, p.359. Labour was the largest group on the City Council from 1926 taking full control in 1933

However overall, only a very small proportion of children benefited with just over 9 per cent of pupils staying within the elementary sector after the age of 14 in central, senior or junior technical and commercial schools by 1938 – an increasing, but still tiny proportion.⁶⁴

Of my sample of Mass Observation respondents, while around three quarters credited their education as a key influence on their career choices and their social identities, and a significant proportion discussed the impact of their education at secondary schools as scholarship or fee-paying pupils, only two admitted to an elementary education. While one can only speculate about the reasons for this, the relative silence is telling. Was there an element of stigma about an elementary education with its association with the working classes? Was it due to the memory of a past failure to pass the 11 plus or having to refuse a scholarship due to parental poverty? Or did it not matter because so many had attended elementary schools that they were considered the norm? Or perhaps the nature of Mass Observation itself as responses required high levels of literacy which gave it greater appeal to the better educated? The responses of the two who did refer to their elementary school education was contradictory. The first, as mentioned above, felt he had missed out on education as he remained in an elementary school until he was 13 by which time, 'it was a bit late to start teaching me French, Science, Art, Algebra etc.' which made him feel inferior to his colleagues, 'afraid of being regarded as a dimwit' and undermined his confidence to undertake further study.⁶⁵

By contrast, this railway clerk celebrated his elementary education as a contributing to his lower middle-class status:

I am in favour of a classless society in which no section obtains special privileges and snobbery is a thing of the past. Nevertheless, class divisions will persist in the sense that education, income and occupation lead to different outcomes. A fairly good elementary education, an occupation requiring some initiative, and a moderate income is my idea of lower middle class.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p.209; Simon, *The Politics*, p.122

⁶⁵ M.O.A. 3853, male, born 1918, Costing Clerk, reply to DR September 1948

⁶⁶ M.O.A. 4443, male, born 1922, Railway Clerk, reply to DR September 1948

Furthermore, there is substantial additional evidence of the numbers of former elementary school pupils following clerical careers. While national figures for occupational destinations for elementary school pupils are not available, reports from the Norwich Juvenile Employment Bureau detail occupational destinations of both pupils from the City of Norwich School and Blyth High School, the two municipal secondary grammar schools for boys and girls respectively, as well as those from the City's elementary schools as a valuable case study.⁶⁷

Table 3.3: Number and percentage of school leavers entering clerical occupations in Norwich, selected years in the 1930s⁶⁸

	1934	1936	1938
Elementary Boys	39/ 901 4%	35/ 735 4.7%	29/ 693 3.3%
Elementary Girls	60/ 866 6.9%	51/ 846 6%	55/ 782 7%
City of Norwich School for Boys	52/ 121 43%	62/ 139 44%	70/ 137 51%
Blyth High School for Girls	50/ 89 56.1%	66/ 114 57%	65/ 117 55.5%
Boys – Technical	-	-	7/ 63 11%
Boys – Junior Commercial School	-	-	19/ 23 82.6%
Girls – Junior Commercial School	-	-	29/ 29 100%

These reports highlight the differences between the prospects for office work for elementary school pupils. The majority left at 14, although those who stayed at

⁶⁷ NRO, N/ED/5/2 *Norwich City Council, Juvenile Employment Bureau Annual Reports* 1934, 1936 and 1938,

⁶⁸ Table drawn from *Norwich City Council, Juvenile Employment Bureau Annual Reports* 1934, 1936 and 1938. The figures for the Elementary pupils include those for the Central School opened in 1924 with a leaving age of 15 or 16. Junior Technical and Commercial schools were opened at Norwich City Technical College in 1937 catering for students aged between 13 and 16.

the senior schools or the commercial school until 15 or 15 are also included in the elementary figures. While they showed that a secondary education was not a prerequisite for white collar employment, they do demonstrate that a significantly higher proportion of those with secondary education were able to obtain clerical posts. Furthermore they also showed that among the boys, even after the opening of the junior commercial school, the number and proportion from City of Norwich School (CNS) obtaining clerical posts increased consistently. For the girls, the pattern was different, with fewer secondary school leavers in offices in 1934, the opposite in 1936 and a significant rise in elementary girls in 1938 after the opening of the junior commercial school.

Unhelpfully, the returns for the elementary boys simply refer to 'clerical' without any further explanation so it is impossible to judge the level of work. Were they simply office boys and confined to lower grade jobs such as copying or batching, or starting on a path to more responsible posts? Those from City of Norwich School, however, were more informative; dividing clerks between commercial and professional, which I have taken to mean that professional clerks were those who would undertake professional qualifications such as banking, insurance, accountancy or solicitors. In 1934, out of 121 leavers, 43 per cent became clerks, of whom 17 per cent were taken on as professional clerks. By 1938, this had risen to 32 per cent, a higher proportion than the figures for England and Wales, probably due to the local economy as a regional centre and the presence of companies such as Norwich Union which employed thousands of clerks.⁶⁹

The picture was different for the girls. While over half of secondary school girls obtained clerical jobs, in numerical terms, more girls from the elementary sector worked in offices. Tellingly, none of the girls were listed as a professional clerk and as mentioned above, there were no women listed in the list of successful candidates in the professional insurance examinations by Norwich Union, one of the biggest employers of white-collar workers in the area.⁷⁰ However, the trend towards employing more girls from the elementary sector, mainly as typists, was marked, as

⁶⁹ *Education in 1938*; Around 12 per cent of secondary school leavers in England and Wales began careers in professions, banking or finance posts with 6.9 per cent as civil servants and local government officers in 1938.

⁷⁰ Aviva Archive; *Norwich Union Quarterly Staff Magazine* 1930, 1932, 1934, 1936, 1938.

the numbers nationally soared – rising from 244,000 in 1931 to over 559,000 by 1951.⁷¹

In summary, therefore, the secondary grammar schools, which remained largely the province of the middle classes, continued to send the largest proportion of their pupils into clerical jobs.⁷² Moreover, of male secondary grammar school leavers in 1938, around half became civil servants, local government officers, bank, insurance or professional clerks – a pattern also seen in Norwich. These posts were associated with the middle classes, they were high status and carried the greatest potential for social and financial advancement. For the boys from the elementary sector, the numbers obtaining clerical posts were increasing but, from the Norwich reports, it is impossible to ascertain the type and level of their jobs, suggesting a continuation of the two-tier labour force as described by Heller and the inferiority expressed by the elementary educated London clerk quoted above.⁷³ It also suggested that the sense of being belittled continued too, as shown by the narrator in *I'd Do It again*, set in 1936, who raged at his boss 'I suppose he thought I hadn't the brains [...] the only difference between him and me was I was educated at a Council School and he was educated at a Public School'.⁷⁴

The number of girls from secondary schools recruited into office work, consistently exceeded that of boys throughout the 1930s. However, there was also a trend to recruiting more girls from the elementary sectors, suggesting that higher levels of education were not required, as one typist wrote in 1947: 'I am one of three senior shorthand typists in a sales department of a local firm. I have told the manager that there does not seem to be any scope or future in the jobs – he agrees. It demands average intelligence but no responsibility or initiative [...] I am just marking time'.⁷⁵ This apparent lowering of the educational requirements for office work and the increases in the number of less well-educated girls, mainly employed as typists or machine minders in mundane, dead-end jobs helped to lower the

⁷¹ Routh, *Occupation and Pay* p.25

⁷² Floud, *Educational Experiences of Adults*, p. 109

⁷³ See p.121, M.O.A. 3853, male, born 1918, Costing Clerk, reply to DR October 1947 and DR September 1948 who was afraid his colleagues would think him a 'dimwit' and felt his education and lack of qualifications made him inferior

⁷⁴ Tilsley, *I'd Do It Again*, p. 34

⁷⁵ M.O.A. 2899, female, born 1915, Secretary, reply to DR October 1947

prestige and status of the routine clerical worker. The prestige bestowed by better education was being diluted.

The above sections have focussed largely upon the experiences of clerks within the education system and how it impacted upon their careers and social identities. I now turn to consider their attitudes to the education system in general, the divide between independent and state education and their hopes and aspirations for change.

Clerical Attitudes towards Education and Inequality: Secondary vs Public Schools

In the June 1939 Directive, Mass Observation included a question 'If money were no object, would you rather give your children a public school or secondary education and why?' While there was a definite split in opinions about which was best, the answers revealed deep insights into the different ways clerical workers perceived themselves and others, and how they related to other groups within society.

Overall, more appeared to favour secondary education over private education, with a perhaps unsurprising slight bias of those claiming middle class status towards public schools. It showed the satisfaction felt by most around their own secondary education while at the same time, disparaging the upper classes as closed, not clever, and reliant upon their family connections and wealth for their position in society. The main themes of those who preferred secondary schools focused upon the quality and breadth of teaching, not only facts but how to think for oneself, the wider social mix of pupils as a preparation for the future and the benefits of family and domestic life, while criticising public schools as narrow, jingoistic and snobbish. In contrast, those who would opt to give their children a public-school education praised their smaller classes, the superior bearing and poise it gave to children, as well as the social and career opportunities to make advantageous connections.

A junior civil servant who described herself as a lower middle-class daughter of a retired post-master and ex-secondary school girl made her opinion very clear:

I would give my children a secondary education in preference to a public-school education. I have a prejudice against public schools, not liking their reputed emphasis on games, their conservatism and Tory-patriotism,

their general policy of teaching a child what he should think and do rather than helping him to think for himself.⁷⁶

These two London clerks concurred:

I have no children but if I had, I would give them an education at a good secondary school only. The modern secondary school encourages interests in literature, art, music, politics etc. and preserves individuality. The public school does exactly the opposite, turns out materialists by the thousand, all in the same mould, the majority of them even unable to frame a complete sentence.⁷⁷

I would definitely send them to secondary school. Reasons – 1. Secondary schools have a far more varied selection of pupils and therefore a wider outlook on life 2. Public schools standardise the product and seem to boast of patriotism and such like rather than brains. 3. If a university education is wanted, you get just as good, if not better result from a secondary school and say, London University, than a public school and then Oxford or Cambridge at far less cost and less snobby.⁷⁸

An insurance inspector (the son of a dentist who labelled himself as upper middle class) also objected to the perceived ethos of the public schools, albeit in slightly different terms:

Secondary – to preserve home life, also I consider that day schools give a better all-round education. Public schools (very often) become ‘all class’ and ‘good manners’ and games to the exclusion of common sense and knowledge of the daily life of people of the town and country.⁷⁹

On the other hand, this working class clerk had no doubts about the value of the cultural and social capital that a public-school education imbued regardless of the ability of the child:

I would give them a public-school education. There is no doubt whatsoever in my mind that the advantages are enormous. From my own experience I have found that a public schoolboy is preferred in business

⁷⁶ M.O.A. 1047, female, born 1916, Civil Servant, reply to DR June 1939

⁷⁷ M.O.A. 1511, male, born 1915, Junior Accounts Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁷⁸ M.O.A. 1024, female, born 1915, Civil Servant, reply to DR June 1939

⁷⁹ M.O.A. 1118, male, born 1919, Insurance Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

just because he is a public schoolboy. Employers accept without hesitation and in most cases insist upon this form of education. I feel that in giving my sons a public-school education, they would be assured of a good position in the business world, no matter how unintelligent they may be. Snobbery and the old school tie is a first rate qualification to a good position.⁸⁰

Nor did a cost clerk who, due to the death of his father, 'came down in the world':

If I could afford it, I would send my children to a public school. They learn things there they would not in secondary schools – the tradition of service – Army, Church, Colonial Service etc. (not that I would want them to join any of that but I would like them to learn the tradition), unostentatious good manners and so on and so on. And there is far less snobbishness in a public school than in a secondary. Money counts a great deal among the sons of tradesmen but you don't get that in a public school where money is regarded as something indecent and to brag about it the worst kind of bad form. Of course, the modern tendency is to make the secondary school as much like the public school as possible so the advantages of a public-school education will be available to everybody and I think this is a good thing.⁸¹

This divergence of views demonstrates the many sides of the clerical identity: aspiration both in career and social terms, the importance of respectability reflected in an appreciation of good manners, social anxiety evidenced by the concerns about snobbishness and the value placed upon culture, knowledge and independent thought, some of which run counter to the stereotype of the conventional, deferential clerk. Moreover, this apparent breaking from the stereotype may also reflect the left-wing political bias within the volunteer panel, as Hinton showed in his analysis of responses to the 1943 directive on voting intentions and the characterisation by Jeffery of Mass Observation as part of the broader movement of progressive politics,

⁸⁰ M.O.A. 1304, male, born 1913, clerk reply to DR June 1939

⁸¹ M.O.A. 1122, male, born 1898, clerk reply to DR June 1939

attracting those who wanted to 'contribute to social reform'.⁸² In addition, the emphasis on developing individuality and 'thinking for yourself' suggests that Sutcliffe-Braithwaite's claims about the decline of deference were evident in the minds of pre-war clerical workers.⁸³

Sentiments which were also reflected in the responses to the April 1942 directive which asked for ideas about how post-war education should be organised in this country. There was a remarkable consensus; all called for change and, while there were differing thoughts about the detail of the system, the majority felt access to education should be more equal, based upon merit and talent and not on ability to pay.⁸⁴ This desire for more inclusivity and equality was more than a reflection of the left wing bias of the volunteers, it was also influenced by the war, a war in which 'we were all in it together', in which government propaganda portrayed Britain as a family and that all citizens had a duty to care for each other.⁸⁵ Others felt in addition, that there should be more vocational training within the system. This had been an issue with regard to post-school clerical training throughout the 1930s and which will be discussed below. This 32-year-old Birmingham buyer wanted more equality and an end to gaining advantage by knowing the right people:

One idea I have is that there won't be so much class distinction in relation to education as has been the case in the past, by which I mean education has to be or ought to be on a more standard basis which would see the exit of the 'old school tie' business.⁸⁶

While a young London clerk who had responded to the June 1939 directive on class by noting the sacrifices his parents had made to give him a good education declared:

⁸² J. Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History*, (Oxford; Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013) p.2 & p.278, an overwhelming majority who expressed a preference chose parties of the left; T. Jeffery, 'The Lower Middle Class in England' in R. Koshar, (ed.), *Splintered Classes: Politics and the Lower Middle Classes in Interwar Europe*, (London: Holmes and Meier, 1990), p.85-86

⁸³ F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics and the Decline of Deference in England: 1968-2000*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press 2018)

⁸⁴ M.O.A. Directive April 1942, question 2 – Have you any ideas about how post-war education should be organised in this country? If so, outline them

⁸⁵ Rose, *Which People's War*

⁸⁶ M.O.A. 1630, male, born 1920, Civil Servant, reply to DR April 1942

I think that everyone should go to an elementary school and then progress according to ability. The public school system should be scrapped. No one should have an advantage because they have more worldly possessions.⁸⁷

Again, this Norbury clerk advocated that access to education be based upon academic ability only, with public schools abolished and for education to continue after school:

My attitude to education is the same as many others, it should be open to the talents. Promotion to secondary and university based on examinations, interview and school reports. Grants for the additional costs and to compensate for the loss of the child's earning power [...] the abolition of public schools [...] education should be extended to the outside world, entrants should not have to pick up their trades in a haphazard way.⁸⁸

As did this middle-class London bank clerk who wanted to see more day-release education, perhaps a reaction to his own bank training during which he would have had to attend night school several times a week after a full day in the bank:

Primary up to 14 followed by technical or secondary [...] to be dependent on merit only not money. The primary to be a broad education, the next stage also broad but more vocational with branches for clerical, scholastic, engineering etc. Later between 16 and 18, school would merge with work on a part time basis so youths would not have to work all day and then attend night school.⁸⁹

While these two Mass-Observers agreed with the general principle of equality in education, they also considered values around etiquette and manners, most often regarded as middle-class concerns.

Reforms that have already been prophesised (sic)– equal chances for every child regardless of social standing – are excellent but it entails the

⁸⁷ M.O.A. 1372, male, born 1918, Railway Clerk, reply to DR April 1942

⁸⁸ M.O.A. 2384, male, born 1915, Clerk, reply to DR April 1942

⁸⁹ M.O.A. 1325 male, born 1910, Bank Clerk, reply to DR April 1942

teaching of some form of etiquette, since a child attending the best possible day school would still be handicapped if its parents teach it to drink tea out of a saucer.⁹⁰

I would give everyone the opportunity for the best possible education. I don't mean merely book learning but 'esprit de corps', courtesy, good manners. Bad manners are not a sign of equality but decidedly otherwise, about thoughtfulness for fellow man.⁹¹

However, the concerns about the level and standard of education together with the need expressed by several of the above clerks to provide more vocational education, raises the question of the provision of post school training for clerical workers which will be explored in the next section.

Post-school training 1930s: Structured Training for Professional Clerks

As has been shown, thousands of school leavers, from both secondary grammar schools and the elementary school sector, began their office career straight from school. However, there are questions to be asked. How ready they were to undertake office duties? What additional training or education did they require and what impact had it on their future identities?

In terms of training, there was a sharp division between those in occupations such as banking or insurance where there was structured training managed by the respective professional bodies, and the mass of general clerks for whom there were no widely recognised qualifications. For the young bankers, insurance clerks and those clerks hoping to enter the professions, there was a structured programme of training: comprising on-the-job office-based work alongside formal academic courses leading to professional qualifications managed by bodies such as the Institute of Bankers and the Chartered Insurance Institute. Young clerks were required to undertake these courses with bonuses and promotion dependent upon progress through the various stages. Studying was done outside working hours either via evening classes at local technical colleges or correspondence. As a Mass Observation clerk studying for an accountancy qualification wrote:

⁹⁰ M.O.A. 2899, female, born 1915, Secretary, reply to DR June 1939

⁹¹ M.O.A. 1432, female, born 1917, Civil Servant, reply to DR June 1939

I am a clerk but striving to take up the profession in which I am employed. I think therefore I am one up on the ordinary worker who learns what he can at work but is generally not sufficiently ambitious to study outside working hours to improve his position.⁹²

He also noted 'the arduous task of becoming qualified [which] means a fair amount of studying after office hours'.⁹³

Another, while not specifying his qualification, also remarked on the higher status conferred upon him:

'I might be a member of the lower middle class. Mainly because I am engaged in an administrative position of a non-manual character with certain recognised qualifications above the average and mix with people of a similar station'.⁹⁴

The award of a recognised qualification marked a person out and bestowed status with occupations such as bank clerk or accountant almost without exception were included in the lists of ten middle class jobs. In contrast, clerks appeared in some lists as middle class and others as working class.⁹⁵

Commercial Training for the General Clerk 1930s-1960s

However, the situation regarding the mass of commercial clerks was much more complex. Serious concerns were raised by, among others, the British Association for Industrial and Commercial Education, about the nature and quality of commercial, as opposed to the professional, training discussed above.⁹⁶ Outside that offered in secondary grammar schools, Central Schools and Junior Technical Collages, as discussed above, pre-employment training opportunities consisted of a small number of one-year senior courses in government-aided colleges for post-16-year-olds with the School Certificate. There was also the option of attending one of the numerous private commercial colleges, which advertised widely, and promised success in

⁹² M.O.A. 3853, male, born 1918, Accounts Clerk, reply to DR September 1948

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ M.O.A. 1140, male, born 1916, Buyer, reply to DR June 1939

⁹⁵ M.O.A. Directive September 1948 asked respondents to list 10 typical middle-class and 10 typical working-class jobs.

⁹⁶ *Liverpool Echo*, 29th April 1930 p.9 Report of establishment of British Association for Industrial and Commercial Education who argued for 'big business to take a direct practical interest in commercial educationto give young men (sic) going into business something better deserved on training than merely shorthand and typing.

obtaining well- paid posts with good prospects, appealing to ideas about aspiration and advancement⁹⁷ Whilst no figures are available for the number of students attending private commercial colleges, we do know that many employers were sceptical about the merits of pre-employment training apart from in shorthand and typing, arguing that ‘whether of a general nature such as record-keeping and dealing with correspondence [...] or of a more specialised character such as accounting’, training was best acquired in the workplace.⁹⁸ Yet, that was mainly of the ‘sitting by Nellie’ variety, being shown the various processes by more experienced colleagues and learning on the job. This sort of training was haphazard and unstructured with the quality dependent on the interest and good will of co-workers. To augment this, in their own time and usually on their own initiative, many clerks, in increasing numbers, took evening and correspondence courses; the most popular being shorthand, typing and book-keeping, which might or might not be recognised by employers or contribute to career progression.⁹⁹ To replace this disconnected and confusing jumble, attempts were made to establish a single nationally recognised certificate in Commerce which would give both employers and students confidence and clarity. The Ordinary National Certificate (ONC) was introduced in experimental form in 1934. However, it cannot be said that commercial businesses gave them any great weight or expressed any great interest in the new qualification: in 1938, only 132 students were awarded the certificate.¹⁰⁰

After 1945, little changed. A special committee on Education for Commerce, under the chairmanship of Carr-Saunders which reported in 1949, echoed many of the issues raised earlier and recommended the further development of the National Certificate scheme.¹⁰¹ However, uptake stayed very low while the popularity of

⁹⁷ Private colleges such as Pitman’s and Clark’s advertised widely e.g. *Daily Mail*; 27th December 1930 ‘Your Boy or Girl Set for Life’, p.12; 28th December 1931, ‘You would not willingly handicap them! Give Them a Real Chance of Success’, p.9

⁹⁸ A. M. Carr-Saunders, *Report of a Special Committee on Education for Commerce*, (London; HMSO, 1949) p.21

⁹⁹ *Education in 1938*, Tables 72, 73 and 74 pp.165-170. In 1930 317,000 students took shorthand bookkeeping and typing; by 1938, over 375,000 were studying these subjects.

¹⁰⁰ *Education in 1953: Being the report of the Ministry of Education and the Statistics of Public Education in England and Wales*, Cmd. 9155, table 49, 330,00 learners taking book-keeping, shorthand or typing courses; *Education in 1956: Being the report of the Ministry of Education and the Statistics of Public Education in England and Wales*, Cmd. 223, table 55 321,00 learners taking book-keeping, shorthand or typing courses

¹⁰¹ Carr-Saunders, *Education for Commerce*, p.33-37

evening classes, particularly for shorthand, typing and book-keeping, continued.¹⁰²

Training for clerical workers remained, apart from in large companies who maintained their own programmes, uncoordinated and haphazard, with individual clerks largely taking responsibility for their own training in their own time.¹⁰³

Contrasting experiences of training: Cambridge and Luton Clerks

This division between the structured training offered to clerks in the professions, banking, finance and insurance was clearly demonstrated when the educational backgrounds of those clerks studied by Goldthorpe and his team were considered. These clerks were interviewed in 1964 as part of the wider study into the question of embourgeoisement. Direct questions were asked about past schooling, further education undertaken, as well as their aspirations for their children's education

The Cambridge bank clerks questioned had all stayed at school until at least 16. Most had studied at grammar schools, although around 25 per cent had been privately educated. None had attended secondary modern or elementary schools. They would have passed the School Certificate or in the case of the younger clerks, at least four GCE 'O' Levels – the minimum entry qualifications for banks. They had all completed or were in the process of studying for the Institute of Bankers professional qualification either via correspondence or at night school, a gruelling process, as one clerk pointed out: 'three years – two nights a week' after a full day's work, and another claiming that he had been going to night school 'three evenings a week for the past year'.¹⁰⁴

This contrasted sharply with the Luton clerks employed by SKF and Laporte whose educational backgrounds were much more diverse. Just over half, 18, had been educated prior to 1944. Of this group, 10 left elementary school at 14; 3 attended higher or Central elementary schools and left at 15; and 5 had a secondary grammar education – 3 leaving at 16 and 2 staying on until 18. Post-school they had undertaken a wide range of courses, two of the ex-grammar school pupils had part-

¹⁰² *Education in 1953*, table 60 - 244 studied for ONC in Commerce; *Education in 1956*, table 64, 377 studied for ONC in Commerce

¹⁰³ Many large companies such as Vauxhall in Luton and Norwich Union in Norwich had their own training centres for typing and shorthand

¹⁰⁴ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 033, Bank Clerk, Barclays; 060, Cashier, Barclays

qualified as accountants; one from a Central School had studied Maths and Science for three years at night school; an ex-elementary schoolboy had spent five years studying commerce via evening classes, while others across all types of schools had done nothing. A similar picture emerged from the younger cohort educated under the post 1944-system, four left school at 15: three from secondary moderns and one from a technical school; five left at 16: four from grammar and one from technical school; while the remaining three left grammar school at 18. Again, their post-school education varied: one was studying with Institute of Cost Accountants, with others completing shorter courses in book-keeping, English or Maths. Overall, 65 per cent (21 out of 32) had some form of post-school training but, for the most part, it appeared ad hoc and unstructured.

While past education was not the only criteria for recruitment or progression of clerks, the lack of a widely recognised qualification led to a more uncertain and haphazard career path. However, it also had implications for the social identities of clerks, widening the gap between the commercial clerks, such as those in Luton, and the more prestigious clerical posts in, for example, banks or insurance companies. A formal, widely-recognised qualification was a mark of distinction, something which conferred status, a sign that certain standards of skill and knowledge had been achieved. The fact that men who left school at 14 and undertook no further training could be in the same type of posts as those who had stayed on at school until 16 and studied for three years at night school gave the impression that almost anyone could become a clerk. It took away their distinction and re-enforced the idea of a two-tier labour market even into the 1960s.

However, if there were few changes to the system of post-school commercial education and training, the same cannot be said of the wider school education system, which was transformed by the 1944 Education Act. The old division between elementary and secondary school codes was discarded. In its place, there was to be a single system with all state-educated children attending a primary school until 11, before going on to secondary education, with no fees at either a grammar, technical or modern school, and places allocated solely on the basis of academic ability. The next section explores how these changes and the rhetoric around merit and the breaking down of class distinction impacted upon the social identities of clerical workers.

Education, Class Distinction and Meritocracy: post 1944 Education Act

The 1944 Education Act was hailed as a new beginning, one element in the brave new world ushered in by the Labour landslide in 1945 – a new era of increased opportunity and equality, a discourse which held that all citizens deserved and had the right to the best possible education.¹⁰⁵ Schools under state control would offer primary school education for all children aged between 5 and 11. Then at 11, there would be universal secondary education with children allocated to the type of school best suited to their abilities: grammar schools for those with abstract intelligence, technical schools for those of a mechanical bent and modern schools for those with more concrete intelligence.¹⁰⁶ The school leaving age was raised to 15, no fees were to be charged and selection for the different schools would be carried out on the basis on an examination to be taken at 11.¹⁰⁷

The aim of the Act, according to Ellen Wilkinson, Minister of Education in Atlee's government, was to 'see no boy or girl is debarred from taking the course of education for which he or she is qualified and to remove from education those class distinctions which are the negation of democracy'.¹⁰⁸ In other words, a system based upon the aptitude of the child and not the ability to pay the fees. Yet, despite the rhetoric of 'parity of esteem', the elite position of the grammar secondary schools did not change. They received greater resources around 70 per cent more funding per head compared to the average secondary modern, and better qualified teachers. Furthermore, they were able to reinforce their academic primacy as fee-paying pupils of lower ability were no longer accepted. Like the pre-war secondary schools, they pursued an academic curriculum leading to external examinations: 'O' levels at 16 and 'A' levels at 18.¹⁰⁹ Passing 'O' levels in four or more subjects was a minimum requirement for most professional, banking and insurance posts, although girls, who would not take professional examinations and were confined to clerical

¹⁰⁵ P. Mandler, 'Educating the Nation III: Social Mobility', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 26, (2016), p.1-23

¹⁰⁶ Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity*, p.45

¹⁰⁷ Gillard, *Education in the UK*, Chapter 9 1939-1945, Educational Reconstruction

¹⁰⁸ R. Lowe, *Education and the Post War Years: A Social History*, (London; Routledge, 1988), p.37

¹⁰⁹ The School Certificate was replaced by the single subject General Certificate in Education in 1951. At 16, pupils took 'ordinary' or 'O' papers with "Advanced" or "A" level at 18. 'A' levels were necessary for university entrance. "O" levels for higher level clerical jobs such in banking, insurance etc.

and secretarial roles, could be accepted with an 'O' level education or good shorthand and typing skills.¹¹⁰ GCE 'O' levels were available in commercial subjects but the take-up was very low, less than 11,000 in 1958, although many grammar schools, especially those for girls, ran commercial Sixth Forms where girls were taught shorthand, typing and basic office practice.¹¹¹ This meant that the grammar schools, as with the pre-war secondary schools, maintained their dominance as a gateway to a higher-level clerical career for both boys and girls. However, the career paths were gendered as these 1960s recruitment leaflets clearly demonstrated. Aimed at grammar school leavers, Martins Bank offered the male Peter Jackson, training, good pay, potential for promotion by his early 30s provided he had a degree, 2 'A' levels or '4 'O' levels. The female who was nameless – the Girl – was promised friendly atmosphere, sporting activities, dinners and dances and a good deal of fun. She needed an 'O' level education or shorthand or typing skills. Nowhere was there any mention of a female with 'A' levels or a degree.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ See, for example, Recruitment leaflets for Martin's Bank – mid 1960s. Martin's Bank Archive(taken over by Barclays in 1968), www.martinsbank.co.uk accessed June 2021

¹¹¹ *Education in 1958: Being the Report of the Ministry of Education and Statistics for England and Wales*, Cmd. 777, Table 32, Of those taking commercial subjects at 'O' level, two thirds were girls with commercial subjects making up less than 1 per cent of papers.

¹¹² For full leaflet, see appendix 3

Illustration 1 – Martins Recruitment Literature 1963



Peter Jackson joined Martins Bank straight from school with a couple of good 'A' Levels and the sort of drive that would take him to the top in quite a few different types of business.

The Manager took a keen interest [...] arranged study leave for the all-important Banking Diploma. Very soon Peter became a cashier, handling large sums of money, [...] it wasn't long before he was given responsibility for running the branch when the Manager was away. Now in his early thirties, and earning around £2,400 a year, he is a manager in his own right. [...] If you have the qualities of Peter Jackson with a degree, 2 'A' levels or 4 'O' levels, you could enjoy the same sort of exciting, progressive career.



Working with Martins is much more than just having a job. For a start, the work is really varied and interesting. As machines and computers take over much of the routine book-keeping and clerical work, more and more girls are becoming cashiers, [...] other jobs include typing and secretarial work, [...] colleagues treat you as a friend and equal. [...] there's a wide range of social and sporting activities. Staff dinners and dances are held regularly. [...] salaries are good [...] excellent prospects [...] whatever your aim in life, you will find working with Martins is more than just a job – its a great deal of fun. If you have an 'O' level education or are proficient in shorthand and typing, write with full particulars...

In comparison with the grammar schools catering for around half a million children, only around 75,000 pupils attended technical schools which were more focussed upon vocational studies and where the girls were taught commercial subjects relevant for a clerical career.¹¹³ Over 70 per cent of children were sent to the new secondary modern schools.¹¹⁴ Initially, these were not permitted to offer pupils the chance to study for external examinations but following pressure from parents and employers, from the mid-1950s many began to introduce more vocational courses and the opportunity to 'stay on' until 16. Many taught shorthand, typing and office practice, mainly to girls, with qualifications accredited by national bodies such as Royal Society of Arts as preparation for clerical posts.¹¹⁵

In many ways, therefore, the post-1944 system created a new hierarchy of schools, despite the claims of 'parity of esteem' and the removal of class distinction in selection. By the mid-1950s, 86 per cent pupils in secondary moderns were children of manual workers, compared to only 14 per cent from professional, managerial or clerical families.¹¹⁶ Moreover, these were children who had been branded 'failures' at 11, a fact which had an undeniable impact on the social identities of clerks educated in secondary moderns and also contributed to the sense of distinction and superiority expressed by those who benefited from a grammar or technical education. The 11 plus became a mark of success or failure.

Prior to a discussion about the impact on this reformed system, I examine the educational backgrounds of clerical workers. As has been shown in my discussion on post-school commercial training of the groups of Cambridge bank clerks and general clerks from Luton, clerical workers were educated in all three types of schools. However, there was clear evidence that the proportion of grammar school boys at a national level obtaining clerical posts dropped substantially from 31 per

¹¹³ G. F. Taylor, 'Selection for junior and secondary technical education', *Vocational Aspects* 20.47 (1968)

¹¹⁴ R. Lowe, *Education in the Post-War years*, p.41

¹¹⁵ V. Brooks, 'The Role of External Examinations in the Making of Secondary Modern Schools in England 1945-1965', *History of Education* 37, 3 (2008); R. N. Morris, 'Fifth Year Courses in Birmingham's Modern Schools', *Educational Review* 12, 1 (1959)

¹¹⁶ Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity* p.56

cent in 1938 to 22.6 per cent in 1956.¹¹⁷ At the same time, there was an increase in the percentage of these boys entering the ranks of professional, banking and financial services from 12 per cent in 1938 to 35.8 per cent in 1956, with increasing numbers going to university.¹¹⁸ For girls, the situation was different, the proportion of grammar school girls becoming clerks grew from 35 per cent in 1938 to 57.6 per cent in 1956, with 25.9 per cent working in professional, banking or financial services.¹¹⁹ The brightest and most ambitious of ex-grammar school pupils were now aiming for university and the professions, rather than a clerical career. This can be partly explained by shifting demand offering new occupational opportunities as companies increased in size and complexity, as national and international trade grew. This together with the continued expansion of the welfare state led to increased demands for managers, accountants and lawyers. For example, the number of professional accountants grew from 16,000 in 1931 to 37,000 in 1951, reaching 77,000 by 1971, most of whom were men.¹²⁰ As in the pre-1945 era, the gender gap remained stark with the major growth for women firmly centred upon the clerical sector in the routine typing and machine operator posts.

Revisiting the figures from the Norwich Juvenile Employment Bureau (post-war renamed the Norwich Youth Employment Sub-Committee) shows the impact of the 1944 Act on numbers obtaining clerical posts from different types of schools.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ *Education in 1938* with 1956 figures taken from M. Sanderson, 'Education and the Labour Market' in N. Crafts, I. Gazeley and A. Newall, *Work and Pay in 20th Century Britain*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2007), p.280

¹¹⁸ L. W. B. Brookliss, *The University of Oxford; A History*, (Oxford; Oxford Academic, online edition, 2016) <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199243563.002.0014>, accessed 26 June 2024.

Numbers going to university (men and women) increased from around 50,000 in 1938/9 to over 164,000 by 1967/68

¹¹⁹ Sanderson, *Education and the Labour Market*, p.208. It is not always clearly precisely which occupations are included within clerical or professional– I have understood the difference to be those jobs in which qualifications are awarded by professional bodies.

¹²⁰ Routh, *Occupation and Pay*, p,13-14, only 2% of accountants were women in 1951, rising to 3% by 1971

¹²¹ NRO N/ED/5/2 & N/ED/5/5 *City of Norwich Juvenile Employment Bureau, Annual Report 1937/38, Norwich Youth Employment Sub-committee, Annual Report 1956/57*

Table 3.4: Proportion of school leavers obtaining clerical posts from different Norwich schools before and after 1944 Education Act

	1938		1956	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Grammar Schools (leavers at 16)	70/ 137 51%	65/ 117 55.5%	61/ 134 45.5%	89/ 152 58.55%
Junior Commercial/Technical Schools	26/ 86 30.2%	29/ 29 100%	14/ 63 14.4%	73/ 98 74.5%
Elementary/Secondary Modern Schools	29/ 693 3.3%	55/ 782 7%	23/ 505 4.55%	94/ 487 19.3%

The pattern was clear: in both 1938 and 1956, the majority of male clerks were grammar school educated although girls from the elementary sector outnumbered those from grammar schools. However, in line with the national figures discussed above, the proportion of boys dropped while that of girls increased. From the technical schools, there was a bigger shift. The number of boys moving into office work decreased, possibly due to greater opportunities in, for example, engineering, manufacturing and construction as Norwich rebuilt after the war. For girls, the number of places in technical schools trebled, with three quarters obtaining clerical posts. However, the largest change was in the proportion of girls with secondary modern education entering offices, from around 7 per cent of elementary school leavers in 1938 to over 19 per cent in 1956. In part, these increases from both technical and secondary schools seemed to be due to the increasing numbers of girls 'staying on' until 16 and using the additional year to improve both their general education, especially English and Mathematics, and also their shorthand and typing skills, and in part, as the Norwich Youth Employment Committee reports for 1956 and 1957 noted, the fact that job vacancies exceeded supply.¹²² Figures which were reflected in the national figures from Employment Exchanges which showed there

¹²²Norwich Youth Employment Sub-Committee, Annual Report 1956/7,

were double the number of vacancies for typists and shorthand typists as were registered unemployed.¹²³

The continuing growth in numbers of clerks from technical and secondary modern schools, which had its roots in the years before the war but quickened afterwards, suggests two classes of clerks whose experiences, lifestyles and social identities differed. How far this was so, is considered through the interviews of the Cambridge clerks, who were almost entirely grammar school or public school educated and the Luton clerks, whose educational experiences were much more diverse. How far had their different levels of education impacted upon their identities and attitudes to social identity and education?

Fairness and Opportunity: The Goldthorpe Clerks 1960-64

As with the Mass-Observers, the majority of the clerks – three quarters of the Cambridge sample and just under two thirds of those from Luton – interviewed by Goldthorpe and his team in the early 1960s believed that education was a major factor affecting social identity. However, because of the ways in which the questions were posed, for example: ‘people talk about there being social classes, what do you think?’, their comments were more general and less a reflection of their own personal journeys than the Mass Observers. Questions were asked about the types of schools attended and any further education they had undertaken. As was discussed in the section above on commercial training, the two sets of clerks relate differing experiences. The Cambridge clerks had all stayed at school, either grammar or independent until at least 16. They had all either passed their school certificate or obtained at least four GCE ‘O’ levels. Given that, even by 1960, only 21 per cent of 16 year olds in England and Wales were at school and only 15.3 per cent were awarded five or more GCE ‘O’ levels, these men were among the better-educated in the country.¹²⁴ Furthermore they had all studied for banking examinations by correspondence and at night school, in some cases over extended periods of up to eight years. By contrast, the Luton clerks were from all types of schools; just under half had left at the minimum leaving age, while a small proportion

¹²³ Routh, *Occupation and Pay*, p.162

¹²⁴ House of Commons Library; *Education: Historical Statistics, examination results England and Wales 1960/61’ Statistics of Education* – public examinations DFE <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04252/SN04254.pdf> accessed June 2023

– 16 per cent – had stayed until 18. 65 per cent of them had undertaken further training, from professional accountancy studies, to night school classes in shorthand or commerce, to Maths and English in the Forces.¹²⁵

Both groups of clerks saw education as one of the major dividing lines between the classes, between those like themselves and those they considered below and above them. These Luton clerks, both of whom identified as middle class, said:

the lower class haven't had the education or haven't tried to improve their education by taking advantage of the education offered to them at night schools.¹²⁶

[shop floor working class] go to secondary school and they want to leave as soon as possible for the money whereas white-collar workers tend to carry their education a bit further.¹²⁷

This view was echoed by two Cambridge clerks who argued:

even the ordinary man can raise himself by reading, educating himself.

Those who stay in the lower class do so because they're spending all their money, not educating themselves.¹²⁸

they haven't had the education to try to better themselves, they are quite satisfied living in crowded rooms, and not being too particular about hygiene, that sort of thing. A person can always improve his education if he has a will to do so.¹²⁹

The implication from all these men was that everyone now had opportunities for education, but that many in the lower classes, among the poor and the unskilled, refused to take up what was on offer. These two groups of clerks portrayed themselves as 'educated', clearly distinguishing themselves from those they condemned as the 'rough working class'.

At the same time, many also placed themselves apart from the rich and privileged, those who attained their position, not from their own efforts, but because of connections, parental wealth or the achievements of others, and questioned

¹²⁵ See page 37.

¹²⁶ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 502, Assistant to Manager Orders Department, SKF

¹²⁷ *Affluent worker Collection*, 544, Senior Cost Clerk, Laporte

¹²⁸ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 029, Tax Clerk, National and Provincial Building Society (N &P)

¹²⁹ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 050, Cashier, Barclays

whether this was fair or meritocratic. This sentiment is reflected by a Luton clerk who left school at 14 and went straight into a shop floor job before joining the Navy and eventually moving into an office job. His son was approaching the 11 plus examination and he was considering whether to pay for additional tuition. He declared:

It comes down to money, some people can afford to put their kids out to private schools, while the working man sends his kids to the ordinary school in the hope they'll pass exams to grammar-school and if they're lucky win scholarships to university [...] whereas the man with money can send his Kiddy to boarding-school and he'll have the things in life that carry so much weight, like the right way to speak, he is put into the social circles where he can mix with right people, he can even be put into the right job even if the kid has no interest in it, I have worked with kids whose father has put them through public school and then into the firm to get them experience.¹³⁰

A Cambridge clerk put it more succinctly:

I think undoubtedly – yes – classes are partly determined by the educational system. I think the people who go to public schools and on to university have an advantage - they can enter the commercial system at a different level.¹³¹

Despite this feeling on the part of some that wealth, status and a public-school education gave an unfair advantage, many from both Luton and Cambridge believed that the post-Butler education system was fairer and more meritocratic than it had been before the war, and that there were more opportunities for people like themselves, and more especially for their children, to acquire a good education. As a young tax clerk from Cambridge explained:

I mean, even the person - well, say to the lowest type of factory worker, today has got the opportunity through state schools to get to the same

¹³⁰ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 539, Planning Plant Maintenance Clerk, Laporte

¹³¹ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 040, Principal Clerk Correspondence Department, Barclays

position as everybody else or the position that everyone else is clambering to get.¹³²

While a Laporte clerk who left a secondary modern at 15 and initially did a brick-laying apprenticeship, although explaining that he did feel there needed to be more provision, said:

The intelligent working-class boy can rise in state schools'. Interviewer: you are saying as it stands all people have got an equal chance'? Reply: 'I think they have. I don't think we have enough higher educational centres but today everyone has a chance to succeed'.¹³³

Both the Cambridge and Luton clerks were ambitious for their children to succeed at school. The Cambridge clerks were asked about their attitudes to the 11 plus, whether failure at 11 would be 'likely to ruin a child's whole future life', a question which emphasised the strength of the association of passing the 11 plus and grammar school education with middle class status. While the majority disagreed, chillingly some did not. One agreed without comment, while others qualified their agreement, for instance, one ticked the 'agreed' box but felt that 'ruin' was too strong; another commented 'it depends on the child, if he develops into an adolescent with plenty of character, he will probably get over it'. Another thought that 'in present conditions, to fail certainly spoils [chances] but it is a very sweeping statement. I think though anyone who fails isn't likely to get on, there are exceptions'.¹³⁴ They were split on their aspirations for the type of school between independent, grammar or comprehensive, not secondary modern, albeit specifying top stream of comprehensives and mostly wanted their sons, even if yet unborn, to go on to university if possible.

Luton clerks were not asked the same question about the 11 plus, perhaps due to pre-conceptions from the research team and assumptions about the educational achievements of both the clerks themselves and their children. They were, however, asked to indicate which schools their children attended and the type of help they gave. Of those who had children aged above 11, around half attended grammar

¹³² *Affluent work in Class Structure*, 029, Tax Clerk, N & P

¹³³ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 541, Assistant to Shipping Manager, Laporte

¹³⁴ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 051, Assistant Chief Clerk, Barclays; 062, Securities Clerk, Barclays; 064, 2nd Cashier, Barclays

schools with the remainder at secondary moderns. Many were prepared to invest in their children's future; a correspondence clerk with an elementary education, who had a son about to sit his 11 plus, wanted:

‘grammar ideally, in the ‘A’ stream at primary and 5th out of 43 and was prepared to suffer if he wanted to go to e.g. Cambridge; ‘I want him to have a better education than his father – education is key to a good job’.

He and his wife also offered ‘encouragement, ensured homework done before TV, a peaceful room, the opportunity to talk about school and any problems and wished they were able to help more with homework.’¹³⁵ This attitude prevailed among most of the Luton clerks; one whose son was a pupil at Luton Grammar was also ‘prepared for him to go to university if he wanted to’.¹³⁶ While yet another spoke with pride of his daughter's progress at grammar school and her ambition to become a domestic science teacher.¹³⁷ Not all had such high expectations, several simply hoped for office jobs rather than factory work or for their sons to get apprenticeships.¹³⁸ Others, while not expressing concrete ambitions, talked about how they supported their children, showing interest, keeping in contact with schools, seeing the teachers to find out where the child needed extra support, helping with homework, paying for additional tuition or for those with very young children, reading them stories.¹³⁹

These examples demonstrate the value that clerical workers placed upon education, not only in their own through post-school study, but also through the support provided to their children. Education was prized both as a sign of the clerks' superiority over the lower classes, the unskilled and the layabouts, and as a means for themselves and their children to climb the social ladder, not only in terms of being better qualified for more responsible and higher paid occupations, but also as a

¹³⁵ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 503, Correspondence Clerk, SKF

¹³⁶ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 506, Sales Planning Clerk, SKF

¹³⁷ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 525, Sales Clerk, SKF

¹³⁸ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 503, Correspondence Clerk, SKF; 525, Sales Clerk, Laporte; 507, Distributor, SKF

¹³⁹ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 507, Distributor, SKF; 524, Credit Control Clerk, SKF; 539, Plant Maintenance Planning Clerk, Laporte; 541, Assistant to Shipping Manager, Laporte; 504, Tabulator, SKF; 535, Senior Assistant to Supervisor of Cost Department, SKF

social asset which would enable them to enter into what was seen as a more cultured and 'more civilised' way of living.¹⁴⁰

Education is the most important thing in changing class, 'it's not always money [...] when you are young you should get GCEs and possibly professional qualifications' said a clerk in Laporte's tool planning department while SKF distributor believed change was possible if 'a chappy got higher qualifications.¹⁴¹

The significance and power of education was summed up by a Laporte documentation clerk in his 40s, earning less than £18 a week and previously employed as a manual worker at Laporte's chemical plant. He had left elementary school at 14 but had continued his education while serving as a wireless operator in the RAF during the war. He had one child studying for A levels at Luton College and another at Luton High – a grammar school. He argued that:

there used to be a complete break between the white collar worker and the shop floor man; from one point of view (wages), it is not so noticeable these days, but from the social point of view, there is still that line between the two [...] education is the vital factor, the differences that education necessarily brings to put a man or a women in a slightly higher level with regard to his recreational fields, opera and the arts, an appreciation of the arts [...] a difference in outlook [...] it's possible for somebody in our class to get to the professional class, by having more education, a child of ours gets to the next class.¹⁴²

Similarly, a Barclays' clerk felt that, while income was important, the influence of education was critical and an essential dividing line between classes:

For example, a self-made man who has no education – he had nothing but the ability to make money. He may be worried about getting into the next class who will have as much money to spend as he. He will find it very difficult but if he has the wit to give his son the education he didn't have, the boy will move up [...] Education is at the root of it – money must come in because it dictates what a person can do. But if all had equal

¹⁴⁰ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 028, Building Society Clerk, N & P

¹⁴¹ *Affluent worker Collection*, 509, Clerk Tool Planning, Laporte; 547, Distributor, SKF

¹⁴² *Affluent worker Collection*, 542, Documentation Clerk, Laporte

money, they still would not be in the same class – you only get into the same class when your education and interests are the same - when your cultural interests are the same.¹⁴³

For all these clerks, the Butler Education Act had created opportunities for them and more especially for their children. While there remained a huge gulf between the public-schools and the state sector, many felt that the state school offered the means for all classes to ‘get on’.

Conclusion

As we have seen, for both the Mass-Observation clerks in the years immediately before and after the war, and the clerks interviewed by Goldthorpe et al in the 1960s, education was absolutely fundamental to their social identities. Education, and particularly a grammar school education, was seen as a dividing line between the classes and an avenue for social mobility. As has been discussed, there were two educational pathways towards a clerical career. Grammar school prepared pupils for more prestigious clerical posts, for example in banking, insurance and the professions. The majority of pupils were from the middle classes but increasing numbers of scholarships in the years leading up to the war and the 1944 Butler Act, which made admission contingent on passing the 11 plus, widened their social make-up.

Grammar schools were seen as engines for upward social mobility as summed up by the Bristol insurance clerk in 1939 who attributed his mixing with people of a higher social class to winning a scholarship to secondary school.¹⁴⁴ While for some clerks, this was entirely positive, it also separated grammar school children from their backgrounds and families, for some, creating new identities like that described by one clerk as making him ‘the meat in a sandwich’, no longer fitting in with his family or able to join in the middle class lives of his colleagues in the city.¹⁴⁵ For others with middle class backgrounds, a grammar secondary school was the norm, as this bank clerk from Dorchester explained: ‘in our position, I must go to secondary school’.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 049, Chief Clerk, Barclays

¹⁴⁴ M.O.A. 1244, male, born 1907, Insurance Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

¹⁴⁵ M.O.A. 1394, male, born 1920, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

¹⁴⁶ M.O.A. 2065, born 1922, Bank Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

Post -1944, however, entry to grammar school depended upon academic ability. There could be no assumption that all middle-class children would be able to go to grammar school, something which accounted for the fears of the Cambridge clerks that their sons' lives would be ruined if they failed the 11 plus - they would be condemned to a secondary modern alongside working-class children or forced to pay for a private education. On the other hand, for those such as the Luton clerks, it held out the hope of grammar school education for their children and opportunities for university and professional posts as this SKF Distributor noted, 'the middle class is not static, with ambition and education, GCEs and professional qualifications, you can move up [...] it starts in school but continues in job if you work hard and study'.¹⁴⁷

Yet, even as opportunities for social mobility apparently improved, there was an understanding that class barriers remained through the public school system. In 1939, those clerks who (if they had had the funds) would have wished to send their children to a public school, considered the advantages in terms of the connections they would make and the social prestige they would acquire, after which they would be 'assured of a good position in the business world'.¹⁴⁸ In the 1960s, despite all the rhetoric about meritocracy, those from the public schools continued to be advantaged, something which this Laporte clerk felt was deeply unfair, his child would face an examination in the 'hope' that he would get to grammar school, a rich man could simply buy his son an education in a public school.¹⁴⁹

However, as the numbers going to grammar schools grew, there was a decline in the proportion of former grammar schoolboys moving into clerical posts and more entering the professions or going to university with a corresponding increase in the grammar schoolgirls in clerical jobs although not into professional posts.

However, the girls were clearly not about to have the same level of career as the boys, male school leavers were preferred for the professional posts while girls were directed to more routine positions with little prospect of advancement, as demonstrated in the Martins Bank 1963 recruitment booklets discussed above.

¹⁴⁷ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 507, Distributor, SKF

¹⁴⁸ M.O.A. 1154, male, born 1918, Accounts Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

¹⁴⁹ *Affluent worker Collection*, interview 539, Planning Maintenance Clerk, Laporte

While both genders were promised interesting work with good pay and pensions. The one aimed at males painted a picture of a long-term career with good prospects progressing from working as a cashier to the height of branch manager. By contrast, the leaflet for females – ‘the Girls’ - put cashier or branch secretary as the ultimate ambition together with a friendly atmosphere, sporting activities, dinners, dances and fun.¹⁵⁰

Over the same period, the numbers from elementary and secondary moderns, particularly the number of girls, obtaining clerical posts, continued to grow. In part this was due to increasing demand for clerks and especially for typists. These girls had higher skills than before the war due to the raising of the school leaving age, and the widespread introduction of commercial subjects such as typing, shorthand and bookkeeping in schools with many offering pupils the opportunity to stay on for an additional year to improve their speeds. Correspondingly the numbers of boys from these schools fell as the economy improved after the war with increasing numbers of well-paid, secure manual jobs.¹⁵¹

This shift, which saw more non-professional clerks drawn from wider educational backgrounds and together with the absence of widely recognised commercial qualifications (apart from shorthand and typing) and the increasing feminisation of the work force, altered perceptions of clerks. It appeared that anyone could be a clerk, the raising of educational standards for the majority had reduced the distinction previously enjoyed by the clerk and while the professional clerk had the benefit of skills and knowledge being recognised by professional bodies and employers, the general commercial clerk did not. It diminished their status – they were just clerks, just the routine office workforce, unproductive paper pushers.

Alongside education, both the Mass Observation clerks, and the clerks interviewed by Goldthorpe’s team considered their homes, neighbourhoods and lifestyles as fundamental to their social identities and the following chapter will explore these themes.

¹⁵⁰ Martins Recruitment brochures; www.martinsbank.co.uk For full leaflet, see appendix 3

¹⁵¹ See for example, P. Hennessy, *Having it so good – Britain in the Fifties* (London; Allen Lane, 2006); L. Black & H. Pemberton, (eds.), *An Affluent Society? Britain’s Gold Age Revisited* (Aldershot; Ashgate, 2004), p.191.

Chapter Four: Suburbia, Domesticity and Social Distinction: The Social Geography of the Lower-Middle Classes

Whether it be in Mr Pooter, Smeeth, Frank Gibbons or Bob Ferris, twentieth century fiction consistently depicted the home and domestic family life to be at the heart of the social identities of clerical workers.¹ This chapter examines the ways in which the home and neighbourhood shaped the social identities of groups of clerical workers through an exploration of the responses to Mass Observation directives in 1939 and 1948 and the interviews with Cambridge and Luton clerks in the early 1960s.

Mass Observation, as is well known, is an excellent source for exploring people's vernacular understandings of class and status.² While it is equally clear that individuals often had widely diverging concepts of the meaning of class and the factors which shaped social inequalities, for many, class had a distinctive spatial dimension. A number of office workers who responded to Mass Observation mapped-out a clear social geography. This civil servant gave the following explanation for her assertion that she was lower middle class:

I think that an English person is in one of four classes – a) royalty and aristocracy mainly through heredity.....b) higher middle class who have made good or whose ancestors have made good....they are the people who live in the best parts of all towns, who own more than one house, travel first class and send their children to public schools.....c) the lower middle class who are the ordinary suburban dwellers, mostly office workers who travel third class to their jobs. Their incomes may range from £1000 per year (those who are not snobbish enough to want to graduate to b) to £150 per year (junior clerks). The majority are probably in the £300s. They inhabit the second and third best places in the towns,

¹ Grossmith & Grossmith, *Diary of a Nobody*; Priestley, *Angel Pavement*; Coward, *This Happy Breed*; Clement & La Frenais, *The Likely Lads*

² M. Savage, 'Changing Social Class Identities in Post War Britain: Perspectives from Post-war Britain', *Sociological Research online*, 12.3 (2007); J. Hinton, 'The Class-Complex: Mass Observation and Cultural Distinction in Pre-War Britain', *Past and Present*, 199.1, (2008); J. Lawrence, 'Class, Affluence and the Study of Everyday Life in Britain: c.1930-1964' *Cultural and Social History*, 10.2 (2013)

the ones who can afford it in detached houses with an acre of garden, the others in rows of houses with little gardens back and front and trees planted in the avenue. Those in the £350s often run small cars. The average number of children is one per couple. d) the working class who are manual labourers, roadmenders, dustmen, ship builders, railway gangers etc. They inhabit the worse parts of towns, more often than not the slum quarter. Their incomes go down to the lowest (about 15 shillings per week) although some may be above those of many people in (c). They have the most children and the ones who suffer the most from malnutrition. These are the classes in England as I see it and I put myself, a junior civil servant, daughter of a retired country post-master and ex-secondary school girl in (c)³.

She neatly divided the whole of society apart from 'royalty and the aristocracy' by reference to their homes and the districts in which they lived, placing herself and other clerks as 'ordinary suburban dwellers', not in the best areas of the town but definitely apart from working class neighbourhoods and the slums. As Nick Hayes argues, the home is a key indicator of social identity bringing together objective criteria such as income and wealth with more subjective ideas around consumption and lifestyle.⁴ While occupation and thus income provide the context within which housing choices are made, consideration of the house, the neighbourhood, taste and lifestyle offers deeper insights into wider aspects of social identity. As was discussed in the preceding chapter on fictional representations, domesticity and privatised family life were seen to be fundamental to the clerical character and this chapter examines how these were reflected in reality, in the day-to-day experiences of clerks as revealed by Mass Observation and Goldthorpe et al. It explores the massive increase in house building, largely family houses on suburban estates, in both the interwar years and from the mid 1950s, together with the transformation in patterns of tenure away from private landlords towards owner-occupation and renting from local authorities. I consider how these fundamental shifts in housing provision

³ M.O.A. 1047, female, born 1915, Civil Servant, reply to DR June 1939

⁴ N. Hayes, 'Calculating class: Housing, lifestyle and status in the provincial English city, 1900-1959', *Urban History*, 36.1 (2009) and N. Hayes, *Nottingham Elites and Civil Society 1900-1950: Status, Engagement and Lifestyle* <http://nottingham-elites.org.uk/housing.php> accessed 20 March 2017

impacted upon clerical workers in terms of the range of housing choices open to them, their status, their family life, their standards of living as well as the social make-up of the neighbourhood and relationships with neighbours and kin. I begin however with a brief survey of the rather extensive literature on suburbanisation, with a particular focus on the lower-middle classes.

Literature Review

The historiography around housing provision in the mid-twentieth century is focused upon two dominant trends, mass suburbanisation and a tenurial revolution and, for the most part, concentrates either on the interwar or the post-war period. One exception is Burnett's broad-brush overview, *The Social History of Housing 1815-1985*, which provides a useful context through which to understand the chronology and extent of change as well as a salutary reminder that a house has a long life and those built in the nineteenth century were still an important part of the housing market throughout the period of study.⁵

Suburbanisation had its roots in the nineteenth century as the wealthy middle classes moved away from their factories and offices in the dirty, crowded town and city centres to set up new privatised family homes in the healthier, more attractive outskirts.⁶ Their example was followed by the less wealthy, including clerks as Jackson's work on London showed.⁷ He argued that improvements to public transport, such as the extension of the Northern line in 1907 to Golders Green and Archway, acted as a trigger for mass expansion of the suburbs - a 'speculators' suburbia' was unleashed with thousands of new houses which were affordable for office workers.⁸

⁵ J. Burnett, *A social History of Housing 1815-1985*, (London; Methuen, 1986)

⁶ See, for example, Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*; S. Muthesius, *The English Terraced House*, (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1982)

⁷ A. A. Jackson, *Semi-Detached London: Suburban Development, Life and Transport 1900-1939*, (London; George Allen and Unwin, 1973). From the 1880s tightly packed terraces of small houses appeared alongside the railway lines through Tottenham and Leyton, reaching places like Ilford by 1914.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.188-191. From mid 1930s, houses in price range £350-£550 required average mortgage repayments of 10s (50p) to 13s (65p) a week which demanded incomes of £3.10s (£3.50) to £4.10s (£4.50) per week – a local authority finance officer earned around £300 per annum, around £5.15s (£5.75) a week; a railway clerk around £234 - £4.10s (£4.50) a week

However, it was the interwar years that saw the greatest exodus to the suburbs, which, according to Clapson, were said to be 'full of clerks'.⁹ The single most comprehensive account of suburbanisation, tenurial change and the growing shift towards privatised family homes is Scott's *The Making of the Modern British Home: The Suburban Semi and Family Life between the Wars*.¹⁰ He traces the development of new suburban housing and changing life styles on both council and private estates between the wars during which nearly four million new houses were built, 1.1 million by local councils and 2.8 million on private estates. Most of the new builds, council and private, were designed for one family with a bathroom, electricity, hot and cold piped water, an indoor toilet and a garden. However, although in the 1920s, due to high rents, the council estates were tenanted by clerks and the skilled working classes, by the mid-1930s, their social character changed as tenancies were increasingly restricted to those rehoused under slum clearance programmes which resulted in a growing stigmatisation of council estates. Both Scott and Speight show that the huge expansion of private housing from the mid-1930s, mostly built for sale to owner-occupiers, was driven by demand from clerks and artisans as house prices fell and mortgages become more accessible.¹¹ This was accompanied by a sharp decline in the private rented sector, from an estimated 76 per cent of all households in 1918 to 58 per cent in 1938.¹²

For the post 1945 period, studies by, for example, Hennessey and Short focus upon efforts to deal with the severe housing shortages; firstly by the Labour Government, mainly through council housing and then by the Conservatives who promised to build 300,000 new houses per year and revive the private sector and

⁹ Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs*, p.8

¹⁰ P. Scott, *The Making of the Modern British Home: The Suburban Semi and Family Life between the Wars*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2013); See also G. Speight, 'Who Bought the Inter-War Semi? The Socio-Economic Characteristics of New House Buyers in the 1930s', *University of Oxford Discussion Paper in Economic and Social History*, 38 (2000); A. Crisp, *The Working-Class Owner-Occupied House of the 1930s*, M.Litt. thesis, University of Oxford (1998)

¹¹ P. Scott, 'Marketing home ownership and the creation of the modern working-class consumer in inter-war Britain', *Business History* 50.1 (2008); Speight, 'Who Bought the Inter-war Semi?'

¹² C. Pooley, 'Patterns on the Ground' in M. Daunton, (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Vol.III 1840-1950*, (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2000) p.446; M. Daunton, *Property Owning Democracy: Housing in Britain*, (London; Faber & Faber, 1987) p.77. Over 1 million private rented properties were sold to sitting tenants between 1914 and 1939 and over 340,000 private rented homes were demolished.

owner-occupation.¹³ After 1951 Conservative election victory, standards for council houses were reduced, more flats were built, and slum clearance prioritised. Council housing, again, became a residual service for those without the means to obtain suitable housing in the private sector, a factor which re-enforced the stigmatisation of council estates.¹⁴ Weiler summarises the other half of the Tory promise, the revival of the private sector, both for older houses and to encourage new housing. Restrictions on private sector building were abandoned, planning controls relaxed, grants were introduced for repairs and improvements such as installing bathrooms or inside toilets and fiscal incentives provided to mortgage holders, building societies and developers.¹⁵ The results, as Cornforth and Short demonstrate, were massive increases in the number of houses available for owner-occupation, a trend which continued under the 1964 Labour government.¹⁶

However, apart from the work of Scott, these studies deal with the supply of housing and the nature of tenure. There are other aspects around housing which critically impact upon ideas of identity such as the importance of a privatised lifestyle, relationships with neighbours as well as the day-to-day practices, for example, where the family eat or the division of household chores and patterns of consumption. Literature on how the house was used is limited, examples include *The Place of Home: English Domestic Environments 1914-2000* and *Dunroamin: The Suburban Semi and its Enemies* which highlight the ways in which their design facilitated privatised life styles, for example the hall as a semi-public space was visible to callers but was also a barrier to accessing private family spaces.¹⁷ They also explore the ways adornments such as bays, mock Tudor timbering, large picture windows and garages were used as symbols of distinction, a clear visible declaration of status and owner-occupation. Similarly, the different layouts of council and private estates

¹³ H. Jones, 'This is Magnificent: 300,000 houses a year and the Tory Revival after 1945', *Contemporary British History* 14.1 (2000)

¹⁴ P. Shapely, 'Social Housing and Tenant Participation; History and Policy' (2008) www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers accessed April 2017

¹⁵ P. Weiler, 'The Rise and Fall of the Conservatives' "Grand design for housing", 1951-1964', *Contemporary British History*, 14.1 (2000)

¹⁶ A. J. Cornforth, *The Market for Owned Houses in England and Wales since 1945*, (Farnborough; Saxon House, 1979); Short, *Housing in Britain*, p.54.

¹⁷ A. Ravetz & R. Turkington, *The Place of Home: English Domestic Environments 1914-2000*, (London; Routledge, 1995); P. Oliver, I. Davis and I. Bentley, *Dunroamin: The Suburban Semi and its Enemies*, (London; Barrie Jenkins, 1981)

were seen as a sign of distinction with wider roads edged with trees, greater distances between houses, larger gardens and curved 'closes' and 'avenues', in contrast to the straight uniformity of many council estates. Moreover, it was not only the house and its location that was seen as a signifier of status and identity, material possessions such as furniture, the new consumer durables, such as vacuum cleaners or radio in the pre-war era or fridges and washing machines in the early 1960s, were also key symbols of identity as was taste in furniture or decoration as per Bourdieu's theory of distinction.¹⁸

Studies such as that of Langhamer into 'The Meaning of Home in Postwar Britain' throw light on how people valued their home and their daily experiences of home and neighbourhood.¹⁹ She challenges the idea, proffered by contemporary commentators such as Adams, Zweig and Willmott and Young, that it was not until the 1950s that a privatised home life spread beyond the established middle classes, arguing that it had its roots in the 1930s in the widespread exodus to the suburbs. Others such as Giles, Crow, Francis, and Devine explore how the move towards home centred lifestyles altered gendered roles within the home with men taking on more domestic tasks and spending more of their leisure time with the home and family.²⁰

The question of how the privatised lifestyles in the suburbs impacted upon relationships with neighbours has also been explored. However, most of the academic studies on suburban life such as Durant on the Watling Estate in 1940, Young and Willmott's on Bethnal Green in 1957 and Mogey's on Oxford in 1958 focus upon the working classes and paint life on the new estates as lonely, individualised and materialistic in contrast to the socially homogeneous, cohesive

¹⁸ D. E. Allen and P. F. Anderson, 'Consumption and Social Stratification: Bourdieu's Distinction' in C. T. Allen and D. Roedder, (eds.), *Advances in Consumer Research*, Volume 21 (1994) p.70-74. Bourdieu argues that taste was social conditioned based on cultural and economic capital, and it would be possible to identify social status and identity through taste decisions.

¹⁹ C. Langhamer, 'The Meanings of Home in Post War Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History* 40.2 (2005)

²⁰ J. Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life in Britain 1900-1950*, (London; Macmillan, 1995), G. Crow, 'The Post War Development of the Modern Domestic Ideal', in G. Allan & G. Crow, (eds.) *Home and Family: Creating the Domestic Sphere*, (London; Macmillan, 1989) Chapter 2; M. Francis, 'The Domestication of the Male? Recent research on nineteenth and twentieth century British Masculinity', *Historical Journal* 45.3 (2002), F. Devine, 'Privatised Families and their Homes, in Allan and Crow, *Home and Family*, Chapter 4

and mutually supporting traditional working class neighbourhoods with their strong kin and friendship networks.²¹ More recent research by Jones, Ramsden and Rogaly and Taylor on Brighton, Beverley and Norwich respectively has qualified these conclusions demonstrating continuities between the older neighbourhoods and new estates as social networks and neighbourly relationships were formed and matured over time arguing that the fundamental criteria by which people were judged, on both private and council estates, was based upon respectability where people lived quiet lives in clean and tidy houses, where gardens were tended and children decently dressed and not rowdy.²²

The aim of the rest of this chapter is to examine how these changes; suburbanisation, the shift towards owner-occupation, better quality housing and privatised styles of living impacted on the social identities of two groups of clerical workers, those responding to Mass Observation in the 1930s and 1940s and those interviewed by Goldthorpe's team in the early 1960s. Were their ideas about their homes different? How did their style of living change and did this make them think differently about their identities? I begin the following section by analysing the rich material on domesticity and social identity elicited by Mass Observation in the late 1930s.

The Home, Identity and Social Geography

Although the clerks responding to the 1939 Directive on class were not asked directly about their homes, many, (such as the civil servant quoted at the beginning of the chapter), saw their home and its location as a fundamental part of their social identities. As a shorthand typist from Leeds wrote:

I belong to the middle class, we have an average income, an average house, accent, clothes and have had average education. I do not know

²¹ A. Olechnowicz, *Working Class Housing in England between the Wars: Becontree Estate*, (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1997); M. Young and P. Willmott, *Family and Kinship in a London Suburb*, (London; Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957); J. M. Mogey, *Family and Neighbourhood: Two Studies in Oxford*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1958); Crowe, 'The Post war development' in Allan and Crowe, *Home and Family*.

²² B. Jones, *The Working Class in mid-twentieth century England: Community, Identity and Social Memory*, (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 2012); S. Ramsden, 'Remaking Working Class Community: Sociability, Belonging and Affluence in a small town 1930-1980', *Contemporary British History* 29.1 (2015); B. Rogaly and B. Taylor, *Moving histories of Class and Community: Identity, Place and Belonging in Contemporary England*, (Basingstoke; Palgrave MacMillan, 2011)

how to define class but feel it is mainly a question of income [...] depending upon the way in which people live, the type of house and especially the neighbourhood in which they live; the quality and neatness of their clothes; their furniture; their refinement of manner and speech. I should put the middle class as earning between £350 and £1000.²³

In a similar vein, a typist from Croydon described herself as ‘Exact middle class. Depends not so much on income but the style in which you live – the house, clothes, food etc.’²⁴ For these typists, as with hundreds and thousands of Britain’s lower-middle classes; suburbia offered an opportunity for the expression of social identity. By the 1930s, with slum clearance programmes suburbanizing the urban poor, it was the owner-occupied suburbs that became a key marker of middle-class identity, as a resident of Stoneleigh, a London suburb remarked of the new-comers, ‘they were middle class sort of people – office workers and all that sort of thing’.²⁵

As Scott and others demonstrated, it was in the interwar period that these ‘ordinary’ and ‘average’ people were able to move into the suburban house. Precisely who was included in the description ‘ordinary’ was not clear. As Langhamer and others have argued, the term ‘ordinary’ was ambiguous with differing meanings according to context. To be ordinary did not fit neatly with social class, ordinary people came from a ‘broad church of different class backgrounds’, but in this context, it was used to distinguish those moving onto the new estates from both the elite middle and professional classes and the problematic poor lower working classes.²⁶ It described those who were aspiring, respectable, decent and self-reliant who wanted a better standard of living and a privatised family life.

The 1920s and 1930s saw a housing revolution, in location, in design and in type of tenure. These new suburban houses, both council and private, were single family houses, mainly semis or short terraces with front and rear gardens, two rooms downstairs and a separate kitchen, at least two bedrooms, a bathroom and an inside

²³ M.O.A. 1552, female born 1915, Shorthand typist, reply to DR June 1939

²⁴ M.O.A. 2036, female born 1920, Typist reply to DR June 1939

²⁵ S. Gunn & R. Bell, *Middle Classes: Their Rise and Sprawl*, (London; Cassell, 2002), p.58-59

²⁶ C. Langhamer, ‘Who the Hell are Ordinary People? Ordinariness as a category of historical analysis’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28 (2018); M Savage, ‘Working Class Identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study’, *Sociology* 39.5 (2005)

toilet.²⁷ They were also wired for electricity and most had piped hot water. However, council and private estates were very different, not only in terms of layout and the look of the houses but also as regards the class, social status and outlook of their occupants.

In the 1920s when the council estates were first built, rents were high and many estates were initially tenanted by clerks and skilled workers with relatively secure jobs.²⁸ However, after 1933, the character of council estates changed, not only were the houses of poorer quality, smaller and closer together, tenants were mainly drawn from those rehoused as a result of slum clearance programmes. The 'rough' from the slums were seen as a threat, which according to Scott, triggered a wave of migration to private estates.²⁹ The council estates were no longer seen as respectable and those with more secure, regular incomes, in particular, the self-reliant, aspiring clerks as well as some manual workers in secure jobs, opted for the private suburban estates. For clerks as a group, affluent manual workers seemed less concerned, council housing became something they sought to avoid, and the private estates came to be seen as clerical enclaves.³⁰

Council tenants were snubbed and branded. One Mass Observation respondent recalled the stigma she experienced growing up on a council estate:

My father learnt a trade (saddlery) and migrated to London (from Somerset) and became a member of the working class. Now lives on the L.C.C Dagenham housing estate. I had a secondary education, was employed in local government and married a local government officer [...] I have been completely 'cut' by two friends when they discovered that I had lived on a Council estate. I always found it disastrous to mention

²⁷ Burnett, *A Social History of Housing*, p.242; C. M. H. Carr & J. W. R. Whitehand, *Twentieth Century Suburbs: A Morphological Approach*, (London; Routledge, 2001) p.6

²⁸ Scott, *The Making of the Modern British Home*, p.62. A report to Bristol Housing Committee in 1931 revealed that tenants were paying an average rent of 11s 6d a week compared to 8s. 3d in their previous accommodation; M. McKenna, 'The Suburbanisation of the Working-Class Population of Liverpool between the Wars', *Social History*, 16.2 (1991), 41 per cent of tenants on Liverpool council estates in 1929s were non-manual workers with average income of around £1 a week more than the average working class family; B. Jones, 'Slum Clearance, Privatization and Residualisation: The Practices and Policies for Council Housing in mid-twentieth century England', *Twentieth Century British History* 21.4 (2010), a 1939 report on Moulscombe (a Brighton Council Estate) and memoirs of former tenants revealed local government officers, civil servants and teachers as council tenants

²⁹ Scott, *The Making of the Modern British Home*, p.62 & 65

³⁰ Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs*, p.8

where I lived and all my friends living on similar estates have had the same experience.³¹

Even after the War, when there were severe housing shortages and the Labour government were focusing their reconstruction efforts on council housing, the stigma remained. This local government officer declared his lower middle-class status precisely because he was not a council tenant nor did he engage in activities associated with the working class:

I am lower middle class. Because I work with my brain and not with my hands, do not live in a slum, a semi-slum or a council house and spend most of my spare time in reading and thinking rather than watching football matches or dog racing, playing darts or cultivating the allotment.³²

In addition, every effort was made by developers to distinguish the private estates from the council. Lay outs were different, instead of straight rows of semis or small terraces comprising identical houses, the private developer opted for variety, with, for example, a mix of styles, some with bay windows or timber gables, different styles of porches or leaded windows set on curved avenues lined with trees. As Sir Leslie Scott, planning barrister noted in 1936, 'the demand for the kinds of house which is bought [...] because its exterior is so different from the decent exterior of the council house that the casual observer must see at a glance that it is **not** a council house'.³³ In the same vein, Gordon Allen, the Managing Director of the major housebuilder, Wimpey, wrote in 1934, 'safe to say that he [the purchaser] desires his home to look different from his neighbour's and above all, unlike the municipal house, owing to his sense of social dignity'.³⁴

Council house tenancy was very clearly not a positive identity for the Mass Observation respondents whose aspirations were for something better. As a middle-aged civil servant wrote, 'I would not have considered a house in a noisy locality or one with drab surrounding or dingy terraces' while a Surrey housewife

³¹ M.O.A. 1408, female, Housewife and former Local Government Officer, reply to DR June 1939. LCC stands for London County Council

³² M.O.A.3868, male, Local Government Officer, reply to DR September 1948

³³ I. Bentley, 'Individualism or Community: Private Enterprise Housing and the Council Estates' in P. Oliver. I. Davis & I. Bentley, *Dunroamin*, p.120. His emphasis.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.121

firmly approved of the fact that her district 'had the general air of being select and nothing much in the way of slums'.³⁵ The following section considers the reasons why so many clerks made a move to the suburbs in the 1930s, what were the attractions, how did they afford to purchase their own homes?

Owner Occupation, Neighbourhood and Social Distinction

The quest for higher standards of living, for private family houses with a bathroom, hot water, an inside toilet, electricity and gardens was driving the demand for new houses on suburban estates as a clerk from Hull debating whether he should move explained:

When we were first married, my wife and I lived with relations until we could find a suitable house. Where we live now was the first available one that fulfilled most of our requirements. The house is convenient for my place of business, being only about 15 minutes walking distance away. It is roomy without being too large, is in good condition and the landlord keeps it so. The rent is reasonable, the neighbours are sociable, and the district is fairly select. We have considered removing; we would like a bathroom, our present hasn't one; more space at the back would be desirable in which our boy could play and a house in the suburbs would be preferable to ours in the centre of town. But the reason for staying is that we feel disinclined to pay more rent, even if we were able, and buying a house is, of course, out of the question.³⁶

Yet, if this clerk could not afford more rent or to buy a home in the suburbs, thousands of others could. The supply of new suburban houses soared and the building costs for an three bed non-parlour semi fell substantially by nearly 30 per cent, from around £510 to £360, between 1925 and 1934.³⁷ Building societies relaxed their lending conditions, extended the standard term from twenty years to twenty-five or even thirty and reduced the minimum deposit requirements from 25 per cent to 10 per cent and in some cases through special arrangements with

³⁵ M.O.A. 1365, male born 1896 Civil Servant reply to DR June 1939; 1026, female born 1908, former Secretary, reply to DR June 1939

³⁶ M.O.A. 2074, male, born 1901, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

³⁷ P Scott, 'Marketing Mass Home Ownership and the Creation of the Modern Working-Class Consumer in Inter-war Britain', *Business History*, 50.1 (2008)

builders, to as little as 5 per cent. At the same time, the Bank of England interest rates fell to two per cent for most of the 1930s.³⁸ The cost of an average mortgage fell by nearly a third to around 12s a week excluding rates with only £25-£30 deposit required.³⁹ This compared with the average council rent in Manchester of between 13s and 15s.⁴⁰ Taking the rough rule of thumb applied by building societies that mortgage repayments should not exceed a quarter of the chief wage earner's income, the average semi costing between £400-£500 was affordable to those with incomes around £3.10s (£3.50) to £4 a week or £180 to £200 per annum at a time when the average pay for a clerical officer in the civil service was around £260 and a railway clerk £220.⁴¹ These changes opened new doors to home ownership, especially for those such as salaried clerks, public sector manual workers or skilled manual workers in the new industries such as vehicle manufacturing or chemicals who were in relatively secure employment. Harold Bellman, Chairman of Abbey Road Building Society said 'of those who made this boom possible, I should judge that about half the purchasers were black-coated workers and the other half better paid artisans'.⁴² While Massey in a 1939 survey into middle class expenditure estimated that around 65% of lower middle class respondents owned or were buying their own house.⁴³ A judgement backed up by a brief analysis of the occupations of residents taken from the 1939 Register in a small estate in Manchester, (the estate to which we moved in 1963) which showed around 85 per cent of the 95 houses were occupied either by clerks or skilled workers with clerical workers the largest single group.⁴⁴

³⁸ P. Scott & L. Newton, 'Advertising, Promotion and the Rise of a National Building Society Movement', *Business History*, 54.3 (2012); Crisp, 'The Working-Class Owner-Occupied House', Chapter 1; Speight, 'Who Bought the Inter-war Semi?' Interest rates fell from 5 per cent in February 1932 to 2 per cent where they remained until August 1939

³⁹ Speight, 'Who Bought the Inter-war Semi?'

⁴⁰ Burnett, *The Social History of Housing*, p.238

⁴¹ Routh, *Occupation and Pay*, p.90; Jackson, *The Middle Classes*, p.337

⁴² Crisp, 'The Working-Class Owner-Occupied House', Chapter 4

⁴³ P. Massey, 'The Expenditure of 1360 British Middleclass Households in 1938-39', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 105.3 (1942), p.159-196. He designated civil servants, local government officers and teachers as lower middle class.

⁴⁴ 1939 Register: Kenmere Grove, Enville Road, Croft Hill Road, Tyndale Avenue and Horncastle Road, Moston, Manchester. Data collected by enumerators for the preparation of identity cards shows that of the 95 semis. Built between 1936 and 1938 on these streets, around 10 per cent of occupants could be considered from the established middle classes, for example, a factory manager, accountants, a housing manager and less than 5 per cent unskilled or semi-skilled workers, the

However, while purchasing a new home may have been affordable, it was, for many, a step in the dark, a break with traditional practice. Thus, encouragement and reassurance were required. Borrowing ran counter to the traditional values of clerical workers; ideas around respectability, not getting into debt and paying your own way. Extensive building society advertising sought to alleviate these worries; their messages drew on images of aspiration, of respectability and the opportunity for a privatised family life. They painted a home and mortgage, not as a burden, a debt to be repaid, but as an investment for the future, something which would appreciate in value, a protection in old age and a nest egg for children.⁴⁵ While the advertisements naturally stressed the superiority of the new houses in terms of gardens, bathrooms, hot water, electricity and other amenities, they also sought to portray the new estates as cleaner and healthier, a better place to bring up children, and more particularly, as 'select' appealing to lower middle class sensibilities and concern to maintain their status and distance from the lower working classes. As one advertisement from New Ideal Homesteads proclaimed 'every house will be semi-detached, so a feeling of spaciousness will pervade the whole Estate. This will keep the property **select** and value will tend to increase as the years roll by so that every purchaser may be sure of a good investment for his money'.⁴⁶

The Mass Observers were not asked whether they were owner-occupiers although it is clear from their responses that many were. They were, however, questioned about the neighbourhoods in which they lived and how they felt about them and their neighbours. Their responses show, not only were the majority living in the suburbs but also the importance of these suburbs to their sense of respectability, aspiration and thus social identities. This clerk in a Friendly Society had thought carefully about both his choice of neighbourhood and what separated him from his neighbours:

remainder were a mix of railway workers, printers, police with the largest group clerks.
www.findmypast.co.uk/1939register accessed February 2018

⁴⁵Scott and Newton, 'Advertising, Promotion and the Rise of a National Building Society Movement', *Business History*, 54, 3 (2012)

⁴⁶ Scott, *The Making of the Modern British Home*, Chapter 5, Marketing Owner Occupation to the Masses. Original emphasis.

When I was married I wished to buy a house of a modern type. I therefore looked round to see what was the best district in which to build, within the limits of my purse. I eventually chose the neighbourhood, where we live, because at that time, it was a quiet country lane. I also noticed the back of our house adjoining the permanent showground and would therefore never be built on. [...] I also wanted to be fairly near the office, but not too near. Actually our house is one and a half miles from the office, which is not considered too far when using a cycle.

I consider myself different from my neighbours in a number of ways. [...] I think I can state without any snobbery at all that the chief difference is an intellectual one [...] I take an interest in the arts and social matters; they do not. I carve masks to hang on the wall and paint mural pictures; they decorate their homes with cheap vases etc. Most of our neighbours seem to aim for 'show' and 'effect' while I shrink from display and try to show good taste in furnishings, clothes etc.⁴⁷

As we can see, this Peterborough clerk exhibited many of the characteristics which confirmed his self-ascribed status as lower middle class. He was an owner-occupier living in a 'quiet' suburb, keen to point out that the land behind his house cannot be built upon, presumably so that it will retain its open views and that there would be no danger of building new estates with unacceptable neighbours. He was also at pains to accentuate his own respectable way of living and above all, his intellectual and cultural superiority.

A Leeds secretary wrote:

We live in our district because 1) it is a superior district and here we are among our own class 2) we could afford this house 3) it is well away from the dirtier parts of the town, the air is bracing and comparatively clean 4) we moved from our previous house because the district and property values were going down enormously because it began to be a Jewish quarter.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ M.O.A. 1151, male, born 1910, Clerk in Friendly Society, reply to DR June 1939

⁴⁸ M.O.A. 1552, female, born 1915, Secretary, reply to DR June 1939

Again, this woman emphasised her social superiority in being part of a middle-class neighbourhood, as well as highlighting the family's wealth and their need to separate themselves from those she considered inferior outsiders, the working class in the dirty parts of town and the Jews. A salutary reminder that through Mass Observation, the pervasive antisemitism within British society often became manifest in directive replies and diaries.⁴⁹ The idea of living in a 'select' or 'good' neighbourhood was a common refrain among those describing themselves as middle or lower middle class even for those living with parents who had had no say in where they lived or who lived in 'digs':

As my parents moved into the house in which we are living about 15 years ago, I did not have much choice in the matter [...] the house is in a good neighbourhood and in a very healthy position commanding fine views of the town and country.⁵⁰

While a buyer who was working away from home ensured that 'the district in which I live is good class and residential. The people are of good middle class and therefore I am living among the class to which I belong'.⁵¹ He was not unusual, most, but not all, of the clerks agreed that they were not very different from their neighbours although several, like the Peterborough clerk quoted above, identified interests in culture matters as a sign of distinction within their class. A Liverpool accounts clerk felt his neighbours were 'much the same although I am more intellectual and interested in literature' while a civil servant from Ealing claimed that only difference was that her family 'don't bother what they think of us, perhaps we have more education and that most of them were dull and conservative'.⁵²

However, while the house and district in which a person lived was an important reflection of, and contribution to their social identity, for some, as for example, this Welsh clerk from Newport who 'had the misfortune to be of a different class than my parents because we lost money and came down in the world', family background,

⁴⁹ See Tony Kushner, *Antisemitism in Second World War Britain: The Persistence of Prejudice*, (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 1989)

⁵⁰ M.O.A 1450, male, born 1911, Railway Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁵¹ M.O.A. 1216, male, born 1907, Buyer, reply to DR June 1939

⁵² M.O.A. 1279, male, born 1891, Accounts Clerk reply to DR June 1939; 1541, female, born 1912, Civil Servant, reply to DR June 1939

culture and a non-manual occupation were equally important and these gave him a social advantage over his working class neighbours:

I wanted to own my own house, and I was able to take this one fairly easily. It is a detached house [...] and is in a good residential district. I am poor. When we came to this house, I was earning about £2 a week, even now I only earn about £3 a week plus certain bonuses. Repayment to the Building Society, rates etc. work out to about £1. 3s.0d. (£1.15) Most of the people living here are young married couples. They have modern furniture, all the latest labour-saving devices, we have to make the best of the furniture Mother had when she got married thirty years ago. All the same, I feel 'one up' socially over most people living near, one immediate neighbour is a railway guard, he is a good fellow and has made a lot of money but there are no pretensions of any 'class' about him. When our friends moved (lived next door), they sold their house to a young married couple, he is a shoe-repairer with his own business – but in the town he would be ranked below Mr H., the Chemist's son (himself). Very few of the people around here keep a maid: until very recently, we always had at least one.⁵³

However, not all the Mass Observation clerks lived in the suburbs or in good districts, some, for the most part young single people, the children of manual workers who had had a secondary education still lived with their working-class families although most had aspirations to move away. Typical was this young Lancashire clerk, the son of factory workers, who saw himself as middle class, 'I live where I do because my family moved here before I had any say. I want to get out – its noisy and the houses are mere boxes'.⁵⁴ Another young clerk living with his working-class parents in Tottenham was also seeking to move but his reasons were based not on the home but on the character of the neighbourhood and neighbours who did not behave in a respectable manner, gossiping and swearing, both considered lower class habits:

⁵³ M.O.A. 1122, male, born 1913, Cost Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁵⁴ M.O.A. 1266, male, born 1914, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

The district I live in is not entirely of my own choice, [although] living at home with my parents since a small boy I have naturally many interests in the locality. I expect one day to get married and then there may be even stronger motives for wishing to change the district. I am different [from neighbours] in this thing – I should not stand at gates or hold conversations over the garden wall which are entirely mindless – swear at other members of the household at the top of my voice for all and sundry to hear – hang clothes on the line on Sundays and light bonfires when others have clothes on the line, annoy others by having the radio blaring at full volume at all hours of the day and night.⁵⁵

While a third, who lived in Clapham with his parents, was ‘anxious to move to where there is a bathroom and electricity and yes, to a better neighbourhood’.⁵⁶ For these clerks, their education and their work in offices had shifted them away from their families making them no longer at home or comfortable in the neighbourhoods in which they had grown up. They aspired to something better.

Everyday life, Domesticity and Social Distinction

However, social identity was not just conferred by the house and its location, it was also shaped by *how* people lived: their possessions and their daily habits. While few of the Mass Observation clerks go into any great detail, simply referring to good taste, comforts, their clean and tidy homes or their refinement, one can still get a strong sense of clerical domesticity, especially in terms of social distinction.⁵⁷ As the Peterborough clerk, quoted above, declared:

We have a nice house [...] are always clean and tidy. [...] I always like my surroundings – house, garden, office – to be as neat and tidy as possible. I notice my neighbours are not too particular in this respect, they allow old ‘junk’ to accumulate in their gardens and their homes are not as clean and tidy as one would expect from their pretensions.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ M.O.A. 1140, born 1916, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁵⁶ M.O.A. 2141, born 1913, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁵⁷ See for example, M.O.A., 1325, male, born 1908, Bank Clerk; 1450, male, born 1911, Railway Clerk; 1494, female, born 1919, Civil Servant, replies to DR June 1939

⁵⁸ M.O.A. 1151, male, born 1910, Clerk in Friendly Society, reply to DR June 1939

While this junior bank clerk, still living with his parents, suggested that the family's lower middle-class assignment was due to their average, unshowy habits:

I think I belong to the lower middle class. This is probably a question of my father's income but as I don't know precisely what his salary is, obviously the impression must have arisen in my mind for other reasons. I think the chief is 'habits'. If we go to entertainments, we sit neither in the best nor the cheapest seats because we feel to pay more would be unnecessary and to pay less would be unpleasant. We have a car but it is a 'Ten'. We have plenty of friends, but they are the sort who call casually or are brought home to tea. I think formality in entertaining is the sign that you have gone up from the lower middle to the higher. My mother does not have a maid and she does quite a lot of her own washing. My father attends to the garden and cleans the car himself. These aspects of domestic life are revealing, I think and form quite a decided idea of social position in the mind.⁵⁹

An Altrincham secretary, in 1948, based her belief on a similar premise – her way of life was neither working nor upper class: 'we do not live in the kitchen or lunch off bought fish and chips – working-class habits. We do not live luxuriously or entertain a great deal - upper middle-class habits'.⁶⁰

The ideal of the privatised home was very important forming a key part of social identity, a place where you could be in control and independent, a place of separation from the office and its rules, as a Sheffield accounts clerk's response to the question of what home meant to him revealed:

Home is a place where one can enjoy the freedom of individualism and not be subject to the restrictions of business. It is a place where one lives more fully and freely than anywhere else, where one finds scope for self-expression and above all else where one receives sympathy and understanding.⁶¹

⁵⁹ M.O.A. 1210, male, born 1917, Bank Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁶⁰ M.O.A. 2899, female, born 1915, Secretary, reply to DR September 1948

⁶¹ M.O.A. 2539, male, born 1895, Accounts Clerk, reply to DR October 1942

Or in the words of another clerk, 'at home you can do what you like, go where you like, there is an entire freedom'.⁶² Or more simply, 'home, it is the place you belong'.⁶³ Moreover, it was also the place where women carried the main responsibility for day to day care, regardless of class, although the housewife in the new suburbs with piped hot water, electricity, bathroom and inside toilet probably had a lighter burden.⁶⁴ Both the marriage-bar and cultural norms kept married women, particular those from the middle classes, away from the workplace; according to Hall, around 90 per cent of all married women remained in the home.⁶⁵ A cashier-accountant from Huddersfield saw the fact that 'my wife wouldn't dream of going out to work' as a matter of pride in his ability to keep her and a sign of his lower-middle class identity.⁶⁶

While the male-breadwinner model of domestic life remained unchallenged, there was a greater emphasis on companionship in marriage and on the respective roles of men and women within the home.⁶⁷ Alison Light labelled the interwar years as a period during which the male turned towards domesticity portraying 'the little man – content with garden, home and domestic life' as the symbol of national character and in fiction, as was discussed in chapter 1, domesticity was considered one of the primary attributes of the clerk.⁶⁸ In March 1948, as many women returned to the home and domestic duties after the war, Mass Observers were asked about men helping with domestic tasks and most agreed that they should help although within limits.

I feel I should do domestic jobs at home. I don't particularly like domestic work but there are plenty of dull jobs to be done and if a man has time, I don't see why he should expect his wife to do them all. A home is a joint

⁶² M.O.A. 1216, male born 1922, Bank Clerk, reply to DR October 1942

⁶³ M.O.A. 2675, male born 1913, Clerk, reply to DR October 1942

⁶⁴ A. Bingham, 'An Era of domesticity', *Histories of Women and Gender in Interwar Britain*, *Cultural and Social History*, 1.2 (2004)

⁶⁵ C. Hall, 'Married Women at Home in Birmingham in the 1920s and 1930s', *Oral History* 5.2 (1977)

⁶⁶ M.O.A. 3844, male, born 1904, Cashier-accountant, reply to DR September 1948

⁶⁷ J. Lewis, 'Marriage' in I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, (ed.), *Women in Twentieth Century Britain*, (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2014), p.79

⁶⁸ Light, *Forever England* p.6-11; see also Grossmith & Grossmith, *Diary of a Nobody*; Bennett, *London Clerk*; Coward *This Happy Breed*; Tilsley, *I'd Do It Again*

responsibility, and I don't see why a man should sit still while his wife is doing the washing up.⁶⁹

While these clerks felt they should but only if the wife agreed:

It all depends on the domestic circumstances. If a woman gets assistance from a char or daily help, she can probably get along or if she had no children [...] in my own case, we occupy a whole house on our own and get no outside help. My wife likes housework. I am afraid I do not help as much as I should but do the washing up with her, fetch coal for the fire and occasionally chop wood. I certainly think a husband should give what help he can. My wife is not in favour of men doing domestic jobs. That is the way she was brought up.⁷⁰

A 31-year-old from Tottenham also felt some responsibility but not as an equal partner, with the household being part of a woman's domain:

As a man, I do think that men should take an active part in the domestic jobs in the house [...] always providing that such help is initially agreed on, sometimes women prefer for men to take no part and consider it interference in their domain. Personally, I feel that there are certain tasks for which men should take responsibility and I include cleaning the chimney and the grate, disposing of ashes, fetching and carrying fuel, laying and lighting fires and chopping wood [...] I take the view that my own job consists of 5 days whereas as her tasks are performed 7 days a week. Anything done at home is for our mutual advantage and the quicker these tasks are disposed of the sooner and longer time we can spend together.⁷¹

In contrast, this bank clerk was more reluctant, he went out to work, his wife maintained the house and any help was with the heavier, more masculine tasks or as a favour, although the situation would be different if she was employed:

I think a man should help with the heavier chores like fetching coal, lighting fires and probably shoe cleaning but generally I am not very keen

⁶⁹ M.O.A. 3811, male, born 1900, Civil Servant, reply to DR March 1948

⁷⁰ M.O.A. 4008, male born 1903, Railway Clerk, reply to DR March 1948

⁷¹ M.O.A. 1140, male, born 1916, Buyer, reply to DR March 1948

on domestic chores – after all, one rarely hears of a wife going down to the office to help her husband [...] provided one's wife is well and strong I cannot quite see why a man should be expected to share all the work when he is at home, help with the washing up when they are going out maybe. I have several friends whose wives go out to work and, of course, they share the domestic chores.⁷²

For the clerical worker, domesticity, as revealed in the responses of the Mass Observers, appeared to be focused upon providing a home, one which reflected his social standing, of good quality with all amenities to allow him and his family to live in some comfort while his domestic role within the house itself was negotiable and related more to the heavier traditionally masculine tasks. Notably none of the clerical workers included in the sample discussed involvement in childcare. However, while these clerks had a home, there were many who, after being demobbed, found themselves unable to find a suitable home and the following section considers how the Mass Observation clerks faced the problem.

Housing Crisis: Finding a Home, 1945-1954

After the war, most clerks simply returned to their homes in the suburbs but, for those young clerks setting up homes after marriage or those moving to new districts, the housing situation was grim. It was estimated that over two million new homes were required. With a government focus upon council house building and severe shortages of labour and materials, few new houses for sale were built and the prices of existing houses soared. It was almost impossible to find a home as this Macclesfield clerk claimed:

I have been trying to obtain a suitable house for the past year, naturally without result. Houses come on to the market but realise three times their pre-war price [...] Houses for letting are practically non-existent although one might be able to get rooms in the older part of town.⁷³

A clerk's letter to the *Picture Post* in July 1945 expressed the sense of desperation and the overwhelming importance to identity of a home:

⁷² M.O.A. 1325, male, born 1908, Bank Clerk, reply to DR March 1948

⁷³ M.O.A. 2512, male, born 1910, Clerk, reply to DR November 1945

For the past six months I have been trying to find a house, a flat, anything where we could live. But nothing doing [...] our name on a never never council list, an offer of a furnished flat at 4 guineas a week or a house, bomb damaged at £1500. All this out of my wages, £6 per week as a clerk, before deductions [...] I have decided with my fiancée that after having been engaged for three years, we are going to keep on being engaged until we get somewhere to live. We don't want to live with her parents or mine [...] and we aren't going to bring up our children living in furnished rooms.⁷⁴

My own parents faced a similar problem. They married in 1948; but the lack of available and affordable houses forced them to live with my paternal grandparents. They had a tiny bedroom, less than eight feet square while downstairs there was only one room, so they had no privacy and no chance to start a proper family life. A council house was not an option for a childless couple and a child was not desirable for a homeless couple. It was not until 1952 that they managed to acquire a house, a run-down terrace, bought from a landlord whose tenant had died; a compromise, not the modern suburban house to which they had aspired.

People were desperate for any house, even council houses, as this shorthand typist from the Wirral described:

Young couples with children are resorting to underground methods of securing a house. A friend of mine dogged the footsteps of a man he knew to be vacating a house. The sum of £15 changed hands. My friend, his wife and children are moving in [...] the bureaucrats will be none the wiser as the rent book will still be in the other person's name.⁷⁵

Many felt that the government were doing little to help the clerical, lower middle and middle classes, new housing was almost entirely Council housing while private developers were hindered by shortages of materials, skilled workers as well as curbs on the number of building licences and tax on development land.⁷⁶ It was in this context of housing shortages together with continued rationing, that many clerks felt

⁷⁴ *Picture Post*, 14th July 1945 p16-17 quoted in C. Langhamer, 'The Meanings of Home in post war Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40.2 (2005)

⁷⁵ M.O.A. 3642, female, born 1922, Shorthand Typist, reply to DR November 1945

⁷⁶ Jones, 'This is Magnificent,' and Cornford, *The Market for Owned Houses*, p.3

under threat, that their social and financial advantages were being lost. The wife of a Gateshead civil servant claimed that 'the middle class have a much harder existence than ever before', while a middle-aged railway clerk declared that the present government 'had a bias against the middle class'.⁷⁷

In terms of social identities, there was a shift from the 1939 sense of aspiration to a harder attitude and sense of hostility to the working classes, of a need to keep a distance to maintain their position, something which will be further explored in chapter five on social identities. I now turn to an examination of how far attitudes to home and domesticity changed from those described above to those held by the two groups of clerks interviewed by Goldthorpe and his team in the early 1960s.

Post-war Affluence, Suburbia and Clerks: The 1950s and 1960s

From 1951 with the establishment of a Conservative government, housing policies shifted. In the long-term, the Tory's aim was to revive the private sector as the main housing provider although while shortages remained acute, the local authority building programmes continued, albeit standards were cut and priorities turned from providing homes for general need to slum clearance. The stigma against council housing became even more pronounced, many people, especially the middle classes did not want to live in council housing and by the 1960s, council estates had become synonymous with need, the 'rough' and rowdy.⁷⁸

The private rented sector was also becoming less attractive. Not only were most rented houses old and in the centre of towns, they were often badly maintained and lacking in amenities, the types of houses many clerks had rejected before the War in favour of new houses in the suburbs but now even more dilapidated. Between 1939 and 1961, the proportion of private rented homes dropped still further from 58 per cent to 34 per cent.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ M.O.A. 4173, female, born 1910, wife of Civil Servant, reply to DR September 1948; 4008, male, born 1903, Railway Clerk, reply to DR January 1949

⁷⁸ P Shapely, 'Social Housing and Tenant Participation', *History and Policy* (2008) www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers accessed April 2017

⁷⁹ A Holmans, *2011 Census Analysis, a Century of Home Ownership and Renting in England and Wales* <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20160107120404/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/a-century-of-home-ownership-and-renting-in-england-and-wales/sty-home-ownership.html> accessed April 2017

After 1953, as pressures reduced, restrictions on private building were abandoned and between 1955 and 1970, over 2.6 million new private sector houses were built mainly for owner-occupation. The proportion of owner-occupiers rose steeply from 28.6 per cent in 1953 to over 45 per cent by 1965, as the government introduced additional measures to encourage the spread of owner-occupation such as reductions in stamp duty, tax relief on mortgage interest payments and improvement grants for the older houses.⁸⁰ Gradually owner-occupation was becoming a norm. Homeownership which, in the early 1930s, had been largely the preserve of the established middle classes, had become by the mid 1960s, something to which the majority of working people could aspire and a mark of respectability and status.

At the same time, the gap between the incomes of manual workers and clerical workers was narrowing. Between 1948 and 1965, real wages grew by an average of around 47 per cent with those of manual workers rising faster than those of the average clerical worker. According to figures quoted by Routh, the average male clerical pay in 1935/36 was £192 per annum rising to £523 in 1955 and £682 by 1960, this compares to £195 for skilled male manual workers and £134 for semi-skilled males in 1935/36, £622 and £469 in 1955 and £796 and £581 in 1960, a shift from a position of earning roughly equal wages with a skilled manual worker to considerably less by 1960.⁸¹ Full employment provided unprecedented job security and benefits such as occupational pensions, sick pay and holidays with pay were increasingly on offer to manual workers.⁸²

⁸⁰ P. N. Balchin, *Housing Policy and Housing Needs*, (London; Palgrave, 1981), Chapter 2 Owner-occupation

⁸¹ I. Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain 1900-1965*, (London; Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.161; Routh, *Occupational Pay*, p.120, by 1956, average earnings for skilled male manual workers had risen by 319% from 1935/36, while that for male clerks by 272%

⁸² A. Halsey A & J. Webb *Twentieth Century Social Trends*, p.567 & p.632. Membership of occupational pension schemes increased from 6.2million in 1953 to 11.1 million in 1963 and from 34 per cent of the male employed work force to 63 per cent; source Government Actuary Occupational Pension Schemes 1975. The Paid Holiday Act 1938 gave manual workers the right to 1 weeks paid holiday per annum and by 1960 97 per cent of manual workers had at least 2 weeks paid holidays.

Privatised lifestyles in 1960s suburban Cambridge and Luton: Neighbourly Relations and 'Companionate' Marriages

It was within this context that the two groups of clerks were interviewed between 1960 and 1964 as part of Goldthorpe et al. affluent worker study as discussed in the introduction to this thesis. One group was comprised of bank workers from Cambridge and the second was made up of general commercial clerks employed by two Luton companies, SKF who manufactured ball-bearings and Laporte, a chemical company making bleaching agents. Like the Mass Observers, they saw the type of house a person lived in as a key part of their social identity and a dividing line between the various classes.

For example, this sales clerk from SKF who when asked what he thought about the different classes placed himself in the middle or ordinary class because:

we don't live in a select neighbourhood but a medium class one – fortunate to have a house – sort of average goings-on. As opposed to the upper class, the higher salaried people on the other side of town – the New Bedford Road area[...] and there's a lot of unfortunate people in the lower class as regards living accommodation and income [...] for instance, these very small cottages or one room efforts.⁸³

While another SKF clerk, an owner-occupier who lived in what he described as an ordinary neighbourhood, also suggested the house, and more particularly the efforts made to acquire a good home, divided the classes:

[The Upper class] very select people for a start who can afford to live in big houses and that. I find it rather difficult to define between the middle and lower class. I don't think there's much difference.

Who's in the middle class – I know I'm talking about the factory all the time but still - heads of departments, office workers, manual workers who have worked really hard and saved for nice houses and that.

Who's in the lower class – people who have to live in slum areas; some can't get out and some don't want to. It's the ones that don't want to that I mean really.⁸⁴

⁸³ *Affluent worker Collection*, 510, Sales Clerk, SKF

⁸⁴ *Affluent worker Collection*, 504, Tabulator, SKF

However, although he saw class divisions in terms of housing, it is noteworthy that the split is between the 'very select' and those 'in the slums', he saw no difference between manual and office workers, in his mind, both form part of a middle class, it was a question of 'working hard and saving'.

Both the Cambridge and the Luton clerks were asked about their homes, ownership of consumer goods, whether their wives were employed and their attitudes to credit while the Luton sample were further questioned about the neighbourhoods in which they lived, responsibility for childcare and housework, household budgeting and leisure activities. These were attributes, which according to Goldthorpe et al., contributed to class identification, to a more middle-class way of life which valued home ownership, saving, a companionate marriage with shared responsibilities, the household chores and childcare and family centred leisure activities. In contrast, the traditional working-class lifestyle was painted as one where families rented from the council or privately, housework and childcare were seen as the wives' responsibility, decisions about money were in the hands of the husband, where there was little or no long-term planning or saving and leisure activities were undertaken separately and largely away from the home. Yet, as Scott, Todd and Lawrence among others have shown, this type of division between so-called traditional working class and middle-class mores had been disappearing since before the 1930s as owner-occupation and more privatised lifestyles became more prevalent.⁸⁵ However, an examination of how the Luton sample organised their home life shines a light on their social identities.

Apart from the young and unmarried who lived with parents, all the Cambridge clerks were owner-occupiers and when asked which major item of expenditure – car, private schooling, holidays abroad, large family or own house, would be a priority, 90 per cent chose 'own their own house'. Home ownership was clearly important to their sense of identity although it should be noted that subsidised mortgages were part of their remuneration package. Only one of the clerks lived in a council house, he lived

⁸⁵ P. Scott, *The making of the modern British home: the suburban semi and family life between the wars*; S. Todd, *The people: the Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910-2010*, (London; John Murray, 2014); J. Lawrence 'Inventing the Traditional Working class: a re-analysis of interview notes from Young and Willmott's "Family and Kinship in East London"', *The Historical Journal*, 59.2 (2016)

with his parents, the son of a low paid civil servant, who was 'hoping for change'.⁸⁶ For the Luton clerks, the situation was more mixed; 65 per cent were owner-occupiers, just under 20 per cent council tenants, 2 per cent in private rented and one man lived in a caravan although most of the tenants declared their aspiration to purchase their own homes. Clearly owner-occupation was a decided preference for these two groups. Of those who were council tenants, half described themselves as belonging to no class and the remainder as working class with one pointing out that 'people on private estates or something think they are above the council house tenant [but that] 'I can go out dressed just as good as a man earning £50 a week'.⁸⁷ None of the council tenants felt they belonged to the middle classes. The private tenants were a mix, one was newly married and saving for a deposit on a house; another recently returned from Rhodesia and was contemplating migrating to Canada while the third could not afford to buy because he had to pay school fees for his son. There was no correlation between self-ascribed class position and owner-occupation.

While the Cambridge clerks were simply asked whether they owned their home, the Luton clerks were also questioned about the district in which they lived and about their neighbours - who they were, what type of job they had and what sort of relationship they had. The majority, regardless of tenure, plumped for the 'ordinary working class' or 'quiet and respectable' options. However, as with the Mass Observers, over twenty years earlier, there were concerns about the proximity of council estates, mainly the recently built London overspill estates. One clerk, an owner-occupier, was particularly vehement:

We want to move, we don't like the council estate – it's dirty and lacking in amenities. The schools are bad – old and filthy. The people – the worse they could throw out of London, we are not snobbish but they cause all sorts of trouble, a friend of mine's daughter got beaten up.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 060, Cashier, Barclays

⁸⁷ *Affluent worker Collection*, 503, Correspondence Clerk, SKF

⁸⁸ *Affluent worker Collection*, 538, Correspondence Clerk, SKF

While another was also seeking to move from his 'nice, quiet, respectable' area because 'when we first lived here, it was a cul-de sac with nothing at the back, now it is a through road to a council estate'.⁸⁹

However, for the most part, the Luton clerks appeared satisfied with their homes and their neighbourhoods with both council and private estates comprising a mix of clerical, manual workers and small business owners, for example, 503, a council tenant lived between a machinist and a gas fitter; 504, an owner-occupier, between a bus driver and a foreman at the Vauxhall factory; 545, an owner-occupier's neighbours were a time keeper and a post office sorter while the neighbours of 540, another council tenant were an assistant surveyor and a foreman. Clerks and manual workers lived side by side.

Unsurprisingly, there was a wide array of answers to the questions about relationships with neighbours and it is hard to generalise. It would appear, however, that clerks with young children and wives at home during the day were more likely to have closer relationships with their neighbours especially if they also had children. For example, the wife of 503 regularly visited one neighbour for coffee and they provided mutual support with babysitting and shopping while they speak to but do not go to the home of the neighbour on the other side.⁹⁰ 506 reported that 'they see a lot of neighbours on one side because their children are the same ages and the 'kids are in and out of each other's houses'.⁹¹ However, for the majority, relationships were friendly but as 536 described, 'see to chat and to borrow tools but not popping in and out' or 527 'little contact, keep themselves to themselves'.⁹² The only notes of neighbourly disapproval referred to a neighbour failing to dig the garden. Borrowing garden and other tools for painting and other DIY projects was mentioned in a number of interviews confirming the continued relevance of Light's picture of 'the suburban husband pottering in his herbaceous border' and reinforcing the findings of Willmott and Young in the contemporary study, *Family and Class in a London*

⁸⁹ *Affluent worker Collection*, 507, Distributor, SKF

⁹⁰ *Affluent worker Collection*, 503, Correspondence Clerk, SKF

⁹¹ *Affluent worker Collection*, 506, Sales Planning Clerk, SKF

⁹² *Affluent worker Collection*, 536, Assistant Purchasing Officer, Laporte

Suburb.⁹³ In all, the picture of the neighbourhood in which these clerical workers lived was one with good relationships, on speaking but for most, unless they had children who played together, not on visiting terms. Asked about leisure activities, while obviously they varied considerably from amateur dramatics to tape recording, from making models of trains and vintage cars to angling, however, most men reported time spent playing or watching sport, television, gardening and household DIY while the women knitted, sewed, visited family, read and watched television.⁹⁴

There was, however, no doubt about the domestication of these clerks who were fully involved in their homes and families. Washing up was shared and while women did most of the shopping, putting children to bed was done by both and in two cases primarily by fathers, one because his wife worked full time as a punch card operator and the other because his wife worked evening shifts as a GPO telephonist.⁹⁵ Those interviewed were also asked about how they managed money, for the most part, major spending decisions were planned, discussed and agreed between the couple. A SKF clerk described the approach of him and his wife:

Decisions on holidays and expensive items for the house together.

Things like wallpaper colour are made by my wife. We have discussions about spending – plan what we want and when we can have it e.g.

carpets for the new house, we got samples and prices and then decided.

More about prioritising, get something done and then on to the next. Only one thing on HP at a time, plan ahead about a year – have a budget for next year in mind.⁹⁶

His colleague from SKF Sales reported a similar process:

⁹³ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 500, Costing Clerk, SKF; 506, Sales Planning Clerk, SKF; 507, Distributor, SKF; 513, Dispatch Clerk, SKF; Light, *Forever England* p.8; P. Willmott & M. Young, *Family and Class in a London Suburb*, p.31-33 they found DIY was a key interest and considered an investment in the home

⁹⁴ For example, *Affluent worker Collection*, 536, Assistant Purchasing Officer, Laporte, spent his time making models, gardening and visiting; 500, Costing Clerk, SKF, spent the weekend gardening and repairing his tape recorder; 508, Senior Accounts Clerk, SKF, spent his weekend insulating the roof and made a snow man with his children

⁹⁵ *Affluent worker Collection*, 524, Credit Control Assistant, SKF; 506, Sales Planning Clerk, SKF

⁹⁶ *Affluent worker Collection*, 535, Assistant to Supervisor of Cost Department, SKF

We have joint discussion about money, whether it is wise to do certain things, what's best in the long run – mainly stuff associated with the house and the children. Don't plan as much as before – too many setbacks.⁹⁷

Furthermore, around half of wives of these clerks were employed, of these a third had no children while the remainder had children of school age mainly in secondary schools. Both the clerk and his wife contributed to the family income.

Questioned about savings, over 85 per cent saved either in banks or post office accounts with most, nearly 70 per cent putting regular sums away with others saving when and if they could, perhaps when they had managed to obtain additional overtime, for example.

For the overwhelming majority, the discussion about money focussed upon their homes and children emphasising the home-centred, domesticated characteristics of the clerk – his home and family were central to his sense of identity. Expenditure was planned, items were saved for, something which was seen to divide them from lower classes who were commonly accused of spending their money on the 'wrong' things, as one SKF clerk suggested a key difference between himself and the lower class was, 'middle class income around £15-£30 a week, but some of the lower class have this income but it's how they use their money – drinking, wasting it, not using it to better themselves and their family'.⁹⁸

On the other hand, the Luton clerks spent their money on the right things, all had insurance on both home and life and all were contributing to pensions through work. Furthermore, although they recognised that people with professional and management jobs had better homes and more comforts, several argued that they shared the same tastes and aspiration that, 'they spend more on particular things, they don't spend it on different things'.⁹⁹

In summary, the 1960s clerks were 'family men', most owned their home and those who did not, aspired to do so in the future. They spent a large part of their leisure time on DIY, the garden and with their children and they shared the running of the home with their wives in companionate marriages.

⁹⁷ *Affluent worker Collection*, 536, Assistant Purchasing Officer, Laporte

⁹⁸ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 502, Assistant to Manager Orders Department, SKF

⁹⁹ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 512, Senior Tool Planner and Estimator, SKF

Conclusion

This chapter has shown the centrality of their homes to clerical identity, as a Mass Observation clerk noted in 1942, the home is ‘the place you belong’.¹⁰⁰ From the 1930s, there was a huge increase in the numbers of houses built, mainly in the suburbs and largely for owner-occupation while the numbers of those in private rented properties in the older suburbs and in the centre of towns fell significantly. After 1933, government housing policies shifted. As subsidies were cut, the size and quality of council houses was reduced, the density of housing increased, and allocations were prioritised to those needing to be rehoused from slum clearances. This altered the character of the council estates resulting in a much closer association with poverty and the needy working classes. Post war, there was a period of severe housing shortages during which it was a struggle to obtain a house of any kind, then from around 1954 a new private house building boom began. The importance of these houses, and specifically owner-occupation in a private suburban house was regularly stressed throughout the period of my study. In 1939, as was shown, several Mass Observers defined their class and status position in terms of their home, ‘by the way people live, the type of house and especially the neighbourhood’, and in 1961, a Luton sales clerk expressed similar sentiments distinguishing himself from the ‘very-select who live in big houses’ and ‘people who live in the slums’.¹⁰¹

However, there were differences between the Mass Observers and the Luton clerks (the Cambridge clerks were only asked about tenure) – between the 1930s and the 1960s. In 1939, when asked about their neighbourhoods, most described them as good, healthy, select or well-to-do, in 1961-1963 when asked to choose how to describe their neighbourhoods, none of the Luton clerks opted for ‘fairly select’ preferring to describe them as ordinary, mixed or quiet and respectable. Notably none selected ‘pretty rough’. This pattern was largely repeated when asked about neighbours, the 1939 Mass Observers mainly wrote that their neighbours were much the same as they were with a few qualifying comments around being more interested

¹⁰⁰ M.O.A. 2674, male, born 1913, Clerk, reply to DR April 1942

¹⁰¹ M.O.A. 1552, female, born 1916, Shorthand Typist, reply to DR June 1939; *Affluent Worker Collection*, 510, Sales Clerk, SKF; Also see Gunn, *Middle Classes: Their Rise and Sprawl*, p.58, owner occupation as key marker of middle-class identity

in culture or intellectual pursuits suggesting that their neighbourhoods were fairly homogeneous in terms of class while also implying their own superiority within their class due to cultural distinction. There were, of course, exceptions with a number of young clerks from working class families eager to leave the parental home and those they considered as 'rough' neighbours and move to better districts. However, the Luton clerks lived in more much mixed communities and from the evidence of the interviews, cohesive and supportive neighbourhoods with manual and non-manual workers residing side by side as owner-occupiers and therefore likely to have similar incomes. This may confirm the belief held by many of the 1960s clerks that the gap between manual and non-manual workers was reducing even to the extent that many argued they were all one class. However, this 'one class' did not extend to **all** of the working class, there was a clear distinction between the so-called respectable, hardworking manual workers and the poor working class, the unskilled, the unemployed and other 'outsiders' such as people of colour as will be discussed in the following chapter, and in terms of housing, the stigma against council tenants remained strong.

The period also saw important shift in lifestyles around the issue of 'companionate marriage' and the responsibility for household chores. Evidence from the comments of Mass Observers in 1948 suggested that the bread-winner model of family life remained strong with the male focused upon his work and the female on the home although most men shared some household tasks, they were mainly restricted to heavy jobs such as decorating, DIY, carrying coal or clearing the ashes. By the 1960s, this was no longer the case, with more wives (mainly those without pre-school children at home) working and contributing financially to the household and also a greater sharing of childcare, household tasks and the decision making around money.

However, while lifestyles may have changed by the 1960s and there was a greater sense of equality with some manual workers - those who had roughly equivalent incomes and who shared aspirations for home ownership; home ownership remained a clear sign of middle-class identity which separated the clerk from the rough working class. It was his aspiration for a home of his own and his desire for a respectable way of life living quietly alongside his neighbours which marked out the clerk. The next chapter explores how these aspirations around the home were reflected in the clerks' sense of social identity and status.

Chapter Five: Social Identities: Ordinary, Lower-middle Class?

Education, home and style of living have been shown in the preceding chapters to be markers which distinguished clerical workers and divided them from both the upper echelons of society and those they characterised as the 'rough' element of the lower working classes. This chapter explores in detail how these come together to create a wider picture of the social identities of clerks through a detailed analysis of responses to questions about class from both Mass Observation in 1939 and 1948 and as part of the Goldthorpe et al. study into the affluent worker. In this way, I show how the ideas that clerical workers had about their class and status evolved over the middle decades of the twentieth century. The first section focuses upon the Mass Observation sample and considers the place of class as a signifier of social identity, whether individuals had a sense of belonging to a particular class and the changes which took place between 1939 and 1948. I then turn to examine the reasons behind class assignment and the ways these influenced overall social identities. The second part of the chapter considers the responses of the 1960s clerks, interviewed by Goldthorpe's team, to questions about their understanding of class and its importance to their identities.

Mass Observation: Class and Social Identity in 1939

I look first at the responses to the June 1939 directive which was the most comprehensive and personal of the three enquiries. It posed a series of very open questions which sought to encourage the volunteers to reflect upon their own class position and the factors which influenced these ideas. Nowhere in their instructions to the volunteer panellists did Mass-Observation attempt to define what they meant by 'class'. They simply prefaced the directive with a statement that:

Few people admit to being snobs and who is free from class prejudice in some form or another. But it is wiser to use the term 'class' in inverted commas as sociologists are by no means agreed on what it means [...] it is essential to get some idea of the nexus of social attitudes which make up the class 'complex'. Observers are asked to be particularly honest with themselves when answering these questions.¹

¹ M.O.A. Directive Questionnaire June (2) 1939

In line with McKibbin's observation that interwar England was 'a country of social classes into which the English freely categorised themselves', the wording of the questions assumed that all the respondents had a specific class identity.² However, it was left to the respondents to establish their own definitions, one which was usually, but not exclusively, based upon the everyday vernacular notion of social distinction or prestige, around lifestyle, rank and hierarchy mixing ideas about class and status as if they were interchangeable. This contrasts with the academic and sociological definitions based upon relationships to the means of production or structural inequalities or the Weberian analysis in which class situation reflected market-determined 'life chances'.³

The Directive asked the following:

- Try to define exactly the 'class' to which you belong and give your reasons in detail. How far is it a question of income?
- Do you tend to move in different 'class' than your parents and grandparents; describe the steps which led to such a change
- With what 'classes' do you feel most at your ease? With what sort of people are you liable to feel embarrassed for 'class' reasons?
- Do most of your closest friends belong to your own class? Describe any exceptions.
- If you are married, engaged or in love, state the part played in this situation by considerations of class'.
- If money were no object, would you rather give your children a public school or a secondary school education and why? (Answer this question whether or not you have children, but mention if you have them and, in that case, what are your actual plans for them?)

These were followed by more questions about the attitudes to money of the different classes, the neighbourhoods in which they lived, their neighbours, the importance of accent, types of food and entertainment considered 'infra dig' and the

² McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p.v

³ R. Crompton, *Class and Stratification: An Introduction to Current Debates* 2nd Edition, (Cambridge; Polity Press, 1998), p.10-11 & 26-36; J. Lawrence, 'The British Sense of class', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35.2 (2002)

price of cinema tickets usually purchased in an attempt to identify distinguishing behaviour between the classes.⁴

This open approach led, not surprisingly to a wide spread of responses which can be described as confusing and confused, contradictory and sometimes tangential which do not allow for straightforward, clear answers but which offer an unrivalled richness and depth revealing the complexity, uncertainty and even pride felt by these clerks about their class position and social identities

Mainly Lower-Middle Class or Hybrid? Identities of Mass Observers 1939

As described in the introduction, I based my analysis on the responses of 80 panellists with white collar clerical occupations. Around 95 percent of these respondents identified as belonging to one or other of the conventional classes, working, lower middle, middle or upper. Yet within this, although there was a consensus about the presence and influence of class as an everyday experience, there were also complexities and contradictions with differing ways of understanding class.⁵ A secretary from London had no doubt that she belonged to a class but was uncertain which one:

I have never been able to decide which class I belong to. It seems to depend upon the company I happen to be in. Sometimes I notice it is referred to as working class and at other time the lower middle class. As I do not know where one class ends and another begins, I am at a loss.⁶

By contrast, a former typist and housewife rejected the traditional class labels and proposed her own system comprising 28 grades ranging from her birth family at 28, 'crude dirty and irresponsible' to her current status at 19 'income £3-£4 a week, some idea of higher culture' headed by royalty at grade 1.

I can only see civilized society as a culture scale which is divided into grades with no clear dividing lines. Generally income and early training are the principal factors. The accompanying scale is a crude one when

⁴ See appendix 1 for full copy of DR June 1939

⁵ D. Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 169. Cannadine argues that British society, while a hierarchy, is not divided into three hermetically sealed homogeneous collectives but different models and multiple identities make it complex and shifting. R. Crompton, *Class and Stratification*, highlights the differences between academic and everyday definitions of class and status.

⁶ M.O.A. 1063, female, born 1904, Secretary, reply to DR June 1939

one considers the complexity of the subject but it is better than defining society as lower, middle and upper.⁷

A minority of respondents expressed their antipathy to or lack of awareness of expressions of class belonging but nevertheless were able to assign themselves within one of the traditional classes, such as a Manchester Quaker and draughtsman who began his response with 'I dislike ideas of class and must compel myself to answer these distasteful questions'.⁸ Or a young local government officer who wrote, 'I was under the impression that in these modern times, classes had ceased to exist, certainly I have never before given a thought to such things,' both of whom were nevertheless able to assign themselves to the lower middle class.⁹

Of the 95 per cent of white-collar workers who felt they belonged to a specific class, by far the largest proportion considered that they were lower middle class, followed around a quarter who described themselves as middle and a significant minority designating themselves as working class. Table 5.1 below gives the breakdown of the declared class identities of the white-collar workers.

Table 5.1 – Self-attributed class of clerks who expressed a class assignment in replies to June 1939 Directive

Working Class	17%
Lower Middle	42%
Middle	26%
Professional	1%
Upper Middle	11%
Upper/Gentry	0%

Of the around five per cent who felt unable to assign themselves to a specific class, most argued that they were between classes or hybrids contrasting their birth or economic position with their educational and intellectual status. A 36-year-old bank cashier from Yorkshire described himself as, 'by birth working class; by

⁷ M.O.A. 1548, female, bon 1898, former Typist, now Housewife, reply to DR June 1939

⁸ M.O.A. 1095, male, born 1876, Draughtsman, reply to DR June 1939

⁹ M.O.A. 1441, male, born 1917, Local Government Officer, reply to DR June 1939

education and environment upper working class; by occupation and present income lower middle class; culturally upper class'.¹⁰

Sentiments shared by this 41-year-old office worker who wrote, 'upper class by education – Balliol; middle class by occupation – sort of clerk; lower class by residence – small house'.¹¹

Therefore, while some white-collar respondents may have had difficulties in placing themselves precisely within the conventional class labels and others found the whole idea of class objectionable, 95 per cent were still able to assign themselves to a specific class.

Remaining Lower-Middle or Hybrid? Identities of Mass Observers in 1948

Almost ten years later in 1948, volunteers were asked again about class.¹²

However, this directive was less comprehensive, respondents were asked whether they thought of themselves as belonging to a particular social class which gave them the opportunity to disavow class in contrast to 1939 when class belonging was presented as a given. They were then asked to identify the class to which they belonged and why, and to list ten working class and ten middle class jobs.

The decade between the two directives had been tumultuous and the 1948 directive provided an opportunity to examine the impact of these events on people's perceptions of class. Experiences during the war had led to more mixing of the classes in the forces, through directed labour in factories and on the land and through evacuation of children and mothers from the cities to the countryside. Although shown to be a myth by Rose, from the time of Dunkirk, the war was increasingly portrayed as the 'Peoples' War' by the press, radio and film, in which there was 'equality of sacrifice' and 'fair shares' for all after which a more equitable, fairer Britain would emerge; one in which class would no longer matter.¹³ However, as McKibbin described, the late 1940s saw an increasing hostility on the part of the middle classes towards the working class and the Labour government as a result of continuing austerity, a decline in living standards and a belief that government

¹⁰ M.O.A. 1599, male, born 1903, Bank Cashier, reply to DR June 1939

¹¹ M.O.A. 1211, male, born 1898, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

¹² See appendix 2 for full copy of Directive September 1948

¹³ S. O. Rose, *Which People's War*, p.34-38

policies prioritised the interests of the working classes.¹⁴ This contrast between hopes created during wartime and the experiences of the present may have been one of the drivers behind Mass-Observation's renewed interest in class.

Again, the analysis of the responses to the 1948 directive has been based upon a sample of 80 observers, although only four are the same individuals. In response to the question, 'Do you think of yourself as belonging to any particular social class and if so which?', over a third of all respondents replied in the negative. A small proportion of these completely rejected class as a badge of their own identity seeing it as useless, an anachronism or simply nonsense although they did not deny its impact and power - casting class as unhealthy and damaging.

A retired insurance clerk wrote:

No, the classes are not clearly defined and I never thought it worthwhile seeking definitions. I cannot see any useful purpose in dividing people into classes and the only product I can see of such divisions is snobbery.¹⁵

Whereas a young accountancy clerk condemned class as an 'unhappy survival of the 19th century', a middle-aged female clerk lamented that it was 'a pity that much of the nonsense, which war broke down, has somehow been built up again in peace' and a retired draughtsman argued that 'all class distinctions are humbug and needed to be swept away'.¹⁶

Most, however, were more ambivalent suggesting they had never thought about class until asked the direct question:

For example, a 30-year-old clerk from Reading reported:

I cannot say I am always consciously aware of belonging to one particular class of the community. I am usually only aware of differences between myself and other people as individuals. It is this individual aspect which is of most interest to me. Of course as soon as the question is put, I realise that I must belong to some class.¹⁷

¹⁴ R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p.62-67

¹⁵ M.O.A. 3881, male, born 1892, retired Insurance Clerk, reply to DR September 1948

¹⁶ M.O.A. 4431, male, born 1928, Accountancy Clerk; 1669, female, born 1902, Housewife and Clerk; 1095, male, born 1875, Railway Draughtsman, replies to DR September 1948

¹⁷ M.O.A. 3853, male, born 1918, Clerk, reply to DR September 1948

An opinion shared by the wife of a local government clerk who wrote:

Apart from knowing I do not belong to the upper classes, I don't think I have ever thought of myself in connection with any class. If I did, then I should say, from my husband's occupation (local government clerk) that I might be middle class.¹⁸

Thus, even among the third of respondents who declared they did not feel they belonged to a particular social class, most were nonetheless able, albeit it reluctantly and in some cases, uncertainly, to place themselves within the traditional social hierarchy.

However, the majority, over two thirds had no difficulties in declaring themselves part of a social class even if they had concerns such as this railway clerk who understood himself to be lower middle class:

I am in favour of a classless society i.e. one in which no section obtains special privileges and where snobbery is a thing of the past. Nonetheless class divisions will persist in the sense that education, occupation and income will lead to different outlooks and interests.¹⁹

Others, like this 56-year-old civil servant, were absolutely certain about the importance, the inevitability, and the power of class:

I definitely think of myself as middle class. I had a typical middle-class education (small private school and company secondary school). I have a middle-class job and I live in a middle-class district. But none of those things would make me middle class in themselves. If I had been clever or lucky enough to get a higher post or profession or rebellious enough to choose a more attractive manual job, I should not have changed my class [...] Besides my education, job and place of residence were determined by the fact my parents were middle class – so it is like the old riddle of the chicken and egg.²⁰

Ideas about class and status were clearly still an essential element in the way these clerical workers thought about their social identities and most ranked

¹⁸ M.O.A. 4297, female, born 1925, Housewife and wife of Local Government Officer, reply to DR September 1948

¹⁹ M.O.A. 4443, male, born 1922, Railway Clerk, reply to DR September 1948

²⁰ M.O.A. 2675, female, born 1892, Civil Servant, reply to DR September 1948

themselves according to the traditional class structures. However, there were differences between the clerical workers' identification with class and the wider panel of volunteers.²¹ According to Savage in his analysis of 175 responses drawn at random from the full panel to the 1948 Directive, only 25 per cent readily identified with class and around 17 per cent refused to assign themselves to any class, a considerably smaller proportion than my clerical sample of whom two thirds acknowledged they belonged to a specific class and only around five per cent declared themselves classless. The reasons behind these differences are not clear. In terms of the clerical workers, it is likely that as a group on the fringes of the middle class and, as discussed in the preceding chapters, keen to distance themselves from the working classes and more anxious about status, that class felt more real and more salient to them. In contrast, the Savage sample, which was predominantly middle class with around a quarter identifying as 'upper middle class' might have been more confident about their status and as Savage contended, understood that 'to openly identify yourself as a member of the professional middle class would, in a sense, indicate a degree of vulgarity that might put a question mark around one's membership of that class'.²² This suggests that considerations of class formed an important element of these clerical workers sense of self and social identity. The next section examines how and why they identify themselves within the class nexus and the changes between 1939 and 1948.

Continuities and Change in Class Identification 1939-1948

In 1939, 95 per cent of the clerical respondents agreed they felt part of a specific class, by 1948, the proportion had dropped to two thirds. Table 5.2 shows the shift in self-attribution of class position. Again, there was no consensus about which class to which clerks felt they belonged, with people ascribing themselves to all traditional classes. There had, however, been shifts over the decade with slightly more feeling they were working class but overall, the basic pattern was little changed, in both 1939 and 1948, the majority described themselves as belonging to the middle

²¹ M. Savage, 'Changing Social Class Identities in Post War Britain: Perspectives from Mass-Observation', *Sociological Research On-line* 12.3 (2007)

²² Ibid.

classes – a small increase from 68 to 70 per cent which, in such as small sample is minimal.

Table 5.2: Changes in self-attributed class position of white-collar workers

	June 1939 Directive	September 1948 Directive
Working Class	17%	23%
Lower Middle Class	42%	37%
Middle Class	26%	33%
Professional	1%	2%
Upper Middle	11%	4%

May not add up to 100% because of rounding.

While the majority in both 1939 and 1948 identified as lower-middle class, the group to which clerks were commonly assigned, overall, over 80 per cent felt themselves to be from the middle class. The range of class identifications demonstrates the weakness of occupation on its own as an identifier of class and status, it also highlights the complexities of clerical identities within traditional class divisions. The following section explores the reasoning behind respondents' class assignment, firstly to 1939 and then 1948. While I will consider the responses to both 1939 and 1948 directive, there is considerably more data from 1939 which explored not only ideas about class position but also notions about relationships with other classes and how respondents distinguished themselves from others.

Identifying as Working Class in 1939: Family, Education, Culture, Politics

From the 1939 sample, all clerks identifying as working class were young, all apart from two aged under 30 and almost half were under 25. All, but one, were single with the majority living with parents and others in 'digs'. All had fathers in manual jobs and most felt they moved in different circles than their parents.

For a small number, class designation was a political statement in which society was divided into the workers and non-workers as per the Marxist model. Their working-class status was derived from their occupation, not as clerks, but as employees dependent upon others for their livelihood as this 22-year-old Bolton clerk explained:

I belong to the working class. I am a worker, my parents and forebears have been workers or peasants and have lived as such. Our incomes

have never exceeded a certain rather low standard and we have always been dependent on employment by someone higher in the social scale.²³

Or in the words of a 21-year-old filing clerk from Sheffield who, by her language betrayed her political views: 'I am working class; I mean the labourer to the big business [...] a person who by his or her own skills, wrests existence from the labour market'.²⁴

However, the majority, while claiming to be working class, distinguished themselves from the 'ordinary' manual working class arguing that they were 'upper working' or hybrids – partly working and partly middle class. This, they attributed to their education, in most cases a result of winning a scholarship to a secondary school. As was discussed in chapter three, education was regarded not just as a stepping-stone to a white-collar office job and thus usually to a higher and more secure income, but also as a means of broadening horizons and opening eyes to higher culture and more intellectual pursuits.

A London accounts clerk described his reasoning:

I consider 'class' to be almost entirely a matter of income, since other possible measures (political, literary, artistic etc) are almost classless. I am thus placed in the lowest or working class by reason of my parents and my own income. The working class itself is a mass of subsidiary castes so I would place myself about half way up the scale, since my job gives me a slight social advantage over those in manual (but more remunerative) work. Intellectually I move in a different class to my parents and grandparents, this is entirely a result of educational advance since I have had my mind awakened to music, poetry, art etc.²⁵

A Hull clerk echoed these views:

I feel I belong to the upper strata of the working class. Although my income is above the average for the bulk of the working class, I don't think my reason for belonging to the upper strata is a question of income. I have striven by reading and study to raise my knowledge and intellectual

²³ M.O.A. 2146, male, born 1917, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

²⁴ M.O.A. 1458, female, born 1918, Filing Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

²⁵ M.O.A. 1511, male, born 1915, Accounts Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

above the ordinary level [...] I am different from my neighbours, the majority of them prefer light books and films that are superficial, I prefer books that teach me something or have depth and meaning.²⁶

These examples perfectly illustrate Hinton's contention that a taste for higher culture was a mark of distinction, something which many clerks used to separate themselves from their peers and the lower working class.²⁷ Moreover, while their education may have opened their eyes to culture, they do not claim distinction simply on the basis of education but also to their continuing intellectual curiosity and engagement with cultural pursuits.

At the same time, education and cultural tastes set them apart and placed them in a marginal position with regard to their class of origin. As a female civil servant described, this distancing started at school and increased once she started work:

My education, employment and interests caused me to move in a different class – teachers, civil servants etc. This mixing with a different class started in secondary school and was gradual.²⁸

She was not alone in this as this male clerk explained:

I really move in two different classes, at home and at political and trade union meetings, I am with the working class; at work, however, I am in middle and upper class company [where] they talk sensibly and are capable of having an intelligent conversation.²⁹

These responses suggest a group who were socially mobile and aspirational, who had moved away from their origins through their own agency and were proud of their educational achievements and eager to continue intellectual and cultural pursuits which distinguished them from their parental circles and from neighbours.

Moreover, while these clerks leaned towards the intellectual and the educated, many expressed feeling of unease and self-consciousness with elements of the working classes. One respondent, a 20-year-old audit clerk, the son of a turner, who worked near Hull docks who identified himself as hovering between working and middle class and perhaps reflecting the common stereotype of the clerk as weak and

²⁶ M.O.A. 1334, male, born 1900, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

²⁷ Hinton, 'The Class Complex'

²⁸ M.O.A. 1013, female, born 1907, Civil Servant, reply to DR June 1939

²⁹ M.O.A 1154, male, born 1920, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

unmanly, wrote about his discomfort when faced by groups of working-class males in fairly florid terms:

I am particularly embarrassed when thrown alone among the manuals – I had occasion to walk along the fish landing stage in Hull recently. I was acutely self-conscious among the fish gutters, barrow lads, fish salesmen, kit washers etc. I felt like a lounge lizard among cannibals, an intellectual abstraction through to physical force, a slender, effeminate thing with phallic masculinity – very uncomfortable it was too.³⁰

While this appeared an extreme response, there is no doubt that the majority, even among those identifying as working class, felt uneasy in the company of the manual working classes especially with the 'rough' and the very poor for whom there were feelings of pity and scorn for their lack of education, rough speech, bad language and the 'crudity of expression and manners' as a Swindon railway clerk complained.³¹ While, in answer to the question about the influence of class upon love and marriage, a 19 year old clerk, the son of a manual worker, found working class girls to be 'messy and factory work makes them lose their individuality'.³² On the other hand, several felt ill at ease with people from higher classes, with well-dressed, well-spoken people; with prosperous businessmen and their women or with monied, cultured people.³³ Others reported feeling uncomfortable both by those who were much richer or much poorer or those in classes 'most removed from my own'.³⁴

Identifying as Middle Class in 1939: Cultural Distinction and Lifestyles

Despite the small but significant proportion of respondents who maintained they were working-class, the overwhelming majority, over 80 per cent, described themselves as part of the middle classes concurring with McKibbin's assertion that 'those in clerical work must be regarded as middle class based upon occupation,

³⁰ M.O.A. 1294, male, born 1919, Audit Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

³¹ M.O.A. 1450, male, born 1911 Railway Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

³² M.O.A. 1182, male, born 1920, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

³³ M.O.A. 1304, male, born 1913, Clerk; 1294, male, born 1919, Audit Clerk; 1450, male, born 1911, Railway Clerk, replies to DR June 1939,

³⁴ M.O.A. 1182, male, born 1920, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

social aspirations and manners together with a strong belief that they were not working-class'.³⁵

Within the middle class, however, respondents ranked themselves as lower, middle or upper middle. Therefore, the first part of this analysis will focus upon why respondents assigned themselves to a particular section of the middle classes followed by a more general discussion about both the common factors and the dividing lines between the various sections of the middle classes.

The Lower-Middle Class Clerks: Occupation, Home and Culture

The largest single group, around 40 per cent, was made up of those who described themselves as lower-middle class. Around half came from lower middle-class families and reported they moved in the same class of people as their parents. Of the others, most were from working class backgrounds and differed from parents due to their better education and their work.

For the most part, the starting point about thinking about their class position focused upon their occupation specifically not being employed in manual work. A 38-year-old wages clerk summed up his feelings about being lower-middle class as:

I feel that I am a cut above the average working man (manual labourer) and therefore would describe myself as belonging to the lower middle classes. If you wear a collar at work and don't get your hands dirty, you feel superior to those who do even if you know they earn more money than you.³⁶

Feelings echoed by a 19-year-old clerk from Dulwich who not only separated himself and his family from the working class but also took the opportunity to demonstrate his education and intellectual sophistication by the use of the German term:

I should hazard my class is lower middle. Not upper middle because we haven't sufficient money. Not lower, because we have a peculiar Weltanschauung, a certain snobbishness about what we do. Obviously not working because we do not work with our hands.³⁷

³⁵ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p.45

³⁶ M.O.A. 2074, male, born 1901, Wages Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

³⁷ M.O.A. 1412, male, born 1920, Shipping Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

However, for this civil servant, while occupation was important, so was education, a factor referred to by over 70 per cent of all those describing themselves as lower-middle class:

I should imagine I belong to the lower middle class or perhaps the upper working class. It is not so much a question of income in my opinion, but the status of one's occupation. Being a civil servant seems to give a certain benefit where class barriers are concerned regardless of the fact that we may earn less in many cases than a dockworker or a fish porter. The class to which I belong seems to be decided by my education (secondary school), the books and papers I read and enjoy by reason of that education and in some degree by the district in which I live.³⁸

As this clerk from Surrey declared, education was important, but more was required:

Lower middle class. I think of class in terms of 'education', income and perhaps 'family'. The income of an individual is perhaps more a distinguishing mark than an actual mark of class. For instance, it is generally true that the well-educated and those of a 'good' family are well-to-do but you sometime come across an individual who is well-off but is obviously of 'low class due to breeding and education.[...] The class I belong to therefore is on the whole well-educated and might be well-off. If I was more well-off, I could reasonably be considered as middle class.³⁹

Yet a lower-middle class identity, for most, meant something more than just occupation and education. It was also contingent upon good taste and intellectual and cultural interests. Listening to symphony concerts rather than variety or jazz or reading the quality papers such as the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Sunday Times* in preference to the *Daily Express* and *The News of the World*.⁴⁰

Most respondents reported their 'interest in literature', their 'enthusiasm for culture' and 'study for its own sake'.⁴¹ While a 17-year-old bank clerk considered 'my

³⁸ M.O.A. 1024, female, born 1912, Civil Servant, reply to DR June 1939

³⁹ M.O.A. 1108, male, born 1905, Draughtsman, reply to DR June 1939

⁴⁰ M.O.A. 1151, male, born 1910, Secretary to Friendly Society, reply to DR June 1939

⁴¹ M.O.A. 1279, male, born 1891, Accountants Clerk; 1122, male, born 1903, Clerk; 1412, male, born 1920, Clerk, replies to DR June 1939

interests better than other peoples; reading good and scientific literature, the theatre. My whole life does not centre around the result of some sports contest'.⁴²

Although none of the respondents felt income *per se* was a deciding factor, it was clearly important, as a 32-year-old insurance inspector explained;

I am a member of the lower middle classes [...] it also seems to be very much a question of income especially in that strata of society where respectability is a general rule resulting in a struggle to keep up appearances conflicting with a more or less firm determination to pay one's way.⁴³

Thus, for these Mass Observers, a clerical identity was based upon a respectable lifestyle, one which was comfortable but not extravagant, which, for those who mentioned money, rested upon incomes in the range of £250-£400. They distinguished themselves from the working classes by their 'brain work', their acquisition of and respect for education and learning while spending their leisure time in intellectual or cultural activities rather than listening to popular music, gambling or watching football.

What, therefore, was different about the responses of those who identified as part of the established middle or upper middle classes?

The Established Middle-Class Clerks in 1939: Family, Breeding and Cultural Capital

This group made up around a quarter of the white-collar sample of whom some three-quarters were under 30 and a third women. Two respondents had working class backgrounds, one the son of Lancashire factory workers and the other, the child of a father with little education and a schoolteacher mother, both of whom won scholarships to secondary school.⁴⁴ The remainder were members of established middle-class families and, for the most part, this fact was a critical part of their identities.

This response from a 31-year-old bank clerk was more detailed than most, but it contained the typical range of reasons why panellists felt they were middle class:

⁴² M.O.A. 1481, male, born 1922, Bank Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁴³ M.O.A 1244, male, born 1907, Insurance Inspector, reply to DR June 1939

⁴⁴ M.O.A. 1266, male, born 1914, Clerk; 1365, male, born 1895, Civil Servant, replies to DR June 1939

Middle class, neither upper-middle or lower-middle class. Income has much to do with this fixing of class and I should place my group on about £300-£1000 or possibly rather wider. Income however is not the entire story as working-class men earn as much as £300 in some cases. It is also a question of education, and the type of upbringing enjoyed as a child, the type of home and the sort of comforts taken as essential. There are quite a few people I know who have incomes much above the limit I have suggested and I should certainly not class them as above lower-middle class if that.

I feel my class is fixed by a certain standard of education, acquaintance with good literature and music, knowledge of history and geography, by the ability to speak correct and grammatical English, by being accustomed to certain standards'.⁴⁵

That income was a necessary pre-requisite for middle class status was reinforced by the comments of this Leeds secretary:

I do not know how to define class but feel it to be mainly a question of income because this influences everything that can be called class.

Intelligence, for instance, belongs to all classes though can be enhanced by education and breeding – the result of money [...] I should put people earning between £350 and £1,000 as middle class.⁴⁶

Yet as the bank clerk suggested, income alone was not enough. An education, specifically at a secondary or public school, was essential to the middle-class identity. Education was mentioned in every response but in a different way to that of many of the working-class and lower-middle class clerks, not as something which differentiated them from their peers, achieved through the award of a scholarship or the sacrifices of parents, but as a part of the natural order as discussed in chapter three. Only two middle class respondents discussed the type of education received in any detail, both of whom were from lower status backgrounds— a railway clerk and a civil servant with good secondary education followed by external degrees from

⁴⁵ M.O.A. 1325, male, born 1904, Bank Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁴⁶ M.O.A. 1552, female, born 1915, Secretary, reply to DR June 1939

London University, the remainder, in the same way as the bank clerk quoted above, simply referred to 'education' as if it needed no further explanation.⁴⁷

Furthermore, there were fewer direct references to the importance of cultural interests although one panellist wanted his future children to be introduced 'to the finer things in life – art, music and literature which are so essential to obtain the maximum amount of pleasure in life'.⁴⁸ As with the bank clerk quoted above, there appeared an assumption that a good education would automatically lead to more refined cultural tastes so unlike the lower-middle class clerks, interests in music or literature did not have to be emphasised, they were not factors which distinguished them within their class, rather culture was intrinsic to the middle classes.

However, this did not mean that taste was not discussed but it was connected with lifestyles, habits and material possessions alongside culture. As was explored in chapter four, respondents associated their class with 'the type of house and especially the neighbourhood in which they live; the quality or neatness of their clothes; their furniture; their refinement of manner and speech'; with the ownership of consumer goods or car and a garage.⁴⁹

Dividing Lines - Clerks and Other Classes; Income, Family, Education, Culture

These responses from the white-collar sample created a varied and sometimes contradictory picture of the panellists' ideas about their class and status. A small but significant proportion, mainly young and children of manual workers described themselves as working class, the remainder declared themselves to be part of the middle classes; the majority lower-middle, others simply as middle and a relatively small group ranked themselves among the upper-middle class. It was clear that, for many, there were, no hard and fast divisions with the majority of respondents maintaining their class position was decided around a mix of occupation, education, tastes, cultural interests and family.

While income was clearly a differentiating factor as it dictated access to among other things, education, culture and type of home, very few panellists claimed it to be

⁴⁷ M.O.A. 1499, male, born 1914, Railway Clerk; 1365, male, 1896, Civil Servant, replies to DR June 1939

⁴⁸ M.O.A. 1352, male, born 1920, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁴⁹ M.O.A. 1552, female, born 1915, Secretary; 1499, male, born 1914, Railway Clerk, replies to DR June 1939

a deciding factor. Although not all revealed their earnings, of those who did, there was no direct correlation between income earned and ascribed class position; a 28 year old London clerk earning £260 stated he was middle class while a 36 year old confidential secretary (male) on £400 said he was lower-middle.⁵⁰ On the other hand, however, many, like this local government clerk, argued that he was middle class but ‘fairly low on the scale due to income reasons’.⁵¹ While, some like the young bank clerk mentioned above, believed that his occupation lifted him out of the working class. full middle-class status depended upon increased income.⁵² Others were more uncertain such as this Swindon railway clerk who wondered:

As time goes on, I hope to get a larger income – therefore it is interesting to ask whether this would automatically transfer me from one class to another [...] I know several young fellows [who] are earning good salaries. Does this mean they enter a ‘higher class’? As a matter of fact, I can think of one or two of these young men, who, although enjoying a good income, are still sadly lacking in culture. [...] I do think that my attempt to have self- respect and a certain amount of culture does help to improve my ‘class’ status.⁵³

Many of those who assigned themselves to the lower middle classes were children of manual workers or routine black-coated workers, most of whom were better educated than their parents as more children from a wider range of backgrounds were able to benefit from secondary education.⁵⁴ Furthermore many were telling a story of social mobility, of a move away from their family origins and taking on a new class or status. A Bristol insurance clerk, the son and grandson of black-coated workers stated his secondary education via a scholarship allowed him to mix with a ‘higher class of people’.⁵⁵ In a similar vein, a Batley clerk with working class parents wrote that his friends came from ‘an altogether wider and broader

⁵⁰ M.O.A. 2143, male, born 1911 Clerk; 1989, male, born 1903 Confidential Secretary for Export Newsagent, replies to DR June 1939

⁵¹ M.O.A.1136, male, born 1910, Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁵² M.O.A. 1314, male, born 1919, Bank Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁵³ M.O.A. 1450, male, born 1911, railway clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁵⁴ Simon, *The Politics of Educational Reform*, p.365. The annual intake of pupils to secondary schools in England and Wales increased from 90,601 in 1922 to 98,820, a small but significant increase.

⁵⁵ M.O.A.1244, male, born 1907, Insurance Inspector, reply to DR June 1939

[class] which does not exclude the class of my parents' due to his education and his interest in 'good culture'.⁵⁶

This sense of social mobility was also apparent in the responses of some of the clerks describing themselves as middle class, for example this son of a railway clerk who ranked himself above his father, 'who had only an elementary school education ' while he had obtained a scholarship to 'a good secondary school and a B.Com. degree [...] and am a railway clerk and teach commercial subjects evening school'.⁵⁷ His higher education and his teaching post made him middle class. However, he contrasted strongly with the majority of those who identified as middle or upper-middle classes. Their submissions tended to show them as settled in their class position, coming from comfortable homes alongside other middle-class people and moving in very similar social circles to their parents.

This response from a female civil servant was fairly typical:

My idea of the working class is those who do rough manual labour.

Neither my father nor I do work of this kind. However we do have to work for our living so cannot be described as upper class. Certain upper-class people do work for their living but if they are not their own masters, they have very responsible jobs. [...] The middle-class people are those who can afford to live in some comfort and have sufficient education to enjoy and understand all kinds of amusements. My family, for instance, I feel is a typical middle-class family. We live in a residential district and could afford to run a car if we wanted one. So we are able to have all the necessities and some luxuries. Thus I should say I belong to the middle class for my education is, not the lowest elementary nor university, my occupation and general mode of living bring me close contact with middle people [...] I think one's income and one's parents' income are very nearly the controlling factors. When one is young, the financial state of one's parents controls education and later one's own income fixes your class.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ M.O.A.1599, male, born 1903, Bank Cashier, reply to DR June 1939

⁵⁷ M.O.A. 1499, male, born 1914, Railway Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

⁵⁸ M.O.A.1494, female, born 1919, Civil Servant, reply to DR June 1939

Furthermore, while the majority wrote that they felt most at ease with those of their own status, many across the whole sample regardless of their own class identity, expressed their distinction from the working classes, although these feelings were articulated in different ways. Some wrote of their unease with the ‘ignorant and ill-mannered’ or the ‘rough working class types with foul language and dirty bodies’, the lack of education and interests in gambling, drinking and spectator sports – activities deemed to be simply worthless distractions.⁵⁹ Others revealed their lack of anything more than superficial contact with working-class people; ‘the messengers and cleaners at the office, for instance, are working class people yet I do not feel embarrassed when talking to them’ or ‘I can get along fine with workmen and tram-drivers and the like, When we have workmen at home, I only have to give them one look and they will talk and smile’.⁶⁰

Others had more conflicting feelings, an uncomfortable fear of appearing snobbish and superior or patronising as the comments of a lower-middle class civil servant illuminate:

I feel most at ease in my own class. I feel ill at ease with those of a ‘lower class’, for example, maids waiting on me in private houses make me feel a bit guilty. I can’t treat them as equals and if I tried, would probably find their tastes quite different from mine and if I completely ignore them, I feel a snob and if I thank them for this and that, I feel horribly condescending.⁶¹

At the same time, she was also ill at ease with those in higher classes:

With those of a higher class, I am apt to feel self-conscious thinking that they must be criticising my clothes and my general demeanour. They seem to stare at me in a hard impersonal way as if I was a museum piece. [...] This is really all imagination as I have never really known anyone of a much higher class.⁶²

⁵⁹ M.O.A. 2074, male, born 1901, Clerk; 1599, male, born N/A, Bank Cashier, reply to DR June 1939

⁶⁰ For example, M.O.A. 1494, female, born 1919, Civil Servant; 1552, female, born 1915, Secretary, replies to DR June 1939

⁶¹ M.O.A. 1047 female, born 1915, Civil Servant, reply to DR June 1939

⁶² Ibid.

Others insisted that their education gave them the ability to be comfortable with those in higher classes as this Surrey man explained:

It is largely a matter of education. I feel most at ease with my own class but I have read widely and can converse well on most things and feel at home with classes well above mine'.⁶³

And this female civil servant argued that she felt equally at ease with everyone and that it was ability not class which should divide people:

At work – I feel equally at home with a Head of a section and a Messenger so long as they treat me as a human being with brains and not as a mere cog in the machine. [...] Class differences only serve to annoy me especially when I know of people with superior talents doing jobs which are only fit for some of our Heads who don't know as much as those below them.⁶⁴

Moreover, as Hinton suggested, distinction within class was also an important element in the formation of identity and as has been shown, cultural tastes were put forward by many white-collar workers especially those who identified as working or lower-middle class and those who were more upwardly mobile as part of their claims for higher status. However, there were many panellists who felt ill at ease with elements of their own class; those who failed the test of taste and respectability; 'the hypocrites and social climbers and [...] that idiotic set known as naice [sic] " people ' as well as those people 'trying too hard to appear higher class' or 'ostentatious in parade of their money and position'.⁶⁵

Furthermore, there was a slightly different emphasis in comments made by those claiming lower-middle class identities around their homes. Although both considered issues around ease of getting to work and pleasant surroundings, they were more likely to mention affordability and the desire for amenities such as electricity or bathrooms as did this London clerk who wanted to move to a 'place with a bathroom, electricity and – yes – to a better neighbourhood' while others such as

⁶³ M.O.A.1108, male, born 1908, Draughtsman, reply to DR June 1939

⁶⁴ M.O.A.1024, female, born 1912, Civil Servant, reply to DR June 1939

⁶⁵ M.O.A. 1314, male, born 1919, Bank Clerk; 1178, male, born 1910, Clerk; 1136, male, born 1911, Clerk, replies to DR June 1939

this Bradford clerk who had considered moving 'we would like a bathroom [...] a house in the suburbs would be preferable to our house in the centre of town.'⁶⁶

Moreover many describing themselves as lower middle, unlike those from the established middle classes, argued that they were different from their neighbours due to their intellectual and cultural interests, for example, a Sheffield clerk who felt he was 'intellectually superior, I can enjoy music and reading and items on the radio which would make no appeal to them' or a woman from West Hartlepool who differed from her neighbours due to 'my interests in good music while their tastes run to jazz tripe (exclusively)'.⁶⁷ To me, this difference indicates that many of those claiming lower middle class identities live in more mixed communities in terms of class whereas the established middle classes tended to more socially homogeneous neighbourhoods.

The differences therefore between those identifying as lower-middle class and established middle class were fundamentally about income and upbringing. Those from the established middle classes had largely been brought up in comfortable homes in which education, access to culture and progress into a non-manual, white-collar, professional or technical occupation was part of the normal flow of life whereas for the lower-middle class it was more fractured with many embarking on lifestyles different to that of their parents, experiencing a shift from the working to the middle classes. This picture painted by these clerical workers in response to the June 1939 Directive was diverse and varied. They understood class in different ways. However, there were also very significant common threads, the belief in the importance of education to identities and the need of so many, even those whose families were manual workers, to distance themselves from the unskilled or rough working classes. For example, an audit clerk felt it necessary to write that his father was 'a turner on £3. 6s. 0d a week', a skilled worker earning a higher-than-average manual wage or a bank cashier who took care to report that his father was a skilled

⁶⁶ M.O.A. 1241, male, born 1914, Administrative Clerk; 2074, male, born 1901, Clerk, replies to DR June 1939

⁶⁷ M.O.A. 2074, male, born 1901, Clerk; 1013, female, born 1907, Civil Servant, replies to DR June 1939

‘engineering smith’.⁶⁸ Class and status identity was nuanced and complex. Education, income, family as well as occupation are critical factors and simply consigning clerks to the lower-middle class is to ignore their richness and diversity.

The following section examines the responses to the September 1948 directive and the questions about class identities. Analysis of these replies provide a snapshot into the changing images and understandings of class in a period of reconstruction and austerity.

Shifting class identifications? Self-assigned ‘Working-Class’ clerks in 1948

Compared to 1939, in 1948 the proportion of clerks claiming to be working class increased slightly to 23 per cent with around half aged under 30. Around 30 per cent argued either that class was unimportant, or that determining class was not straightforward. A 39-year-old civil servant who described himself as working class summed up the dilemma:

whatever classification is adopted there can be no hard and fast dividing lines. If income is the deciding factor, the coal-miner ranks above many black-coated workers; if manual/sedentary is the division, many highly skilled craftsmen would seem to be socially inferior to routine office workers. I define the working class as all who are employed excepting those holding executive or similar positions who, together with the self-employed, constitute the middle class.⁶⁹

In contrast to the working-class clerks in 1939, those in 1948 stressed income and their status as workers as the major determinants of class assignment. A second civil servant identifying as working class wrote:

My salary of approx. £400 is not sufficient to justify any claims to belong to a higher social class even if I felt inclined that way. I have to work for my living and consider anyone so doing, irrespective of finances rightly belongs to the working class.⁷⁰

For this 22 year old clerk, however, it was not just his low salary at £245 but also his ‘monotonous, routine job with little or no prospects’ which put him into the

⁶⁸ M.O.A. 1294, male, born 1919, Audit Clerk; 1599, male, born 1903, Bank Cashier, replies to DR June 1939

⁶⁹ M.O.A. 4499, male, born 1909, Civil Servant, reply to DR September 1948

⁷⁰ M.O.A. 4463, male, born 1903, Civil Servant, reply to DR September 1948

working classes arguing that there was a general dividing line between 'those whose positions allow initiative and responsibility and those whose hours are fixed and who really have nothing but work under orders to do,' and he was firmly in the latter.⁷¹

A further key difference in the self-described working-class clerks in 1948 was the majority simply referred to themselves as working class, not upper working class and there were few references to interests in culture as a way of distinguishing themselves within the working class. There was also little mention of the role of education as a stepping stone away from manual work, apart from one respondent who attributed his working-class status to the fact that 'my education was not really anything other than the 3Rs [...] I consider the middle class would have had some academic training'.⁷²

Middle and Lower-middle Class Identities in 1948

As in 1939, the overwhelming majority, over three quarters, of those who felt they belonged to a social class, described themselves as part of one of the traditional middle classes, mainly lower-middle or middle with less than 6 per cent opting for professional or upper-middle. For most, this was due to their occupation, working with their brains not their hands, their levels of education, interest in books, plays and higher culture and way of living as this civil servant explained:

I suppose if it is possible to identify oneself with a particular class, I would belong to the middle strata because my interests are largely those that are associated with that class. I was educated to just past the age of 17 and this coupled with an average intelligence enables me to appreciate decent books, films, plays and periodicals etc, and to hold down a worth-while conversation. [...] We were strictly brought up i.e. correct speech, decent table manners etc.⁷³

In a similar view, a 32-year-old civil servant placed himself in the 'middle middle class despite coming from a working-class family because:

Mainly because I am a salaried worker, a brain worker as compared with an unskilled manual worker, partly because of my secondary school

⁷¹ M.O.A. 4444, male, born 1926, Clerk, reply to DR September 1948

⁷² M.O.A. 3853, male, born 1918, Clerk, reply to DR September 1948

⁷³ M.O.A. 3816, male, born 1921, Civil Servant, reply to DR September 1948

education and because my intellectual and recreational activities and interests are among other brain workers.⁷⁴

For the most part as in 1939, the majority emphasised their non-manual occupation, their education and their taste for culture as their reasons for assigning themselves to a particular class. However, there were shifts and an acknowledgement of the difficulties in maintaining standards and a sense of a loss of status since the war as this Gateshead housewife pointed out :

As the daughter and wife of civil servants [I] have always considered myself as middle class but judging from the standpoint of affluence, I don't think I can claim to be anything higher than working class – perhaps upper! I feel that anybody who has to consider prices and be economical at every turn cannot claim to belong to the Middle Class. This term to me is synonymous with prosperity, not yet wealth but a carefree liberality in all things costing money. On the other hand, maybe people like myself who have had a secondary education or a university education like my husband can be promoted to the middle class regardless of bank balance'.⁷⁵

This insurance clerk agreed, wondering whether class positions were about to be reversed:

Opinion in the past appears to have regarded those who earn their living by the sweat of their brow as working class and those whose work is clerical as lower middle with those in the professions as middle. As an insurance clerk (and the son of one), I confess I subscribe to this opinion. This has probably been fairly accurate, as broadly speaking, the earnings of manual labourers, tradespeople and the like have tended to be lower than clerks. Whether this is true today and will be in the future is a debatable matter as in this 'age of the working man', the wages of the so-called producers appear to be continually rising while the black-coated

⁷⁴ M.O.A. 2923, male, born 1917, Civil Servant, reply to DR September 1948

⁷⁵ M.O.A. 4166, female, born 1920, Housewife and wife of Civil Servant, reply to DR September 1948

workers' salary remains fairly constant. Perhaps soon, their positions will be reversed.⁷⁶

This was a very different tone from that in 1939 articulating a sense of loss of status which was shared by many. A civil servant in his forties who identified as lower-middle class due to his secondary education and his permanent non-manual job, lamented 'before the war, I enjoyed a much fuller social life and could run a car, have decent clothes, good holidays.....the war has resulted in a definite lowering of my social standard'.⁷⁷ An idea which was reinforced by a 24 year old civil servant who described himself as working class on a 'bare living wage' of £350 which pre-war would have allowed him 'to consider himself middle class'.⁷⁸

However, as McKibbin explains, the issue was not simply about earnings. These were increasing but those of clerical workers were rising more slowly than those of manual workers and importantly the differentials between the groups were narrowing. In cash terms, clerks were still paid more on average than manual workers, according to Routh by 1946, an average male clerk earned 135 per cent of the average manual worker's wage but only 110 per cent by 1950.⁷⁹ Taking the civil service as an example, those in the clerical grades saw their salaries rise from an index of 100 in 1939 to 140 in 1948 and 154 in 1950 compared with the manual post-office engineers whose average wage soared to 196 in 1948 and 207 by 1950, more than doubling while the clerks' salaries grew by just over half.⁸⁰ The gap between manual and clerical wages was narrowing fast. Furthermore, over the same period, taxation rocketed; in 1938, those earning between £250-£700, which included the majority of clerks paid around 2.7 per cent of their earnings in tax, by 1947 it climbed to 12.7%.⁸¹

These ideas of losing status were not confined to questions of narrowing of income, it should also be remembered that the introduction of free secondary education for all and medical treatment free at the point of need relieved many of

⁷⁶ M.O.A. 4465, male, born 1922, Insurance Clerk, reply to DR September 1948

⁷⁷ M.O.A. 4347, male, born 1900, Civil Servant, reply to DR September 1948

⁷⁸ M.O.A. 5189, male, born 1924, Civil Servant, reply to DR September 1948

⁷⁹ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p.154

⁸⁰ Routh G, *Occupation and Pay*, p.155

⁸¹ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p.62

significant costs but at the same time, universal services removed premium, distinction and choice. While there were conflicting opinions, there was discontent as summed up in the frustrations of this Sheffield accountant who declared: 'I am to eat only standard food, wear only the regulation number of clothes, have the uniform medical attention and be denied the opportunity of visiting other lands'.⁸² He felt that he was being denied the freedom of choice and the opportunity to express his tastes and his interests which had long been part of the middle class identity.

Moreover, as McKibbin and a number of the Mass-Observers pointed out, the continued rationing and shortages, while affecting all sections of the population, had a particularly draining and dispiriting impact on the middle classes. Many of those items which helped to distinguish the middle classes from the manual workers – the comfortable homes, good clothes, cars or holidays – remained rationed or were impossible to obtain. Clothing was one of the clearest outward signs of status, the clerk was obliged to wear a suit, collar and tie for work and his wife would be expected to be well-dressed wearing a good coat, a hat and gloves even for a trip to the local shops. Yet clothing was rationed and even if a person had the necessary coupons, they could not always obtain what they wanted, as this anecdote in Kynaston's *Austerity Britain* illustrated:

to Burton's branch at the The Angel, to order one of the fifteen 'made to measure' suits that comprise their present weekly quota. Wanted a grey tweed, [...] they hadn't any in this week's allocation of patterns – only blue worsteds. They would, however, try to get me a length next week. In which case, the suit would be ready in about nine months' time!⁸³

Similarly waiting lists for cars ran into years while petrol for private consumption was rationed although the ration was relaxed in June 1948 to allow drivers up to 90 miles a month. In addition, even if items were available, wages were not keeping up with the increases in prices, on average around 40 per cent since 1945, resulting in even less money for those items like entertaining or cultural pursuits such as

⁸² M.O.A.2539, male, born 1901, Accountant, newly admitted as an accountant after 20 years as a clerk who used his savings to buy into the practice, reply to DR September 1948

⁸³ Kynaston, D, *Austerity Britain 1945-51*, (London; Bloomsbury, 2007), p.8

concerts and theatres which, prior to the War, had been a key mark of middle-class identity as this local government officer complained:

I live from hand to mouth and am almost always a little in debt by each monthly pay day [...] I economise as much as possible by buying nothing that is not absolutely necessary, by doing no entertaining (social contacts are now almost nil) and by restricting amusements to the minimum – two or three theatres/concerts a year and cinema about one a month. This is all fairly depressing.⁸⁴

Most, when asked if attitudes to social class had changed since the war replied that they had not, while several including this civil servant believed that: ‘the war has enabled me to mix with all classes, high and lower and I have lost my fear of both’.⁸⁵ However, there were dissenting voices who expressed fear about the working classes as these two respondents revealed:

during the war, the question of class scarcely arose, since all classes depended on each other for survival. This, of course is still the case, but unfortunately many of the lower classes fail to realise this and work for the extinction of the upper and middle classes.⁸⁶

While a trainee accountant from Leeds wrote: ‘in the past I was never aware of them. Now I feel real antagonism towards those who appear to be venting their class spite against me’.⁸⁷

Others felt that the working-classes had benefited while the middle classes had borne the major part of the burdens. They include this wife of a civil servant who argued that she no longer felt the same compassion for the working class; ‘Their standard of living has improved their social conditions e.g. family allowances have made life much easier for them than before the war. The middle class has it much harder’.⁸⁸ Or a railway clerk who complained that the middle classes, of which he counted himself a member, ‘pays most of the income tax and pays for the education

⁸⁴ M.O.A. 3868, male born 1907, Local Government Officer, reply to DR December 1947

⁸⁵ M.O.A. 2923, male, born 1916, Civil Servant, reply to DR September 1948.

⁸⁶ M.O.A. 4863, female, born 1921, Typist

⁸⁷ M.O.A. 5098, male, born 1924, Accounts Clerk, replies to DR September 1948

⁸⁸ M.O.A. 4173, female, born 1910, wife of Civil Servant, reply to DR October 1948

of their children in addition to those of the working class'.⁸⁹ And one housewife went further saying simply; 'I don't like the working class having so much money because they haven't learnt how to use it'.⁹⁰

A feeling which was echoed by many, such as this bank clerk arguing that his income of £450 per annum was insufficient to maintain a middle class standard of living and who complained about manual workers earning as much as £11 a week (£572) who lived in slums yet spent £6-£7 a week on beer, tobacco and the 'pools' – spending their money on the wrong things.⁹¹

Yet, despite the insistence by the majority of the white-collar sample that they were part of the middle classes, when asked to identify ten typically middle-class occupations and ten typically working-class jobs, the findings are not so clear cut. Although many argued that no occupations were typically middle or working class the majority managed to produce lists. There was almost complete unanimity in naming the professions such as solicitors, doctors, accountants and business owners as middle class while citing factory workers, dustmen, miners or labourers as working classes. Surprisingly, since most had declared their middle-class status, the position of clerks appeared more problematic; in many responses, they were simply not mentioned, while in others they were included as typically middle class, and in yet others as working class. Several respondents questioned how to define occupations as typically one class or others suggesting it was;

'increasingly difficult to segregate them (working class tradesmen) from what we knew as pre-war black-coated workers (middle class) [...] briefly my opinion is that working and middle class have come more or less one'.⁹²

Many suggested that the division between working class and middle class jobs was based purely on income although there was no consensus on the level of pay with one clerk suggesting £700 per annum as the dividing line and another £300 placing civil servants in executive or administrative grades as typically middle class

⁸⁹ M.O.A. 4008, male, born 1903, Railway Clerk, reply to DR January 1949,

⁹⁰ M.O.A. 1635, female, born 1915, wife of Civil Servant, reply to DR October 1948

⁹¹ M.O.A. 4588, male, born 1919, Bank Clerk, reply to DR September 1948

⁹² M.O.A. 4504, male, born 1926, Clerk, reply to DR September 1948

and those on clerical grades as working class.⁹³ Or alternatively, dividing occupations between those which permitted initiative and responsibility such as bank clerks, upper and middle grades in the civil service as middle class and ranked routine jobs, for example office boys, typists and bookkeepers as working class.⁹⁴

This uncertainty about class and what it represented led Mass Observation to issue a further directive in January 1949 which asked: 'What value, if any, do you attach to the continued existence of the middle classes?' While fewer than a third of the clerical sample commented on this directive, those that did, even those who identified themselves as working-class, responded in a similar vein. The overwhelming majority believed the middle classes to be an essential and valuable asset to society, seeing themselves as managers of the nation.⁹⁵ A 26-year-old civil servant who described himself as lower-middle class wrote passionately about the value of the middle classes:

I suppose I am a member of the middle classes [...] Quite honestly I feel the middle classes form the fulcrum of British life and stability, the petty snobberies and the unproductiveness and the smug suburbanism are tolerable faults when compared to their real significance. An enlightened democracy depends mainly upon the middle classes [...] Administration is mainly by and progress chiefly achieved by a solid core of enlightened middle class opinion.⁹⁶

A claim also made by a 34-year-old clerk working for a coal merchant who identified as working class due to his parentage and low pay and argued that 'industries cannot be operated, commerce cannot be continued, the educational system cannot be maintained nor the religious life of the community be kept alive' without the middle classes.⁹⁷

⁹³ For example, M.O.A 3502, male, born 1926, Clerk, suggested a dividing line of £700 p.a. and 4477, male, born 1916, Building Society Clerk, placed office staff on more than £300 as middle class and under £300 as working class; replies to DR September 1948

⁹⁴ For example M.O.A. 3811, male, born 1900, Civil Servant; 3816, male, born 1921, Civil Servant; 2852, male, born 1899, Clerk-Store-Keeper, all of whom listed routine clerks, office boys and typists as working class; 4444, male, born 1926, Clerk, included clerks in his list of working-class job as a 'monstrous routine job'; replies to DR September 1948

⁹⁵ M.O.A. 3524, male, born 1920, Civil Servant, reply to DR January 1949.

⁹⁶ M.O.A. 3785, male born 1922, Civil Servant, reply to DR January 1949

⁹⁷ M.O.A. 2925, male, born 1914, Clerk to Coal Merchant, reply to DR January 1949

Others argued that they formed a buffer between the working and the upper classes ensuring social order and stability which was the essential characteristic of the British as a female civil servant wrote: 'the middle class have too much to lose by a breakdown in order so would not allow revolution and much to gain from social legislation so were not tempted by ultra-conservatism'.⁹⁸ Furthermore, their importance lay not only in their managerial prowess, but also in their role as supporters and producers of music, art and literature as well as their involvement in voluntary organisations. A retired civil servant praised his class as the backbone of the country:

'the most educated elements in the community and more readily swayed by reason than by passing emotions. They foster culture and progress and in general advance the general level of society and civilization'.⁹⁹

Moreover, it was predominantly within the middle classes that the 'traditions of culture and voluntary service and charity and all that is best in British character' resided, a tradition which working classes, even as their incomes and standards of living improved, could not emulate because 'they do not gain the broad background in culture, their outlook is so narrow'.¹⁰⁰

While, this description of the role of the middle classes was idealised around what people thought of the middle classes as a whole, not simply the white-collar workers but professionals, scientists, politicians, business owners and academics, it was the class to which the majority of the white-collar sample felt they belonged and that they had a role, even if it was a small one, in the class which saw itself as the mainstay of the country, as organisers, as rational planners, as the keepers of culture and responsible for the maintenance of standards of morality, manners and respectability as Savage suggested.¹⁰¹ However, it is notable that it was only when asked about the middle class as a whole that ideas about being organisers and planners were expressed, for the most part, the individual responses of white-collar workers regarding their reasons behind their class assignment laid more emphasis

⁹⁸ M.O.A.2675, female, born 1892, Civil Servant, reply to DR January 1949

⁹⁹ M.O.A. 4004, male, born 1881, retired Civil Servant, reply to DR January 1949

¹⁰⁰ M.O.A. 4223, female, born 1918, Secretary, reply to DR January 1949

¹⁰¹ Savage, 'Affluence and Social Change in the Making of Technocratic Middle-class Identities' & 'Changing Social Class Identities in Post War Britain'

on their intellectual curiosity and cultural distinction supporting Hinton's arguments that an interest in culture continued to be a key feature of their middle class identities.¹⁰²

While a small but increasing number of respondents denied the existence of class, preferring to place themselves outside of the class system as an individual or as simply ordinary, the majority in both 1939 and 1948 agreed, albeit sometimes reluctantly, that they belonged to a particular social class.¹⁰³ Class, even when thought of as a negative, as a source of snobbery or undeserved privilege, remained even after the war, an important element in shaping identity. For the most part in both 1939 and 1948 they cleaved to the middle classes because they were brain workers, they were educated, they were cultured and they lived in better conditions than the working classes. Even the small proportion who identified as working class tended to qualify this labelling themselves as 'upper working' or hybrid, largely because of their education and cultural distinction.

Of those who felt they were socially mobile, moving in different circles than their parents, education was clearly the most important factor, something which propelled them up the social ladder into more financially rewarding and security jobs as clerks and also into a new intellectual and cultural world. In contrast, those in the established middle classes placed more weight upon their family and their upbringing with their identities much more focused upon belonging, of having a good education and an interest in literature or music because that was part of the normal upbringing of one from the middle or upper-middle classes.

In 1948, while education, culture and style of life were still essential elements of clerical social identity, the tone changed with much more emphasis on income, for some of the clerks, they were working class entirely due to their income - 'working class due to content of pay packet, to think otherwise would be sheer self-deception'.¹⁰⁴ For others, it was more a case that they were not able to enjoy the

¹⁰² Hinton J., 'The Class Complex': Mass Observation and cultural distinction in pre-war Britain', *Past and Present*, 199 (2008); Hinton J., 'Reflections in the Mass: Review of M. Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method*', *History Workshop Journal*, 75, 1, (2013)

¹⁰³ Langhamer, 'Who the Hell are the ordinary people?'; 95 per cent of the white-collar sample in 1939 said they belonged to a specific class, 66% per cent in 1948, see table 5.2, p.190

¹⁰⁴ M.O.A., 4234, female, born 1892, Secretary, reply to DR September 1948

middle class lifestyles as before the war especially those which were signs of middle class status and this fostered a resentment and even in some cases, a direct antagonism towards the working classes.

The following section jumps forward to the early 1960s to consider how the attitudes of clerical workers changed in response to very different social and economic conditions. The economy was booming, there was full employment and the educational reforms of 1944 had had the opportunity to bed in, what was different and also what was the same.

Affluence, Aspiration and Meritocracy? Class in the early 1960s

This section will examine the responses of the Luton sample of clerical workers and the Cambridge bank clerks to questions about class. Unlike the questioning about education, home, income and work, the responses to which have been explored in earlier chapters, these aimed to elicit the respondents' true feelings about class and status. Through unstructured, open questions, interviewers were encouraged to allow the discussion to flow without putting words into his mouth or suggesting a right or wrong answer. They began with enquiries into images of class – 'people talk about there being different classes, what do you think?' before turning to a discussion about the different classes, how to determine who belongs to which class, the dividing lines between classes, the ease or otherwise of moving between classes, their own class position and the inevitability of class.

While the responses of the affluent manual workers to these questions have been examined in detail, not only by Goldthorpe et al. as part of the original study but also in Savage's reanalysis in 2005, the views of the clerical workers have received very little attention.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, Goldthorpe et al. wrote 'in view of the very restricted nature of the white-collar sample, we have not attempted to give any great weight to the findings it produced', using them simply 'as a way of illustrating already well documented features of white-collar social attitudes and behaviour'.¹⁰⁶ Specifically, there was no analysis of the individual responses of the white-collar workers who

¹⁰⁵ J H Goldthorpe, D. Lockwood, F. Bechhofer & J. Platt, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press 1969); M. Savage, 'Working Class Identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study', *Sociology*, 39 5 (2005)

¹⁰⁶ Goldthorpe et al., *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, p.53

were treated as a homogenous group and the qualitative, nuanced answers to the questions about class were lost.

Both Savage and Lawrence have conducted some re-analysis of the Affluent Worker transcripts.¹⁰⁷ Savage re-analysed the data on class identity taken from the interviews of the manual workers examining more closely the qualitative, subjective responses in addition to the quantitative answers about the number of classes reported or how they were ordered or the frequency of particular terms, such as education, occupation or money to describe dividing lines between the classes. While Savage concurred with Goldthorpe's conclusions about the frequency of references to money as a fundamental dividing line between the classes, he took the analysis further showing that wealth was linked to power, influence and family inheritance and was a key dividing line between a small rich powerful elite and the rest, the 'average' or 'ordinary' who had to work for their living.¹⁰⁸ The 'ordinary' were a large group, both manual and non-manual, whose major characteristics lay in making their own way, earning their own living and certainly not part of a privileged upper class.¹⁰⁹ This concept of 'ordinariness' had also been noted by Savage in his work on the 1948 Mass Observers.¹¹⁰ It meant 'refusing both a stigmatized pathologized identity.....[and] a privileged position', not including oneself among the needy, problematic lower class and at the same time rejecting the notion that identity had been formed by access to privilege, whether in the form of inheritance or family connections.

Lawrence also highlighted the differences between professional and vernacular definitions about class and the need to consider how the inequalities inherent in the interview situation might have affected responses.¹¹¹ In light of replies which suggested a blurring of boundaries between the office worker and those on the shop

¹⁰⁷ Savage, 'Working Class Identities'; J. Lawrence, 'Workers Testimony and the Sociological Reification of the manual/non-manual distinctions in 1960s Britain', *Sozial.Geschichte Online/Heft 20* (2017)

¹⁰⁸ Savage, 'Working Class Identities', 95 per cent of the affluent workers referred to an upper class as central to their ideas about class.

¹⁰⁹ See also Langhamer, 'Who the Hell are the Ordinary People?'

¹¹⁰ Savage M, 'Changing social class identities in post-war Britain: Perspectives from mass-observation', *Sociological Research Online* (2007)

¹¹¹ Lawrence J, 'Social Science Encounters and the Negotiation of Difference in early 1960s England', *History Workshop Journal*, 77.1 (2014)

floor, Lawrence examined three specific questions which were designed to demonstrate typical working or middle-class characteristics – attitudes to promotion, separate canteens or setting up in business. He concluded that the differences were less than usually portrayed with significant overlaps between manual and non-manual workers, differences which were hidden in the quantitative analysis carried out by Goldthorpe et al.¹¹² I now examine the detail of the white-collar workers' responses, how did they feel about class and status?

Vernacular images of Society and Understandings of Class amongst Clerical Workers in Luton and Cambridge

While all the respondents agreed that people do talk about class, ideas about the nature of the class system, the number of classes and how to assign people to a particular class were complex and diverse and many of the responses were hesitant, defensive, rambling and often contradictory. As both Savage and Lawrence suggested in their re-analysis of the manual workers' interviews, there were many reasons which might account for this.¹¹³ Firstly, there was the imbalance in interview situation itself, men and their wives were questioned in their own homes or workplace by strangers, by highly educated researchers from an elite university. Furthermore, ideas about class and status were clearly unfamiliar topics for many of those interviewed which could be construed as a sign of the unimportance of class to this group or as Savage suggested, a nervousness about giving the 'wrong' answer to those evidently more knowledgeable about class and appearing stupid or uneducated.¹¹⁴ A SKF correspondent clerk gave such a confused description of class suggesting there were numerous classes that he felt it necessary to apologise:

Well, there's the haves and the have-nots, and they can be either the financial haves and have-nots and the ones with or without education and those with and without intelligence – Oh yes, there's lots of different classes. [...] People generally think there's the Rich, the Middle Class, the Lower or Working Class er - it usually revolves around money. [...]

¹¹² Lawrence J, 'Workers' testimony and the sociological reification of manual/non-manual distinctions in 1960s Britain, *Sozial.Geschichte Online/* Heft 20 /2017 <http://duepublico.uni-duisburg-essen.de/servlets/DocumentServlet?id=43554>. Goldthorpe et al, *Affluent Worker* p.71--76

¹¹³ Savage, 'Working Class Identities'; Lawrence, 'Workers' testimony'

¹¹⁴ Savage, 'Working Class Identities'

For me it is more mainly from educational side than the monetary. [...] The Intelligent, the Less-Intelligent and the Dim, then there's the Rich, the Less Wealthy and the Poor - there's six already - there could be more.' [...] the reason we're having so much difficulty here is that we've never thought about it before and analysed it'.¹¹⁵

Similarly, another man and his wife, while trying to make sense of the questions, argued about whether there were two or three classes and the importance or otherwise of money in determining class before admitting 'I'll be quite truthful, I wouldn't ever have thought [about class] if you hadn't come tonight. It's not anything I've ever really delved into or thought about.'¹¹⁶ Moreover, the questioning did not just explore unfamiliar concepts but requests to identify 'who is above you and who is just below you' raised tensions and sensitive issues around, for example, snobbery and racism. Add to this, the fact that the class questions came towards the end of an interview, which in many cases took place in the evening after the working day and extended over three hours with respondents expected to reply immediately to contentious subjects, it was hardly surprising that some of the responses were confused and hard to follow.

The transcripts make it clear that ideas about the class system were in flux and that these white-collar workers recognised the class system and specifically their own place within it in different ways. While some argued that class no longer had any significance, the majority were certain that social classes existed, albeit less visible and less influential than in the years before the war. A Barclays worker was clear, 'There are quite definitely social classes, perhaps not as well defined as they used to be.' 'Yes and always will be' responded a Laporte clerk.¹¹⁷ Whereas others including this building society tax clerk disagreed: 'I don't think there is today, I think it's what class people make for themselves'.¹¹⁸

Moreover, there were considerable variations in the way they described classes which, in turn, differed from the ways in which academics defined class. Over half

¹¹⁵ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 538, Correspondent Clerk, SKF

¹¹⁶ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 545, Section Leader in Home Sales, Laporte

¹¹⁷ *Affluent Worker in Class Structure*, 009, Accountant, Barclays; *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 541, Assistant in Shipping Office, Laporte

¹¹⁸ *Affluent Worker in Class Structure*, 029, Tax Clerk, N & P Building Society

maintained there were three classes, although again, there were differences in the make-up of these three classes. For example, a correspondence clerk employed by SKF said ‘there is an upper-class social set, dukes etc. Then a middle class of professional men, top bankers and people like that and then a working class everyone else [...] ‘everyone who works on a fixed income below £2,000’.¹¹⁹ Whereas a Laporte’s sales clerk saw society as made up of a upper or landed class which included chairman of big businesses; a lower class of those in poorly paid jobs and those not wanting to work and a very wide middle which ‘takes in 80-85% of the population - most people are middle class.’¹²⁰

Others suggested there were only two classes– the upper class, the very rich or the establishment and the ‘rest’, again referred to as either working or middle class. The remainder, around twenty per cent of those interviewed, thought there were four or more classes; an upper class of those with land, property and high incomes, an upper middle made up of professionals, senior civil servants and managers, a lower middle of shopkeepers, clerks and schoolteachers and a working class earning less than £15 a week or alternatively a upper and a middle class with the working class of manual and non-manual workers earning up to £1500 per annum and a poor, low group working class into an affluent and a poor or low group getting less than £10 a week.¹²¹ However, it was made very clear that none of those interviewed felt that they belonged **in any way** to either the upper classes or the lower poor class but included both in their descriptions of class structure as a way of distancing themselves from these groups, a way of confirming their identities by demonstrating what they were not.

Identifying the Upper Classes: Wealth, Capital and Power

The overwhelming majority of those interviewed spoke of the existence of an upper class which was variously described as ‘very select people who can afford to buy big

¹¹⁹ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 511, Correspondence Clerk, SKF

¹²⁰ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 549, Sales Clerk, Laporte.

¹²¹ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 526, Home Sales Clerk, Laporte, spoke of an upper class, an upper middle with high incomes and property ownership, a lower middle like himself and a working class group earning no more than £15 a week; 536, Assistant Purchasing Officer, Laporte, had an upper rich class, a middle class earning £10,000 p.a., a working class which included both manual and non-manual earning up to £1,500 p.a. and a lower or poor class such as farm labourers and pensions getting around £10 a week.

houses – big business men, company directors and works managers'; 'the establishment –the ruling landowners and tycoons'; 'the owning class'; the landed gentry; the aristocracy and those 'like the Clores [...] they can talk of investment in millions'.¹²² Their wealth allowed them to enjoy completely different life styles and to indulge in 'five guinea meals'; 'holidays without saving, to the continent' with 'their cars, and detached houses and that sort of thing; they go out yachting at weekends'.¹²³

As Savage argued, for the clerks as well as the affluent workers, it was not just money which made the upper classes different.¹²⁴ Power and influence was also seen to lie in the hands of the upper classes 'Big business takes it on itself to govern the rest of the community' commented a Cambridge bank clerk while one of his colleagues described the upper classes as 'the establishment....a small class, which governs the country to a large extent, by politics or finance.'¹²⁵ A view which was shared in Luton 'they are the people that have the money. They have greater control and say in the running of the country'.¹²⁶

The upper classes not only had power, they were also perceived to have independence and the ability to control their future and that of their children. A SKF sales clerk maintained that 'the owning class -.mainly rich people, landowners, directors and such like [...] if you are in the owning class you have more power and leisure and you are not dependent on anyone else for your future.'¹²⁷ A more direct example of the way the upper classes have control over their children's future was given by a Laporte plant maintenance clerk:

'people [who] can afford to put their kids out to private schools, while the working man sends his kids to the ordinary school in the hope they'll pass exams to grammar-school and if they're lucky win scholarships to

¹²² For example, *Affluent Worker Collection* 504, Tabulator, SKF; 547, Distributor, SKF; 506, Sales Planning clerk, SKF; 508 Senior Accounts Clerk, SKF; *Affluent Worker in Class Structure*, 043, Clerk in Charge, Barclays

¹²³ *Affluent Worker collection*, 512, Senior Tool planner/estimator, SKF; 500, Cost clerk, SKF; 510 Sales Clerk, SKF

¹²⁴ Savage, 'Working Class Identities'

¹²⁵ *Affluent Worker in class structure* 043, Clerk in Charge, Barclays; 054, Principal Securities Clerk, Barclays

¹²⁶ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 500, Cost Clerk, SKF

¹²⁷ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 506, Sales Planning Clerk, SKF

university, whereas the man with money can send his kiddy to boarding-school and he'll have the things in life that carry so much weight.¹²⁸

Moreover, none of those interviewed felt that there was any opportunity for them to join the privileged upper classes; 'And there's the establishment. [...] the whole ruling set up, a kind of closed shop' according to a Barclay's bank clerk.¹²⁹ Wealth, although essential, was not enough, birth, family and educational background were also important, as a bank clerk in his early 30s declared:

Winning £250,000 on the football pools might take you into their financial bracket, but you can't acquire what's been bred into them by generations. One can go from lower to upper middle class by money alone and you can acquire the rest after a time, but certainly no further than the upper middle class.¹³⁰

These descriptions of the upper classes therefore give a clear indication of identities which the white-collar workers, like their manual worker colleagues, did not share. Furthermore, by so plainly distinguishing themselves from the upper classes, they were also claiming an identity, one which was seen as 'normal' and 'ordinary' based upon themselves and their own efforts, skills and hard work and not because of the privileges bequeath to them by accident of birth, the talents of their forebearers or their family name.¹³¹

Identifying the Lower Classes: Unfortunates and Layabouts

If these clerks were not members of the upper class, they were most definitely not part of the so-called lower classes. Around a third of those interviewed identified what they referred to as a lower class, also in some cases labelled as the poor, the irresponsible or the layabouts. This lower class, as described, was not synonymous with the traditional manual working classes although, for some it included some unskilled manual workers, the very low paid such as farm workers, road sweepers and dustmen; 'coloured' people as well as people referred to as 'unfortunates' who

¹²⁸ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 539, Planning Plant Maintenance Clerk, Laporte

¹²⁹ *Affluent Worker in Class structure*, 043 Clerk in Charge, Barclays

¹³⁰ *Affluent Worker in class structure*, 051 Assistant to Chief Clerk, Barclays

¹³¹ Langhamer, 'Who the Hell are the Ordinary People?'

might be pensioners or the 'mentally low'.¹³² As with the upper classes, many of those interviewed highlighted characteristics of this group as a way of stressing the differences between these so-called 'lower classes' and themselves describing them in discriminatory or contemptuous terms. Apart from the pensioners and perhaps those unemployed living in depressed areas who were largely to be pitied, many felt that those in the lower class were there because of their own failings, as these Luton clerks claimed; 'the man who's idle and doesn't want to do anything about it'; and 'the type of chap who's from the slums, living in squalor and never had any ambition [...]. the lazy type that doesn't want to work, living on the dole with no self-respect'.¹³³ Sentiments which were shared by several colleagues who argued that 'anyone who is poor nowadays has only themselves to blame' and 'there aren't many able bodied poor people in Luton, they're poor because of their own laziness; there's no need for anyone to be on the dole in Luton'.¹³⁴

Yet, it was not only the unemployed who were castigated for their failings, around a quarter of those identifying a lower class included labourers and unskilled workers with one Barclays bank cashier in his early twenties offering extreme disapproval stating:

they very often have a TV set and a car, those sort of amenities; they haven't had the education to try to better themselves, they are quite satisfied living in crowded room and not being too particular about hygiene, that sort of thing.¹³⁵

For the most part, however, these men were simply censured for not having 'enough intelligence or ambition to do better things' or being someone:

¹³² *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 510, Sales Clerk, SKF; 549, Assistant Sales Clerk, SKF; 507, Distributor, SKF; 501, Orders Clerk, SKF; *Affluent Worker in Class Structure*, 033 Building Society Clerk, N & P

¹³³ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 539, Plant Maintenance Clerk, Laporte; 524, Credit Control Assistant, SKF

¹³⁴ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 503, Correspondence Clerk, SKF; 512, Senior tool planner and Estimator, SKF

¹³⁵ *Affluent Worker in Class Structure*, 056, Bank Cashier, Barclays

who doesn't look properly after his future – doesn't put money aside for a rainy day. And, generally speaking...wants as much money as possible for as little work as possible. And usually is of limited intelligence.¹³⁶

Although the researchers did not ask any questions about race, a number of those interviewed made comments which indicated that, for them at least, being white was a sign of their identity, one listed 'coloured people' within the lower class, another argued that 'coloured' people would never get into the middle or upper class because most Indians and Pakistanis think and act differently' while a third was reported by the interviewer to have 'revolting' ideas about race.¹³⁷ That these comments were unsolicited and said openly to strangers suggests that there was an understanding that these were commonly held beliefs. But they also tell us more, as Waters has argued, about the link between class, respectability and race, about the way in which people from different races were perceived as a threat to the status and the respectability of a neighbourhood.¹³⁸ Waters offers detailed evidence of the widespread belief that a black or Asian neighbour was not to be welcomed; they did not know how to behave, they do not follow the rules of conventional neighbourliness, they were disruptive, noisy and uncivilised. To retain respectability and status therefore, it was necessary to maintain distance between the respectable white and the racialised other – to live apart and as Schofield showed also to socialise separately.¹³⁹ While the majority of the Luton clerks stressed the respectability of their neighbourhoods, the question of the impact of Black or Asian neighbours was not explored, although with an expanding New Commonwealth population in Luton, from around 2,000 in 1961 to over 10,000 in 1971 and 25,000 in 1981, it would merit further investigation¹⁴⁰.

¹³⁶ *Affluent Worker in Class Structure*, 024, Senior Clerk, Barclays; 051 Assistant to Chief Clerk, Barclays

¹³⁷ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 500, Cost Clerk, SKF; 501, Orders Clerk, SKF; 508, Accounts Clerk, SKF; 539 Plant Maintenance Clerk, Laporte

¹³⁸ R. Waters, *Colonized by Humanity*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press 2023) Chapter 1 Precarious Lives

¹³⁹ C. Schofield, 'In Defence of White Freedom: Working Men's Clubs and the Politics of Sociability in Late Industrial England', *Twentieth Century British History*, 34.3 (2023) which discusses the imposition of colour bars in working men's club

¹⁴⁰ Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me*, p.118; Questions about ethnic origins were not asked in the census until 1991, figures for 1971 were obtained from P. N Jones, 'The Distribution and Diffusion of Coloured Population in England and Wales, 1961-1971', *Transactions of Institute of British Geography*, 3

These clerks were therefore very clear in defining themselves as against these identities, they were not part of the upper classes, they did not depend upon privilege or inheritance, but upon themselves, their own skills and labour for their living and status. In the same way, they were not feckless or irresponsible, scrounging off the state, again they were responsible, civilised and respectable. The following section turns to how these clerks thought about themselves, what they were rather than what they were not.

Blurred boundaries and shared ambitions? Clerical Identities 1960-1964

This section examines the way individual clerks thought about their own class positions going behind the simple labels to consider their feelings and understandings of the way class impacted upon their experiences and their identities. However, the differing understandings of the class structure makes the use of traditional labels difficult to interpret.

Analysis of individual interviews gives a very varied picture which was unsurprising given the diversity of backgrounds and experiences. While they were all white-collar workers aged between eighteen to sixty-five, there were clear differences both between the Luton and Cambridge clerks and also within each sample. The Cambridge clerks who enjoyed a structured career with regular increments, had all remained at school until at least 16 and were either working towards or had completed professional qualifications with the Institute of Bankers with salaries ranging from £7 a week for a junior to £30 for a senior bank clerk. In terms of politics, two thirds of those old enough to vote were Conservative supporters. In contrast, just under half of the Luton clerks were paid monthly earning between £15 and £23 a week while the rest were paid weekly or fortnightly with paid overtime bringing their take-home pay to the same levels. Again, around half had left school at the minimum leaving age without formal qualifications although there was no correlation between school leaving age and income. Politically, most, around 46 per cent were Conservative voters with 33 per cent Labour and the rest equally spilt between the Liberals and unsure.¹⁴¹

(1978); and for 1981 from *Ethnicity in 1991 Census, Vol 3, Social Geography and Ethnicity in Britain: Geographic Spread, Spatial Concentration and Internal Migration*, (London; HMSO 1996)

¹⁴¹ Of those who were unsure, two would vote fascist if there was a candidate standing.

Although no one interview could be defined as typical or representative, there were common themes and attitudes. Many of those interviewed found the whole question of class challenging, perhaps lacking the language to fully express their opinions but overall, most, when prompted by the interviewer, assigned themselves to one or other of the traditional classes as shown in table 5.3 below albeit sometimes reluctantly or uncertainly.

Table 5.3: Indicative Class position (number)

Class	Luton Clerks	Cambridge Clerks	Total
Upper Middle	2	1	3
Middle	8	8	16
Lower Middle	2	6	8
Working	11	1	12
Ordinary	4	2	6
No Class	5	5	10

Again, there were clear differences between the Cambridge clerks and those from Luton. The overwhelming majority of the Cambridge sample, 15 out of 23, identified as part of the middle classes with only one clerk, a 19-year-old cashier, the son of a GPO telegraphist, describing himself as working class, a position he did not anticipate would endure:

‘if you’ve an executive position in a bank, you’re upper class [whereas] the lower class is just anyone in the lower income bracket, anybody with an non-executive position, [I am] definitely working class. I’m hoping for a change.’¹⁴²

There was nothing surprising in this; of the 15, all but three were from non-manual backgrounds with a secondary grammar or private education, all characteristics of middle-class identity.¹⁴³ In addition, banking was traditionally considered an archetypal middle-class occupation.

¹⁴² *Affluent Worker in Class Structure*, 060, Cashier, Barclays

¹⁴³ Of the three with manual fathers, one was a foreman on the railways, one a railway inspector and one a skilled worker in the motor trade, all considered within the upper reaches of the working classes.

In contrast, the Luton sample was more diverse with a slight majority, 37.5 per cent, declaring themselves to be middle class, 34 per cent working class and 28 per cent refusing class labels. Of those who assigned themselves to the working classes, the majority, 62 per cent, were sons of manual workers while the fathers of those asserting themselves to be middle class were split equally between manual and non-manual occupations. Furthermore, 60 per cent of those who answered the question about previous employment had had manual jobs in the past.

In terms of education, there was no correlation between type of school attended and declared class position, with those describing themselves as working class split between five ex-grammar school pupils; four older men having attended elementary schools and one younger clerk from the post war equivalent, the secondary modern and one from a technical school. In addition, they worked in the same locations as shop-floor manual workers, having similar family incomes and in many cases having manual workers as friends and neighbours.¹⁴⁴

Overall, 10 (18 per cent) of respondents, with equal numbers from each sample, refused to identify with any particular class, arguing that class and status had no meaning for them. For some, this was because 'there is no need in this day and age.....that in a job like this, you need to be able to mix freely ..without thinking differently of anybody'.¹⁴⁵ Another felt that 'class is what people make for themselves'.¹⁴⁶ To a Barclays chief clerk and a Laporte Statistical Clerk, class was simply an irrelevance, something to be ignored; an artificial construct only of interest to 'those who care' variously described as social climbers, snobs and those 'who judge a man upon the amount he earns'.¹⁴⁷ For others, it was more a demand for and belief in social equality and in their own individuality and worth: 'personally, I don't acknowledge a class.....I think I'm as good as the next man'.¹⁴⁸ Or 'the only

¹⁴⁴ Goldthorpe et al, *Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* p.39 median family incomes for both manual and non-manual samples was £18-£20. *Affluent Worker in class structure 1961-1962* [data collection], around two thirds of all respondents in my sample had at least one manual worker as a neighbour, while a third included manual workers among their closest friends.

¹⁴⁵ *Affluent Worker in Class Structure*, 044, Bank Clerk, Barclays

¹⁴⁶ *Affluent Worker in Class Structure*, 029, Tax Clerk, N & P

¹⁴⁷ *Affluent Worker in Class Structure*, 049, Chief Clerk, Barclays; *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 527, Statistical Clerk, Laporte

¹⁴⁸ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 547, Distributor, SKF

classes I recognise are classes of intelligence...I've no respect for a lord as a lord....an intelligent cowman is as good as an intelligent banker'.¹⁴⁹

A further 11 per cent agreed that classes existed but, while accepting there were social distinctions based upon intellect, income or lifestyles, refused to attach the traditional labels to themselves preferring to describe themselves as 'a member of the community', 'the ordinary group' or 'the average class', a very wide group which allowed them to sidestep any accusations of snobbery by claiming either a higher status for themselves or labelling others as inferior and at the same time coupling themselves with the decent and respectable.¹⁵⁰ However, in effect, the so-called 'ordinary' or 'average' class had much in common with the large common classes identified as either working or middle. This rejection of class labels was also noted by Savage in both his research into the Mass-Observation responses to the 1948 directive on class and his re-analysis of the manual workers responses to the same questions and the idea of a large group, variously labelled, as discussed above, was a recurring theme.¹⁵¹

Of those who recognised class, over three quarters from both Cambridge and Luton believed the boundaries between classes, apart from those around the upper and the lower or layabout classes, were disappearing and that they were part of a wider class which included white-collar workers and manual workers, although there was no consensus on whether this was a middle or a working class.

Some argued there was a middle class; as a Cambridge bank clerk declared:
the manual worker and the office worker and that type of thing and the so-called executive class. I think that its [differences] all superficial rather than social class differences.

Interviewer: so all those groups are in the same class, the middle class?

Yes.¹⁵²

A SKF clerk in his late twenties agreed:

¹⁴⁹ *Affluent Worker in Class Structure*, 076, Foreign Exchange Clerk, Barclays

¹⁵⁰ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 049, Chief Clerk, Barclays; 013, Assistant Accountant, Barclays; *The Affluent worker Collection*, 500, Cost Clerk, SKF

¹⁵¹ Savage, 'Changing social class identities in post-war Britain'; Savage, 'Working Class Identities'; Langhamer, 'Who the Hell are the Ordinary People'

¹⁵² *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 033, Building Society Clerk, N & P

they're probably tending for the boundaries between classes to decrease as the standard of living goes up. The lower classes are coming up to more middle-class levels and the so-called upper-class is moving down [...] I don't think the working-class of the early part of the century really exists today.¹⁵³

Ideas shared by a Laporte sales clerk in his forties who stated:

the so-called middle has probably become wider with increased wages.

Once that was a white-collar man working in the City, with a car. Now the middle's very wide and takes in 80-85 per cent of the population.¹⁵⁴

Others declared the large class to be a working class which included everyone who worked for a living; as a senior accounts clerk employed by SKF insisted, it contained 'virtually every class of wage-earner and salaried man [including] the SKF Managing Director – he still works for his living' and a Laporte's cost clerk who claimed 'you're working class whether you wear a white collar or overalls' dividing the classes between the titled and moneyed and the rest.¹⁵⁵ Others saw a narrower working class which excluded those in the professions, businessmen and executives but did include routine white-collar clerks, as a senior statistical clerk at Laporte's and a despatch clerk employed by SKF explained the working-class was made up of 'many grades...the general office-worker, the skilled and unskilled operators' or 'the ordinary workingmen – porters, builders, decorators, same as myself.'¹⁵⁶ However, whichever way this class was labelled, as middle, working or simply ordinary, it was clearly one which included manual and non-manual workers. Over three quarters of the Luton sample thought they were of the same class to those working on the shop floor while around half of the Cambridge workers considered there was little difference between white-collar and manual workers.¹⁵⁷

Furthermore, there was general agreement that ideas about class were changing, and that this blurring of boundaries between manual and non-manual

¹⁵³ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 535, Senior Assistant to Supervisor of Cost Department, SKF

¹⁵⁴ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 549, Sales Clerk, Laporte

¹⁵⁵ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 508, Senior Accounts Clerk, SKF; 543, Cost Clerk, Laporte, his definition of moneyed included those at Director level and above.

¹⁵⁶ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 527, Statistics Clerk, Laporte; 513, Despatch Clerk, SKF, a

¹⁵⁷ See also Lawrence J, 'Workers' testimony', analysis of the 54 non-manual workers 23% identified themselves as a different class than shop floor workers.

workers was of relatively recent origin. For example, a Laporte documentation clerk in his 40s, who left school at 14, and therefore would have experience of working pre-war, argued that classes were:

tending more to move closer together [...] from the money point of view I would say the working-class has moved up into the middle class and the middle class has moved slightly down the scale. I'm taking the comparison of before the war and today; I suppose the middle class before the war were the businessmen, the professional men mainly - but now there has been a rise in the standard of living of the workers compared with the business side or the white-collar workers, that the two classes are almost intermingled now.¹⁵⁸

A similar point of view was put forward by a younger man, who brought together 'the general worker in industry - and the clerical – the average clerical worker and most of your manual workers in industrial areas' into one middle class explaining that this was due to improved standards of living alongside better education, the raising of the school leaving age and more secure and better paid jobs.¹⁵⁹

The feeling of change, of flux at a time of increasing affluence and as Macmillan phrased it when 'you've never had it so good, was reflected in the comments of both sets of clerks.¹⁶⁰ Overall, what was noticeable about the responses of both was the attitude of optimism, ambition and aspiration – a sense that change was possible provided the individual grasped the opportunity. This was particularly plain when discussing how they distinguished themselves from those considered below them in the social scale. For example, two of the Cambridge clerks, both of whom identified as middle class, believed: 'those who stay in the lower class do so because they're spending all their money, not educating themselves. [...] even the ordinary man can raise himself by reading, educating himself'.¹⁶¹ While his colleague declared: 'the lower class have inherited [their] class

¹⁵⁸ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 542, Documentation Clerk in Shipping Office, Laporte, aged over 40 and left school at 14, so he would have started work in prior to the war.

¹⁵⁹ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 535, SKF Senior Assistant to supervisor of Cost Department

¹⁶⁰ Harold Macmillan in a speech in Bedford on 20th July 1957, www.bbc.co.uk/onthistday.20thJuly

¹⁶¹ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 029, N & P Tax Clerk

from their working class parents and have been content to stay and idle their lives away [...] it's possible for practically everyone to attain the middle class....just by working and applying the results of your work to your home life and other activities.¹⁶² A clerk in the Laporte purchasing office had a similar opinion designating those below him as 'people who either haven't got the same finances, or ambition or will'.¹⁶³

An outstanding example of this attitude of mind was given by a Laporte clerk in his late 20s working as assistant to the shipping manager. He had left secondary modern and done a brick-laying apprenticeship before taking evening classes and being employed by Laporte's and who placed himself firmly in the upper middle class:

There's the manual working class – he's the person who is quite content with what he's got and doesn't try to improve himself, he just moans and does nothing. Then there's the lower middle class, who are the people that are not quite manual workers but not far off it - they do a slightly better job but have no real ambition behind them. Then there is the upper middle class, who is the type of person who intends to improve his lot in the world, improve his living standard as much as possible and give his children a better start in life'.¹⁶⁴

A similar point of view was put forward by a plant maintenance clerk who had moved from the shop floor into the office, a move he saw as social advancement, and who described himself as working class but distinguished himself from the 'type of chap who's born in it [the working class], lives in it and realises he'll never get out of it unless he wins the pools so he reconciles himself' and himself 'the type who's born in it but is always looking for a better job'.¹⁶⁵

This sense of aspiration or ambition on the part of those interviewed was also apparent in the answers to questions posed about social mobility. Although the question simply asked if it was possible to change class, the automatic assumption was to discuss upward mobility. The overwhelming majority thought that it was

¹⁶² *Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, 033, N & P Clerk

¹⁶³ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 546. Purchase Clerk, SKF

¹⁶⁴ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 541, Assistant to Shipping Manager, Laporte

¹⁶⁵ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 539, Plant Maintenance Clerk, Laporte

possible although not to the upper classes or aristocracy but many aspired to move within and between the working, the middle and the professional classes, if not for themselves, for their children. For themselves, it was about character and effort:

You can only do it through yourself. First you start by broadening your outlook and trying to attain higher standards in every aspect of your life in work and in play, in that way you would automatically improve your own standard of living and over time you would gradually through your own efforts leave one class automatically and join the next.¹⁶⁶

Others agreed, the route was seen to be via work, working hard, 'getting a higher position at work' which would allow 'better houses in better districts,' or 'increases in his job, increases in salary and a better standard of living. Buying his own house' equating, income and life style with class position.¹⁶⁷ However, for another set, changing class was about more than just a more affluent lifestyle, it would take time and education, as one Cambridge clerk declared, 'a self-made man who has no education [...] he will find it very difficult [to get into the middle class] but if he has the wit to give his son an education, the boy will move up'.¹⁶⁸

The importance of aspiration and ambition to the identities of these white-collar workers was reflected in their ideas about the qualities needed 'to get on' and the weight given to the potential for promotion in their choice of employment. When the Cambridge sample was asked about the most important qualities which 'would help a man get on', ambition was selected the most frequently followed by character, both above hard work, intelligence or education.¹⁶⁹ Similarly when asked about the most important things to look for in a job, all apart from one included promotion within their three selections while 'interest' was the second most important followed by the prospect of steady employment. For the Luton clerks, education and knowing the right people were seen as the most important qualities for 'getting on', while there were no reasons given, this might be due to the contrasting employment conditions

¹⁶⁶ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 541, Assistant to Shipping Manager, Laporte

¹⁶⁷ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 024, Senior Bank Clerk, Barclays; *Affluent Worker Collection* 549, Assistant Sales Clerk, Laporte

¹⁶⁸ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 049, Chief Clerk, Barclays

¹⁶⁹ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, interviewees were asked to select the three most important factors from a given list – ambition, education, character, contacts, hard work, intelligence and luck.

with the closed structured career path of the bank workers and the more ad hoc arrangements in industrial plants with external recruitment, few mutually recognised qualifications and no clear promotion ladder. Yet, it was clear that many Luton clerks did aspire to improve their position at work with 87 per cent 'very keen' or 'fairly keen' for promotion and over 64 per cent believing they had a good or reasonable chance of achieving their ambition.

These aspirations spread beyond the workplace, the Luton clerks were asked whether their standards of living had improved over the past five years, all but one agreed that they had. They were also questions about the next ten years, all were positive, they all expected improvements with most responses focused upon their homes; 'to have paid off the mortgage and improve the house, maybe even a car'; to allow the wife to stop work and maybe a new car and to have cash in the bank'; 'a house of our own and possibly a car'.¹⁷⁰

Dividing Lines: Income, Work, Education

In a shift from the opinions expressed by the clerical Mass Observers before the war who cited education, lifestyle and engaging in non-manual work as key to their class identities, over 70 per cent of all those interviewed in the 1960s focused upon money as the main, but not only, determinant assigning class position. As a SKF cost clerk wondered;

the working class and the middle class are more come together now, after all who is to define the true explanation of working-class and middle class? [...] It's really difficult, do they become working class, because they work with their hands or a pen, because he is given orders, because of the property they own? [...] is it the difference between council and private? They're almost as one' [...] 'the main difference is money'.¹⁷¹

Similar sentiments are reported by a Cambridge bank clerk who insisted that it was money that decided 'we're getting more like America everyday where it's the size of your bank balance that determines what club you are in. Emoluments are superseding education and breeding in determining class'.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 510, Sales Clerk, SKF; 527, Senior Statistical Clerk, Laporte; 503, Correspondence Clerk, SKF - a council tenant.

¹⁷¹ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 500, Cost Clerk, SKF

¹⁷² *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 082, Assistant to Assistant Chief Clerk, Barclays

Income was particularly important for these clerks when distinguishing between themselves and the upper classes with many expressing the differences in concrete terms. A Laporte clerk who defined the working classes as all those taking home between £600-£1500 a year (between £12 and £29 a week), the middle class of managing directors, sales managers and executives earning £10,000 to £20,000 and the upper classes having millions, mainly through inheritance, was typical.¹⁷³

However, the question of how their own incomes determined their class position was more complex and nuanced. All but one of the Cambridge clerks claimed middle class status regardless of income while as is shown in table 5.4, there was limited correlation between income and stated class position for the Luton clerks.

Table 5.4: Income and Self-attributed class of Luton sample ¹⁷⁴

Income Bands - £ per week	Upper- middle	Middle	Lower- middle	Working	Ordinary	None	%
Under £18	-	3	2	5	3	2	46
£18-£23.19s	1	4	-	5	1	3	43
£24 plus	1	-	-	-	-	-	3
Not known	-	1	-	1	-	-	6

(does not add up to 100 because of rounding)

Nor was there a link between the 50 per cent of my sample who were paid monthly salaries and not entitled to paid overtime, one of the criteria used by several Mass Observers to claim middle class status.¹⁷⁵ Of these 43 per cent declared themselves middle class and 31 per cent working class with the remaining 25 per cent either no class or ordinary. Those who were paid weekly or fortnightly and who were paid for overtime in the same way as manual workers were similarly split albeit with a slightly higher percentage 37.5 identifying as working class.

¹⁷³ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 536, Assistant purchasing officer, Laporte

¹⁷⁴ *Affluent Worker Collection*

¹⁷⁵ M.O.A. 3844, male, born 1904, Cashier-accounts, his criteria for being considered lower middle class were he had a non-manual occupation and was paid monthly; 3851, male, born 1911, Clerk – 'I am a salaried clerk'; and 3868, male, born 1907, Local Government Officer; I am not a weekly wage earner'; replies to DR September 1948

Yet further investigation showed that income was important as large numbers of both Cambridge and Luton clerks considered themselves as part of a single class alongside manual workers regardless of how it was labelled due to income levels. As this Luton clerk declared;

I know there are different classes, but not in the old-fashioned way – rich, middle class and poor. I consider myself middle class. The middle class is the average working man irrespective of office or factory [...] the factory worker now earns as much if not more than office.¹⁷⁶

Table 5.5 makes it clear that that, for the most part, incomes of clerical and manual workers were very similar with 77 per cent of the bank clerks, 89 per cent of the Luton clerks and 96 per cent of the affluent workers sampled taking home less than £24 per week. However, there was a significant difference in the proportion of bank clerks earning over £24 with a small number earning £30.

Table 5.5: Comparison of income earned by Cambridge and Luton clerks and Goldthorpe's affluent worker sample

Income Bands - £ per week	Cambridge Bank Clerks	Luton Clerks	Manual Workers
Under £18	50%	46%	47%
£18-£23.19s	27%	43%	49%
£24 plus	22%	3%	4%
Not known		6%	-

However, it must be stressed that the figures relate to take-home pay which for the manual workers included significant amounts for over-time and payments for shift work. Goldthorpe et al. had selected the Luton manual workers as exemplars of affluence and did not include manual workers earning less than £17. When average weekly earnings for manual workers in Britain as a whole were considered, they were not very different from those quoted for the Luton clerks; in 1963, the median

¹⁷⁶ *The Affluent Worker Collection*, 524, Credit Control Clerk, SKF

weekly take home pay for men aged 21 and over in manufacturing industry, before deductions, was £16.19.0d rising to £20.5.0d for the upper quartile.¹⁷⁷

Income, therefore, was not necessarily a strong factor in decisions about class assignment within the sample, but it was clearly very influential in the development of ideas about the disappearance or blurring of class barriers between the manual and shop floor worker and the belief that they were all part of the same class. This was summed up by SKF despatch clerk who identified as working class and believed that his status as a clerk had diminished since the war, mainly due to the narrowing of income differentials:

before the war a clerk was a good job; that's why I class now a clerk in the working class, because they're not any better off than the ordinary labourer or machinist – even a sweeper-upper can get more than a clerk.¹⁷⁸

His colleague argued on similar lines putting both manual and clerical workers into the same class albeit for him, it was a wide middle class of those earning between £800 and £1500 per annum:

'Manual and clerical workers both get the same now as far as wages go, that is workers in industry and the coal mines, things like that [...] financial status and how they live, what sort of housing and how they dress and eat. It all depends on salary'.¹⁷⁹

This reduction or elimination of income differentials between clerks and factory workers made them therefore, in the eyes of the majority of those interviewed, members of the same class who enjoyed similar standards of living, as was explored in chapter four, as a Cambridge bank official remarked:

We in banks are now lumped in with lower classes. Many of the people in the bank would disagree but this is the stark reality. I earn very little more than a lorry driver. The gap has narrowed enormously in my lifetime. There is very little distinction now [...] Money is a great leveller, if you pay people the same money, they can't live very differently.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Goldthorpe et al, *The Affluent Worker: Political Attitudes* p.36

¹⁷⁸ *Affluent worker Collection*, 513, Despatch Clerk, SKF

¹⁷⁹ *Affluent worker Collection*, 500, Cost Clerk, SKF

¹⁸⁰ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 043, Clerk in Charge, Barclays

Similarly, the question of education which had been so critical to the identities of the Mass Observation clerks with attendance at a secondary school a key dividing line between the working and middle classes appeared to be little considered as these men saw themselves as little different from their manual colleagues within an expanded middle or working class. However, it was seen as important in separating them from both the upper or professional classes and the low or layabout class. Some clerks talked about the unfairness of the system which allowed: 'the public school type to have an advantage [...] to enter the commercial system at a different level' and the SKF tabulator who said: 'I feel that the upper class - big businessmen, company secretaries, works managers, directors and that - have a better education because of their money, they could buy it because they came from a select class.'¹⁸¹ Conversely education and more specifically attitudes and value given to education was a line of separation from the lowest class who: 'haven't had the education or haven't tried to improve their education by taking advantage of the education opportunities offered to them at night school for instance'¹⁸² However, despite this, the majority, as was shown in the preceding chapter on education, were ambitious for their children's education seeing it as an essential avenue for social mobility as evidenced by the Cambridge clerk's fears about their children failing the 11 plus with one going as far as suggesting failure would 'ruin' his son's life.¹⁸³

The perceptions of class as key elements of social identity had therefore changed by the 1960s. Class was still felt to be important but there had been a shift in the general view of the class structure, people still used the traditional language of class and there was still the deep divide from the upper classes and the lower reaches of the working or poor class. However, the thoughts of both the Cambridge and Luton clerks suggested class barriers based upon the manual/non manual divide and in particular those between clerical workers and skilled manual worker were either reducing or had been eliminated, albeit there was no agreement whether they were part of an expanded working or growing middle class or simply ordinary. For most, this was due to both groups enjoying similar levels of income and standards of

¹⁸¹ *Affluent worker Collection*, 504, Tabulator, SKF

¹⁸² *Affluence Worker Collection*, 502, Order Clerk, SKF

¹⁸³ *Affluent worker in Class Structure*, 009, Accountants Clerk, Barclays

living. As was discussed in chapter four, clerks and affluent workers were living side by side in owner-occupied homes in Luton suburbs.¹⁸⁴ In terms of possession of consumer goods, often considered as outward signs of status, there was little difference; some 60 per cent of the Luton clerks and 57 per cent of the affluent workers owned a refrigerator while 51 per cent of the clerks had a car compared to 45 per cent of the manual workers.¹⁸⁵

Yet, despite these apparent similarities, there were sharp lines of division in the workplace between manual and non-manual workers. While take-home pay might have been comparable, clerks worked much shorter hours, on average around 38 hours a week over 5 days with only occasional overtime or Saturday mornings. In contrast, to earn the same amount, manual workers had to work shifts, early mornings, evenings and nights as well as substantial overtime, on average around 10 hours a week on top of their standard 40 hour week.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, although they were now entitled to sick and holiday pay, it was paid at the basic rate without overtime or shift allowances so sickness or holidays meant less money while white-collar workers received their standard regular pay.

Within the factories, the employers clearly differentiated between the shopfloor and the staff. Clerks and manual workers were kept apart with separate canteens and workspaces.¹⁸⁷ The nature of work was different, while both worked to set routines, 'interest and variety' was the most popular option chosen by the Luton clerks when asked about the most important factors in their jobs while the manual workers complained of the pace of the assembly lines and the monotony and fragmentation of their work.¹⁸⁸ In addition, the overwhelming majority of the manual workers were unionized while none of the white-collar workers belonged to a union.

¹⁸⁴ 65 per cent of the Luton sample of clerical workers were owner-occupiers as were all the married Cambridge clerks and 57 per cent of Goldthorpe's affluent workers. Goldthorpe et al., *Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, p.39

¹⁸⁵ Based on my Luton sample, figures for affluent workers, Goldthorpe et al., *Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, p.39

¹⁸⁶ Goldthorpe, *The Affluent Worker*, p. 61

¹⁸⁷ Lawrence, 'Workers Testimony'

¹⁸⁸ The Affluent Worker Collection, clerks were asked to identify the two most important factors in their job from following list; 1. Interest and variety, 2. Good pay and chance of paid overtime, 3. Pleasant people to work with, 4. Supervisor who doesn't breathe down your neck, 5. Pleasant working conditions, 5. Strong and active union. Interest and variety was selected most often. For opinions of manual workers, Goldthorpe et al. *Affluent Worker*, p.54

In most cases, this was not because individual clerks objected to unions, many had been members in previous job, but because their employers, Laporte and SKF, either did not recognise trade unions or discouraged staff from joining.¹⁸⁹ Yet despite these significant differences in the way they were treated in the workplace, the belief that all were part of the same wide middle or an inclusive working class, was widely shared.

Conclusion

This exploration of the voices of clerical workers on the subject of social class and their position within the class system has highlighted the complexity and confusion about what class meant and how to assign individuals to a particular class. Even in 1939, a time when according to McKibbin, England 'was a country of social classes into which the English freely categorised themselves', there was no shared understanding of class and how to define it.¹⁹⁰

In both 1939 and 1948, although the majority assigned themselves to the middle classes, predominantly to the lower middle class, others felt they were working class, and a small but growing number disclaimed any class identity. For the most part, they identified with the middle classes due to a combination of factors which influenced individuals in different ways. These included the nature of their occupation as 'brain workers'; their education with the majority of respondents in receipt of a secondary school education; their lifestyles, mainly in comfortable suburban homes, their family background and their interest in culture and intellectual matters.

However, by 1948, there was more emphasis on income as a deciding factor with many clerks claiming that their status had been reduced. Many simply declared they were working class due to their income: 'I think the contents of my pay packet tell me I am working class, any other idea would be sheer self-deception on my

¹⁸⁹ While the Luton clerks were not unionized, around two-thirds of the Cambridge bank clerks were members of the National Union of Bank Employees (NUBE) although several commented that it was not affiliated to the TUC or the Labour Party and was only interested in negotiating salaries and conditions.

¹⁹⁰ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p. v; McKibbin, *Class and Conventional Wisdom: The Conservative Party and the 'Public' in Inter-War Britain*, in R. McKibbin, (ed.) *Ideologies of Class: The Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1990)

part'.¹⁹¹ Many, however, argued that, while they were middle class that their position was more insecure since the war, that issues like the rising cost of living, the narrowing of differentials in pay between manual and non-manual workers, the shortages, the universal health services took away their sense of distinction and reduced their differences from the working classes, as this daughter and wife of civil servants wrote:

I always thought I belonged to the middle class, but judging from the standard of affluence I do not think I can claim to be anything higher than working class [...] I feel that anyone who has to consider prices and be economical at every turn cannot claim to belong to the middle classes.¹⁹²

By the 1960s increased affluence for all classes alongside a structure of feeling which stressed optimism and opportunity based upon merit, there was a further shift in class perceptions. Most of the Cambridge and Luton clerks, although aware of a wider social structure, saw themselves as separate from both the rich, the leaders of business and the professional classes and the very poor as part of a large group which some referred to a middle, some working and some simply ordinary. These were people who could stand on their own two feet, who worked for their living and did not depend upon the state or family wealth and privilege. Within this broad class, people were measured by their income and possessions and could move within it by dint of education and income. As with the Mass Observers, education was valued but more as a way to 'get on' in terms of future careers. They were aspiring, wanting to improve their material conditions and for their children to take advantage of the expanding educational opportunities. For the most part, they were content to be part of a single large class, one which contained the ordinary people like themselves.

¹⁹¹ M.O.A. 4234, female, born 1895, Office Worker reply to DR September 1948

¹⁹² M.O.A. 4166, female, born 1920, Housewife and wife of Civil Servant reply to DR September 1948

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This thesis has examined the changing social identities of clerical workers between the 1930s and the early 1960s. It has explored both the public images through a survey of the differing ways the clerk has been portrayed in contemporary literature together with the personal views of clerks themselves as expressed in their responses to Mass Observation directives and in interviews carried out by Goldthorpe et al. as part of the wider study into class and the affluent worker.¹ In doing so, it has revealed the complexity and messiness of perceptions about the class and status of clerical workers, the factors which they considered shaped their social identities and highlighted the gap between vernacular and academic meanings of class. It also showed that, although many of the literary and film depictions of clerical workers were little more than caricatures, they did throw light upon aspects of clerical characteristics, such as aspiration, desire for respectability, snobbishness, self-reliance and a desire to distinguish themselves from the rough working classes, which clearly influenced how the wider public and clerks themselves, perceived office workers.

This study is important and has filled a gap in the historiography on ideas about class and its impact on clerical workers, a marginal group straddling the working and middle classes, people who had previously been largely unstudied. The periodisation is also significant, It starts in the 1930s, a period of middle class hegemony when, as McKibbin and Jeffery contend, the Conservatives governed in the interests of the middle classes with the working classes constantly stereotyped as hostile and aggressive, a threat to the social system of the country.² This was followed by the chaos of war in which the rhetoric and propaganda pictured Britain as a family, all in it together.³ The Labour landslide of 1945 disrupted class relations again as reconstruction and the introduction of the welfare state was seen to favour the

¹ [Mass Observation Online - Adam Matthew Digital \(oclc.org\)](#); Goldthorpe H, Lockwood D, Bechhofer & Platt J, *The Affluent Worker Collection*, University of Essex Special Collections; Goldthorpe, J.H., Lockwood, D. (2010). *Affluent Worker in the Class Structure, 1961-1962*. [data collection]. UK Data Service.

² R. McKibbin, 'Class and Conventional Wisdom: The Conservative Party and the 'Public' in Inter-War Britain,' in R. McKibbin, (ed.) *Ideologies of Class: The Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1990); Jeffery, *A Place in the Nation, The Lower Middle Classes in England* p.78

³ Rose, *Which People's War?* p.34-38

working classes and fears were expressed by commentators such as Lewis and Maude that middle classes would disappear.⁴ By the 1960s, growing prosperity saw the emergence of the so-called affluent worker and the development of a theory of 'embourgeoisement' which according to commentators such as Zweig and Abrams and Rose, hypothesised that as the incomes of manual workers improved, they were abandoning traditional working class values and increasingly adopting middle class attitudes and a more individualised, privatised style of living.⁵ While Goldthorpe et al. found this theory to be largely unfounded, they did find evidence of what they labelled 'normative convergence' and changes in the values of both manual and non-manual workers particularly around lifestyles and education.⁶ How these shifting contexts and the associated social, economic and educational changes between the 1930s and 1960s impacted upon clerical identities formed the core of my research.

I explored the thoughts and voices of individual clerical workers to provide contemporary insights into how they perceived their class position and also into how the significant changes around housing and suburbanisation, education and meritocracy, and increasing affluence impacted upon their personal sense of social identity. This approach has thrown up sometimes confusing and contradictory responses but has also revealed the richness and diversity of clerical identities which means they cannot be simply dismissed as 'small people living routine lives in dull suburbs'.⁷

In five substantive chapters, a multi-faceted picture of the social identities of clerical workers has been built up. From the outside view of the clerk as portrayed in contemporary literature, film and television, the exploration of clerical identity moved on to examine how clerks saw themselves, how they distinguished themselves from other parts of society, not the simple manual /non-manual divide but by the factors they themselves identified as important: their education, their cultural distinction, their neighbourhoods, homes and domestic lives. The final chapter considered the images clerical workers held about themselves and their class, status and position in

⁴ Lewis and Maude, *The English Middle Classes*

⁵ Abrams and Rose. *Must Labour Lose?*; Zweig, *The Worker in an Affluent Society*

⁶ Goldthorpe et al, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, p.28

⁷ Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs*, p.6

society and how they shifted over the course of the middle decades of the twentieth century in response to the socio-economic context of the time.

The first two chapters explored contemporary fiction, films and television in which clerical workers were the main protagonists to illustrate what Raymond Williams has described as their 'lived experience' in which different elements of identity are shown as an 'inseparable part of the complex whole'.⁸ Furthermore and more importantly, this approach also enabled a deeper understanding of the wider picture, of the 'structure of feeling', a window into the mood of the time as seen through the eyes of the fictional clerk and how this impacted upon the way they were portrayed. This analysis revealed there was no single or simple image of a clerk. On one hand, he was a figure of fun; despised as ignorant and lacking higher feelings; accused of aping his betters; trapped in drab and dreary suburbia; timid and emasculated. On the other, he was also a stoic soldier; a home-loving family man; a social climber; upwardly mobile and aspirational and a breadwinner; sometimes a liminal figure caught between two classes, at other times, the everyman, the symbol of family life. His characteristics changed over time and according to the class of the author. The Eton educated Orwell described the interwar clerk as 'a docile cit'.⁹ Whereas Priestley, himself a former office worker, painted a much more positive, sympathetic picture of the clerk, not as small, conventional, boring and unimaginative, but as vigorous, important and confident. Mr Smeeth, the clerk in *Angel Pavement* was 'the lynchpin of the business without which it could not function'.¹⁰

Yet within this jigsaw of different stories told at different times and drawn from the imaginations of different authors, there were common threads which build up perceptions of the clerical character. Key themes around the home and family, respectability and aspiration run through the literature, films and television programme as do images of effeminacy, weakness, timidity, snobbery and social anxieties primarily predicated upon clerks being in a marginal position, desperate to distance themselves from the working classes and striving to keep up with the

⁸ Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p.103

⁹ Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, p.52

¹⁰ Priestley, *Angel Pavement*, p.41

established middle classes. From the scorned Leonard Bast in *Howards End*, eager to improve his mind and share in the cultured and intellectual world of the middle classes, to the criminal narrator in *I'd Do it Again*, desperate to cling on to his bungalow in the suburbs and not return to rooms in Camberwell, and the manipulative, social climber Joe Lampton in *Room at the Top*, all were on a journey to improve their lives and move away from their working class origins.¹¹

As with the male clerks, there were many different pictures of women in the office. At the end of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century, the women were pictured as daring and adventurous, the opposite of the timid, downtrodden male, in such works as *Typewriter Girl* or *Miss Brown of XYO*.¹² However, they also contained a warning that the office was essentially a male world and the woman was an interloper, in danger of being perceived as unfeminine and thus unfit to fulfil her natural role as a woman. By the 1930s when around 46 per cent of the clerical work force were women, these depictions shifted with women increasingly shown as marginal and in the background.¹³ Exceptionally, Priestley's *Angel Pavement* provided a more rounded picture of the characters of two women office workers; the middle class secretary, Miss Matfield and the working class typist, Poppy.¹⁴ For Miss Matfield, her job was a necessary evil, she had to earn a living. She was better educated and socially superior to others in the office, but she was discontented and desperate to be married and avoid the sad life of a spinster. Conversely, the low status Poppy was an example of optimism and social mobility, on a journey but still there was the suggestion that by being in an office environment, she was more likely to meet and marry a clerk and move up the social ladder. Furthermore, the class differences between the older Miss Matfield and the youthful Poppy suggested a general lowering of the class of women who might be found in the office – the working-class girls were finding their way in. Moreover, most of the novels and films which depicted female office workers focused upon female sexuality, from 'gold-diggers' to marriage breakers to 'Cinderella' stories, almost

¹¹ Forster, *Howards End*; Tilsley, *I'd Do it Again*; Braine, *Room at the Top*

¹² G. Allen, *The Typewriter Girl*, (London; C. Arthur Pearson, 1897); E. Phillips Oppenheim, 'Miss Brown of XYO' in Ehland & Wachler, *Middlebrow and Gender* (p.152-155)

¹³ Routh, *Occupation and Pay* p.24

¹⁴ Priestley, *Angel Pavement*

always tales of unequal relationships between secretaries or typists and men of wealth and high social status.

Outside of romantic fiction, there was little interest in women in the office, they were kept in the background, answering phones, making tea, as giggling and flirting in reception as in *Room at the Top* or the nameless 'bints' in the offices in *A Kind of Loving*, they were patronised and overlooked.¹⁵ In *Room at the Top*, only one female worker was given a name, June, dismissed as an ordinary girl who would have been satisfied with 'one of the concrete boxes of houses on the new Council Estate' and not worth considering.¹⁶ Similarly, in *A Kind of Loving*, Ingrid was portrayed sexually attractive but lacking culture, banal and boring. These misogynistic images of women in the office as ordinary, lacking in culture, corralled into routine jobs – women who by the 1950s made up over 60 per cent clerical workers - reinforced the image of women in the office as being low status and by implication, the whole of the clerical workforce.

After consideration of the fictional representations, the second part of my thesis turned to the views of the clerks themselves and the question of how they understood their social identities and the factors which differentiated themselves from other groups in society. Their responses revealed a coherent picture in which education, the home and domestic life together with ideas about class and status formed the basis upon which many clerks built their sense of their own identity. In chapter three, I considered how educational reform impacted upon the social identities of the clerical workers studied. As has been shown, a grammar school education was a stairway to better paid and higher-status posts, for example, in banking, financial services and the professions, and as a means of acquiring or maintaining middle class status. While the 1930s saw an increase in the number of scholarships and educational opportunities to those in the working and lower middle classes who could not afford fees, it was the 1944 Butler Act which created a new structure of secondary education opening up the prospect of a grammar school education to all on the basis of academic merit. This allowed new opportunities for social mobility, improved prospects and widened the pool of potential clerical

¹⁵ Braine, *Room at the Top*, p.24; Barstow, *A Kind of Loving*, p.34

¹⁶ Braine, *Room at the Top*, p.165

workers. It made the 11 plus a crucial moment in children's lives. There was no longer an assumption that a middle-class child could have a grammar school place simply because of the social position and ability to pay fees of parents, something which accounted for the fears of the Cambridge clerks that their sons' lives would be ruined if they failed – condemned to a secondary modern alongside the working classes or forced to pay for a private education. Yet, for these 1960s clerks, the opportunities for their children to go to grammar school and perhaps university or enter the professions were now a realistic prospect with 'even the lowest type of factory worker has got the opportunity through state school to get to the same position'.¹⁷

There was also evidence that between 1938 and 1956 the proportion of grammar schoolboys entering the professions or going to university rose as the economy grew and demand for people like accountants and lawyers increased. This resulted in a downgrading of clerical posts in terms of status – the brightest and most ambitious looked to university or professions rather than clerical work.¹⁸ Over the same period, the number of grammar school girls becoming clerks increased in equal measure, although as was shown by the recruitment literature of Martin's Bank, a girl with an 'O' level education, therefore mainly from grammar schools, had a different career path to the boys.¹⁹ Peter Jackson was promised good income, responsibility and a rewarding career, the Girl (sic) was offered interesting work, a friendly atmosphere, staff dinners and dances.

Over the same period, growing numbers of elementary and secondary modern pupils, and in particular girls were obtaining clerical posts. This shift saw more non-professional clerks drawn from wider educational backgrounds, mostly without any formal commercial qualifications, such as many of the Luton clerks, together with large numbers of female typists and shorthand typists. It reinforced the idea that there was a two-tier structure in clerical employment with the higher status clerks in

¹⁷ *Affluent Worker in Class Structure*, 029, Tax Clerk, N & P

¹⁸ *Education in 1938*; 'Sanderson, Education and the Labour Market' in Crafts, Gazeley and Newall, *Work and Pay*, p.280

¹⁹ Peter Jackson Works for Martins; A Girl Get More from Life working at Martins – recruitment booklets https://www.martinsbank.co.uk/A_career_with_BIG_OPPORTUNITIES.htm see p.136-137 and appendix 3

banks, insurance companies or professional offices and the lower status as general clerks. A Cambridge bank clerk explained:

Most professional people; doctors, dentists, sort of the higher grades of civil servants, the higher grades in banking and insurance. In a lot of these categories now you're getting a working-class entry, who may eventually be middle class but are not now, though they've entered into a profession once considered a middle class preserve. That applies particularly to banking and the civil service [...] the clerical occupations have vastly expanded since before the war, so there isn't enough of the normal type so they have to recruit lower down.²⁰

In the 1930s over two thirds of the Mass Observation respondents considered their education to be fundamental to their class identities and a key dividing line between themselves and the working classes. By the 1960s, this had dropped to around half. After 1944, all children from all classes were provided with a secondary education. Higher standards in the secondary moderns compared the old elementary schools and the raising of the school leaving age equipped more children from wider social backgrounds with the skills to become clerks and allowed recruitment from all types of schools. To have an education was no longer seen as a distinction but something the majority could access.

Furthermore it was not only education but a taste for culture as a result of that education, which also contributed to the Mass Observers' sense of distinction and social identity.²¹ An accounts clerk from East Ham considered himself different to his parents because of his 'secondary education which opened his mind to music and poetry'.²² In a similar vein, a local government officer, argued that he was not working class because:

My main interests are reading and arguing. My main relaxation is bridge. I do not visit football matches, dog-tracks or speedway tracks [...] I seldom fill in football pools coupons. I prefer the stage to the cinema, and I enjoy

²⁰ *Affluent Worker in Class Structure*, 071, Supervisor Tax Department, Barclays

²¹ Hinton, *The "Class Complex"*

²² M.O.A. 1511, male, born 1915, Accounts Clerk reply to DR June 1939

opera and ballet. Taking myself as a whole, I think I do not add up to the generally accepted idea of a member of the working class.²³

This belief in culture as a key to middle class identity was also articulated in responses to the January 1949 Mass Observation Directive which asked about the value of the middle classes.²⁴ Many included a reference to cultural interests, a 67 year old retired civil servant declared that it was the middle classes that ‘foster culture and advance the general level of society and civilisation’, while a coal merchant’s clerk characterised the middle classes as ‘having an intelligent interest in the arts and literature and preserve cultural standards’.²⁵

In contrast, by the 1960s, there appeared to be far less interest in culture. One clerical couple criticised their neighbours as people who ‘read the Reveille and nothing else [...] there’s no conversation but the TVs on all the time, they have a car but no books’.²⁶ However, this was an exception. Several had interests which could be described as cultural, for example membership of Luton Film Club, amateur dramatics and one had a large collection of what the interviewer described as ‘middle class’ books but they did not refer to these interests when considering the factors behind their class assignment.²⁷

Another important element in terms of the social identities of both the Mass Observers and the Goldthorpe clerks, lay in their home and domestic lives which were explored in chapter three. As a Mass Observation clerk observed in 1942, the home is ‘the place you belong’ and it was in the home that your social identity was formed and revealed.²⁸ For most, whether it was in the 1930s or the 1960s, this meant an owner-occupied house in the suburbs, a sign of middle class status and a clear statement of distinction from the stigmatised working class tenant.

For a Croydon housewife, a former secretary, home was located in a neighbourhood;

²³ M.O.A. 3875, male, born 1916, Local Government Officer, reply to DR September 1948

²⁴ M.O.A. Directive January 1949

²⁵ M.O.A. 4004, male, born 1881, retired Civil Servant; 2925, male, born 1905, Coal Merchants Clerk about to start teacher training, reply to DR January 1949

²⁶ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 501, Orders Clerk, SKF

²⁷ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 505, Distributor, SKF; 526, Clerk – Home Sales, Laporte; 506, Sales Planning Clerk, SKF

²⁸ M.O.A. 2674, male, born 1912, Clerk reply to DR April 1942

with mature and attractive roads with fields and downs and other open spaces within easy walking distance. Shops, cinema, trams and station are all quite near. Sanderstead has an air of being 'select' and nothing in the way of slums.²⁹

While a bank clerk living in Muswell Hill was content to live in 'pleasant surroundings, [...] a garden to work and sit in [...] neighbours of a similar class to myself and are pleasant.'³⁰

The Cambridge and Luton clerks were equally committed to owner-occupation. Of the Cambridge clerks, all apart from those still living with parents, were owner-occupiers, while two thirds of the Luton clerks were buying their own homes and those who were not, had ambitions to buy in the future.

The stigma around council estates and their tenants remained strong. A local government officer in 1948 described himself as lower middle class precisely because 'I do not live in a slum, a semi-slum or a council house'.³¹ While a young bank clerk, also identifying as lower middle class, living with his parents wrote of his concerns about a neighbouring estate which he did not identify as a council estate but definitely the homes of people he considered of lower social standing:

Near us is another estate where the education, standard of living and nourishment is definitely lower – the houses are much smaller. I have heard it expressed that if people had known this estate was to be built, they would not have lived here.³²

There was a similar antipathy towards council estates expressed in 1960s Luton as a SKF documentation clerk remarked;

there's the Tythe Farm Estate and the Private Estate, they regard themselves as separate entities. They keep themselves to themselves.

The Council tenants don't want to be here and we don't want them here.³³

By the 1960s, the Luton clerks lived in much more mixed private estates. When asked about their neighbourhoods, none described them as 'select' as had the

²⁹ M.O.A. 1026, female, born 1908, former Secretary, reply to DR June 1939

³⁰ M.O.A. 1325, male, born 1908, Bank Clerk, reply to DR June 1939

³¹ M.O.A. 3858, male, born 1918, Local Government Officer reply to DR September 1948

³² M.O.A. 1481, male, born 1922, Bank Clerk reply to DR June 1939

³³ *Affluent Worker Collection*, Interview 538, Documentation Clerk, SKF

Mass Observation clerks in 1939, rather they considered them 'quiet and respectable' or 'rather mixed' although none identified them as 'pretty rough'. Both clerical and manual workers lived on these private estates which suggested a softening of barriers but only between those with similar levels of incomes. The clerks still retained their distinction from the bulk of the working class and most particularly from the rough on Council estates or in the slums.

In terms of domesticity and lifestyles, the data collected by Goldthorpe's team from the Luton clerks provided a detailed picture of their day-to-day domestic life. The evidence presented a picture of companionate marriages with both partners sharing domestic tasks and childcare. Around half of the wives were employed, mostly those who had no children or whose children were at school. Major decisions about spending which were mainly focused upon the house and children were made jointly. This represented a shift, when compared to the situation painted by the Mass Observer clerks in the 1940s, few of whose wives would have been employed.³⁴ These men, when asked about carrying out household tasks, largely wrote about helping with the heavy chores such as bringing in coal, cleaning out the ashes or chopping wood. Moreover, several of the respondents caveated their replies suggesting that household tasks were mainly a female responsibility and that their role was secondary. As this London buyer wrote 'I think men should take an active part in domestic jobs [...] providing such help is agreed on; sometimes women prefer for men to take no part and consider it interference in their domain'.³⁵ Or another, 'I feel a man should help [...] I always do the drying up after meals and occasionally the washing up if I am allowed' ³⁶ Others saw their role primarily as breadwinners, as this bank clerk remarked: 'I think a man should help with the heavier chores [...]one rarely hears of a wife going down to the office to help her husband'.³⁷

The final chapter considered how these experiences of education and the home helped shape the clerical workers sense of social identity. Despite a wide range of self-assigned classes among clerical mass observers in 1939, a set of common

³⁴ C. Hall, 'Married Women at Home in Birmingham in the 1920s and 1930s', *Oral History* 5.2 (1977); 90 per cent of married women stayed at home.

³⁵ M.O.A. 1140, male, born 1916, Buyer, reply to DR March 1948

³⁶ M.O.A. 3868, male, born 1907, Local Government Officer, reply to DR March 1948

³⁷ MO.A. 1325, male, born 1908, Bank Clerk, reply to DR March 1948

patterns emerged in terms of the ways in which clerks thought about social identity. Most were happy to consider themselves distinct from the working classes on the basis that they were better educated, more cultured, lived in superior neighbourhoods and worked with their minds, rather than their hands, as a London civil servant explained:

I think I fall into the lower middle-class group. I am neither a labourer or an artisan, much less a capitalist. Intellectual sounds too pretentious but I do claim individuality, a right to think and an interest in so called 'high-brow' pursuits [...] the change was a secondary school education and an occupation in London.³⁸

Even the small proportion who identified themselves as working class tended to qualify this by labelling themselves 'upper working' or hybrid, largely because of their education and cultural distinction but retained the working-class label due to their family background while others hedge their bets, suggesting they might be lower middle class or upper working based on occupation, education and cultural interest. For example, a young clerk suggested he was upper working class because, 'I have striven by reading and study to raise my knowledge and intelligence above the ordinary level of my class'.³⁹

All those who identified as working class and over half who described themselves as lower middle, felt they were moving up in the world into more secure and financially rewarding posts, among people of higher social standing with whom they could share intellectual and cultural interests and for them education was a critical factor in their social identities, the starting point in their journey towards a better, more middle class life and separating themselves from their working class backgrounds. This Hartlepool civil servant argued that 'her education, employment and interests' divided her from her parents and grandparent, a process which 'started in secondary school days and was gradual'.⁴⁰

This upward mobility caused anxieties for some, for example, the clerk quoted on page 114 who protested; 'I am like the meat in a sandwich', and felt unable to relate

³⁸ M.O.A. 2091, male, born 1917, Civil Servant, reply to DR June 1939

³⁹ M.O.A., 1334, male, born 1919, Clerk, reply to June 1939

⁴⁰ M.O.A. 1013, female, born 1907, Civil Servant reply to June 1939

to his bus driver father or play a full part in the lives of his richer, intellectual colleagues and was at a loss.⁴¹ Others such as the Bradford junior bank clerk embraced the change claiming his profession was the first step toward middle class membership, something which would be cemented as he grew older and his salary increased.⁴²

Little had changed by 1948 when the largest proportion still maintained they were lower middle class and for much the same reasons although, given the economic hardship of the time, unsurprisingly there was more emphasis on income as a dividing line. A Huddersfield clerk described himself as lower middle class because; 'I am not a manual worker, paid monthly and live in a fashionable suburb [...] my child will go to college, and I am interested in the arts and Mass Observation. I am badly paid but try to keep up appearances.'⁴³

The proportion claiming to be working class increased. Their reasoning was largely based upon income although a small number also argued on more political grounds that as workers and dependent upon their labour they were working class as this clerk reported: 'my salary of £400 is insufficient for me to claim to belong to a higher social class [...] I have to work for a living and consider anyone so doing, irrespective of income belongs to the working class'.⁴⁴ Others, as was shown, felt that they could no longer afford the middle class lifestyles, the concerts, the decent clothing, the car as a local government wages clerk explained 'we are becoming very shabby [...] it is three years since either of us had a new topcoat'.⁴⁵ This sense of losing status, unable to live as they wanted and to which they were accustomed fostered resentment and increased the friction between the middle and working classes and provided one of the reasons for Labour's loss of the 1951 general election.

By the 1960s, there was a further shift in perceptions about class. The economy was booming, there was full employment and wages were rising, it was, as

⁴¹ M.O.A. 1394, male, born 1919, Clerk reply to DR June 1939

⁴² M.O.A. 1314, male, born 1919, Bank Clerk reply to DR June 1939, see also p.115

⁴³ M.O.A. 3844, male, born 1904, Cashier reply to DR September 1948

⁴⁴ M.O.A. 4463, male, born 1913, Civil Servant reply to DR September 1948

⁴⁵ M.O.A. 3859, male, born 1906, Local Government Wages Clerk, DR December 1947

Macmillan boasted a time when 'most of our people had never had it so good'.⁴⁶ Many commentators such as Zweig, Abrams and Rose argued for the theory of embourgeoisement which predicted the end of the working classes as workers became more affluent with everyone becoming middle class. The aim of Goldthorpe et al, was to test this theory empirically. It was for this reason that the clerks were interviewed and why the questioning was framed in the way it was. However, my interest has been in the raw data and not in the conclusions drawn by Goldthorpe around the affluent worker.

As was shown, there were wide ranging views and considerable uncertainties and hesitations in the responses but there were still clear trends. There was considerable unanimity in the descriptions of the social structure at the extremes with an upper class – variously made up of the very rich, the aristocracy, big business and parts of the professional classes – and a lower or poor class comprising the unskilled, the unemployed and the feckless. Groups to which none of the clerks felt they belongs. However, outside of categories, the picture was much more complicated. Around 80 per cent of all the clerks assigned themselves to one or other of the traditional classes, although they often needed to be prompted by the interviewer. Of the Cambridge clerks, all apart from three declared themselves to be middle class with two stating they were 'ordinary' and one working class. In contrast, the Luton clerks were more diverse, equally spilt between middle and working class and four suggesting they were 'ordinary'. 'Ordinary' was as Langhamer suggested an ambiguous term which could be defined in many ways depending on who was using it and in what context. For these men, as a means of self-description, it seems to imply that they saw themselves as living normal, everyday lives without any particular social distinction, not snobs but authentic, decent, hardworking people, not dependent upon family money or connections but self-reliant and blessed with common sense.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ H. Macmillan, Prime Minister in speech in Bedford 20th July 1957.

www.bbc.co.uk/onthistoday20thJuly

See also, for example, Hennessey P., *Having it so Good: Britain in the Fifties*

⁴⁷ C. Langhamer, 'Who the hell are Ordinary People? Ordinarity as a category of historical analysis', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28, (2018)

Yet, as with the Mass Observation clerks, it was not the label but the description of who was included within the category that was important. Around three quarters of both sets of clerks argued that the boundaries between the classes were disappearing and that they were part of a wider class made up of both white-collar and manual workers although there was no agreement about whether it was an expanding middle class or a growing working class. For the Cambridge clerks, it was mainly middle class, as this tax clerk claimed; 'there's only a small upper class now and the so-called middle classes just about cover the majority of the population' while the 'differences between manual workers and those who work in offices even at executive level and were superficial'.⁴⁸

Unsurprisingly, the Luton clerks were divided, some saw the middle class comprising '80 to 85 per cent of the population, not just the white collar man' or 'the average working man irrespective of office or factory, the factory worker now earns as much if not more than those in the office'.⁴⁹ For others, it was a working class made up of everyone who worked, 'miners and labourers as well as white collar workers like myself' or 'virtually every class of wage earner and salaried man' including even 'SKF directors, they work for a living'.⁵⁰

This contention by many of both groups of clerks that they were part of the same class as manual workers could be understood as evidence of the blurring or elimination of class barriers and a sign of the breakdown of the traditional class structure. Was it a sign of either 'embourgeoisement' as workers adopted middle class values or the reverse as clerical workers assigned themselves to the working class? According to Goldthorpe and his team, *embourgeoisement*, did not occur but that they did identify a process they called 'normative convergence' in which both affluent manual workers and white-collar clerical workers embraced similar behaviours and values particularly in respect to home-centred, privatised family lives, the desire for home-ownership and aspirations for their children to do well at school. How far these attitudes were new or were confined to the middle classes is open to debate given the evidence from the Mass Observers in 1939 and 1948 revealing the

⁴⁸ *Affluent Worker in Class Structure* 033, Building Society Clerk, N & P.

⁴⁹ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 549, Sales Clerk, Laporte; 524, Credit Control Clerk, SKF

⁵⁰ *Affluent Worker Collection*, 545, Section Leader, Home Sales, Laporte; 508, Sales Planning Clerk, SKF

educational journeys of many clerks from manual working class and lower middle-class backgrounds. A secondary school education until 16 or a place at a higher grade elementary school until 15 could not have happened without aspiring, supportive parents. Similarly, Scott and Speight have demonstrated that in 1937-38, both manual workers and middle-class clerks, teachers and civil servants bought their own homes in the interwar suburbs and were living privatised family lives.⁵¹ It seems likely that such “normative convergence” between manual and non-manual workers had its roots in the 1930s.

However, while it was clear that clerks in both Cambridge and Luton shared very similar lifestyles, aspirations for their children’s education and comparable incomes with sections of the affluent manual working class, could they be considered as part of what Pahl later described as the ‘middle mass’? ⁵² This was an identity which transcended class, which brought together those of the lower middle and skilled working classes who were employed and living in comfortable material circumstances enjoying home centred, privatised family lives. In many ways, this fits the lives described by the Luton and Cambridge clerks living alongside their affluent manual work neighbours. Yet, I would argue that this is too simplistic an explanation of the social identities of these 1960s clerks. It ignores their experiences in the work place and the differences around their conditions of employment and attitudes to work as discussed in chapter five.⁵³

As has been shown, there were fundamental differences around pay and working hours as well as entitlements to pensions, sick and holiday pay. Clerks enjoyed regular secure incomes while that of the manual workers was more irregular dependent upon copious overtime and shift working with sick and holiday pay

⁵¹ P. Scott, *The Making of the Modern British Home: The Suburban Semi and Family Life between the Wars*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press 2013) Chapter 6, Tables 6.1 & 6.3. Based on the 1937-38 Ministry of Labour survey of working-class household expenditure, 18.9% of working class households were owner-occupiers rising to 24.8% of those earning between £4.10s and £5, and 37% of those earning over £7 a week. A survey of middle-class households, mainly clerks, civil servants and teachers, revealed 47.4% of households with incomes over £6.15s were owner-occupiers; G. Speight, ‘Who Bought the inter-war Semi? The Socio-economic Characteristics of New House Buyers in the 1930s’, *University of Oxford Discussion Papers in Economic and Social History*, 38 (2000)

⁵² R.E. Pahl, *Divisions of Labour*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1984)

⁵³ See Chapter Five, p.237-238

calculated on basic pay without overtime or shift bonuses.⁵⁴ There was also physical separation between staff and shop floor workers even during breaktimes as both Laporte and SKF operated separate canteens for works, staff and management.⁵⁵

Trade union membership was another area of difference with only one Luton clerk in a union although most of the Cambridge clerks belonged either to NUBE (National Union of Bank Employees) or the Barclay's staff association.⁵⁶ By contrast, the shop floor workers were all trade union members. The manual workers therefore engaged in collective action to improve their conditions and pay, the traditional working-class way. The white-collar workers followed a more individualistic path. They saw the way to higher incomes through their own efforts, through obtaining promotions to more senior and better paid positions and working their way up the career ladder.⁵⁷

Workplace identities were therefore very different which adds a level of complexity to the idea of a 'mass middle' suggested by Pahl or the single class picture drawn by the Luton and Cambridge clerks. While there were few differences between the affluent manual workers and the white-collar clerks in terms of life styles, standards of living or aspirations for their children's futures, they remained a distinct group mainly through the position in the workplace and the way they were treated by their employers. Furthermore, even within the clerical group, there were significant differences. These arose from the diversity of their social backgrounds, whether they were the socially mobile children of working-class families or from established clerical families; the type and level of education they had received; or their employment. For example, as a bank or insurance clerk with a structured career path and accepted as part of the traditional middle classes or a general

⁵⁴ Goldthorpe et al, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press 1969) p. 60-61; Goldthorpe calculated that to earn a similar wage to the white-collar worker, an assembly operative at Vauxhall had to work some 50 hours a week compared to 40 hours for the average clerk.

⁵⁵ Lawrence, 'Workers' testimony and the sociological reification of the manual/non-manual distinctions in 1960s Britain', *Sozial.Geschichte Online/Heft 20* (2017). SKF operated 5 canteens, works, weekly paid staff, monthly paid staff, managerial and executive – a clear hierarchy.

⁵⁶ It is not clear why there should be a difference although NUBE was not affiliated to the Labour Party and concerned only with negotiating around pay and conditions.

⁵⁷ Lawrence, 'Workers' testimony'

commercial clerk who had to plot a way forward as an individual, who was in a more liminal place between the manual and the established middle classes.

While clerks have been largely neglected by the academy, I argue that they are an important group. This study has shed light, not only on the evolving social identities of clerical workers but also on the changing social structure in England in the mid-twentieth century. It has highlighted a fundamental resetting of social relationships with both the established middle classes and elements of the manual working classes, those with similar incomes with similar privatised, respectable family lifestyles. The 1939 clerks made it clear that they were separate from the working classes because of their education and home lifestyles; by the 1960s, most felt that they and their affluent manual worker colleagues, although not the poorer, unskilled lower classes, were all members of the same class whether it be labelled middle, working or ordinary.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Mass Observation Directive – June 1939

DIRECTIVE: June 1939

ECONOMIC SURVEY: "CLASS"

Few people admit they are snobs and yet who is free from class-prejudice in some form or another? But it is wiser all the same to use the term "class" in inverted commas, because sociologists are by no means agreed on what it means. For the purposes of the Economic Survey (still working at full pressure in Worktown), it is essential to get some objective criteria of the nexus of social attitudes and behaviour which make up the "class" complex. Observers are asked to be particularly honest with themselves in answering these questions.

As there are rather a lot of them, and as they need to be answered in some detail, they are divided into two parts and it is suggested that Observers send in their answers to the first part by June 15, and the second part by June 30. There is, of course, no objection to both sets being sent in by June 15.

IMPORTANT

(1) Please send in your answers to the Racial questions on a separate sheet.

(2) Please be sure to state your name, sex, whether married or single, address, age and occupation on each set of answers, as this saves endless trouble in analysing.

PART I

(1) Try to define exactly the "class" to which you feel you belong, and give your reasons in detail. How far is it a question of income?

(2) Do you tend to move in a different "class" from that of your (a) parents, (b) grandparents? Describe the steps that have led to such a change.

(3) With what "classes" do you feel most at your ease? With what sort of people are you liable to feel embarrassed for "class" reasons? Try not to answer this question theoretically but to give actual examples.

(4) Do most of your closest friends belong to your own "class"? Describe any exceptions.

(5) If you are married, engaged or in love, state the part played in this situation by considerations of "class".

(6) If money were no object, would you rather give your children a public school or secondary education and why? (Answer this question whether or not you actually have children, but mention if you have them, and in that case what are your actual plans for them.)

continued

PART I

(7) What do you think of the working-class attitude to money? Illustrate from your own experience.

(8) Which "classes" do you think are (a) meanest about money (b) most generous, (c) most thrifty, (d) think most about money? Give your reasons and give examples of the sort of thing you mean.

PART II

(1) Give your reasons and analyse your motives for living in the district where you do live.

(2) In what ways do you consider yourself different from your neighbours?

(3) When you go into pubs, which bar do you use and why?

(4) What priced seats do you use at the cinema and why?

(5) What forms of food, drink or amusement are thought "infra dig" or not quite the things in your circle?

(6) Are you sensitive on the subject of accent and have you made any attempt to change your own?

(7) Do you make a habit of using the following words and phrases? If not, what is your reaction when they are used by others?

Cheerioh, Bye-bye, Tooleoo, Okay, Okidoke, Not half, Ta (for thank you), Old Boy, chum, pal, mate.

DIRECTIVE: July 1939

Age Differences: See Descriptive Guide.

Jazz (2): See Descriptive Guide.

DIRECTIVE: July/Sept. 1939

Dreams and Dream Diary: See Descriptive Guide.

DIRECTIVE: August 1939

Money: See Descriptive Guide.

Appendix 2

Mass Observation Directives – 1942 to 1949

APRIL 1942

Priority A (for everyone)

1. What are your feelings about the "traditional English Sunday"?
2. Have you any ideas about how post-war education should be organised in this country? If so, outline them.
3.
 - (a) What are your own beliefs about the 'supernatural'?
 - (b) Have you had any personal experience of so-called supernatural occurrences? If so, describe them.
 - (c) Describe any supernatural occurrences which you have heard of from friends or acquaintances.

Priority B (for everyone who can possibly find time for them)

4. What are the main changes, if any, in your clothing habits since clothes rationing was introduced? Do you dress differently? In different colours? Do you change your clothes more or less often? Are there any clothes which you have given up wearing? Do you spend more or less than you did on clothes? Has the stock in your wardrobe increased or decreased?
5. What are your present feelings about the political truce? If your ideas on the subject have altered since war began, say briefly in what ways they have altered.
6. What particular pieces of music, if any, give rise to strong emotions in you? Describe your feelings when you hear the music in question.

Directive for March-April, 1948

Please send in your replies to Mass-Observation, P.B.6, Letchworth, Herts., as soon as possible, and not later than 24th April, 1948.

1. How often do you eat away from your own home, and on what sort of occasions? How many of such meals do you pay for yourself and how many do you receive from friends, etc.? In each case, what do you most like to eat and drink?
2. To WOMEN: Do you feel that the men in your household should be expected to help in domestic jobs, or not? *If so*, Why? And what sort of help do you expect to have? *If not*, why not?

To MEN: Do you feel that you should do domestic jobs in your house, or not? *If so*, why? And what sort of help do you expect to give? *If not*, why not?

3. What are your present feelings about:

(a) The Russians?

(b) The Americans?

(This question has been asked regularly since 1939).

4. What are your main feelings about Mass-Observation? We are asking this question not so much for analysis purposes but in order to get as many comments, criticisms and suggestions from you as possible.

Special Job, for all those who come into contact with children either in their schools or in the home:—

5. Do the children with whom you come into contact read newspapers? If so, which individual papers do they read? How often? Which parts of papers do they like best and read most? Give the ages and sex of the children observed, and please remember that *negative results are just as important as positive ones*.

Directive for September 1948

Please send in your replies to Mass-Observation, P.B.6, Letchworth, Herts, as soon as possible and not later than October 22nd, 1948. Please treat the first two questions as priorities.

1. (a) Do you think of yourself as belonging to any particular social class ?
(b) (If so) Which class ?
(c) Why would you say that you belong to this class ?
(d) Give a list of 10 jobs you consider typical middle-class jobs, and 10 you consider typical working-class ?
2. (a) How do you feel about people making love in public ?
(b) How do you feel about making love in public yourself ?
(c) Do you think that any changes have taken place in your attitude towards this subject ?
(d) If so, what changes have taken place, and why do you think they have occurred ?
3. (a) What are your present feelings about the New Look ?
(b) Have your feelings changed at all over the past two years ?

Directive for January 1949

There are only three questions this month as all of them require answers in as much detail as possible. Please return your replies to P.B.6 Letchworth, Herts., as soon as possible and not later than 12th February, 1949

1. What value, if any, do you attach to the continued existence of the middle classes? Please discuss in as much detail as possible.
2. What are the things you most like and dislike in yourself?
3. (a) Describe in as much detail as possible the *next* dream that you have after receiving this directive.
(b) Describe, again in as much detail as possible, the most vivid dream that you can ever remember having.

(Dream questions have been asked by Mass-Observation both before and during the war).

Appendix 3

Martins Bank Recruitment booklet



Peter Jackson joined Martins Bank straight from school with a couple of good 'A' Levels and the sort of drive that would take him to the top in quite a few different types of business. Right from the start, he felt at home. The Manager took a keen interest in Peter's progress, and arranged study leave for the all-important Banking Diploma. Very soon Peter became a cashier, handling large sums of money, known and trusted by his regular customers. Lectures and formal training sessions supplemented his rapidly increasing experience of practical banking, and it wasn't long before he was given full responsibility for running the branch when the Manager was away. Now in his early thirties, and earning around £2,400 a year, Peter Jackson is a Manager in his own right, running a medium-sized branch in a busy town. His work brings him into contact with all sorts of people—professional men, bosses of industry, shopkeepers, harassed husbands trying to sort out the family budget—the list is endless. What's more, it's no desk-bound job. As a Manager, Peter Jackson spends a lot of his time getting out to see and learn about his customers at first hand. That driving seat of his is just as important as the chair behind his office desk. He's got to be able to size up a construction job, say, as competently as he sizes up his various customers. Even now, he's very much boss of his own show. But that's by no means the end of the road. Bright people like Peter Jackson who come to Martins can, and very often do, go right to the top of the tree in general management. Banking is growing fast; technical innovations are coming in rapidly and the scope for real management talent grows all the time. To foster the abilities, they need in senior men, Martins send a number of them every year to various residential business schools, including Oxford and Harvard. Experience of this type is invaluable in broadening their knowledge not only of banking but of business problems of every type. Peter Jackson was a shrewd young man. He picked a career that would not only give him the scope he wanted but would positively help him to develop the qualities to

succeed which he already possessed. He's got a well-paid, responsible job, plus a great many valuable fringe benefits - a first-class pension scheme, excellent sick pay arrangements, special low-cost loans for housing, sports and social facilities - not to mention four-and-a-half weeks' holiday a year. If you've got the qualities of Peter Jackson, with either a degree, 2 'A' Levels or a minimum of 4 'O' Levels, you could enjoy the same sort of exciting, progressive career. The first step is to write with brief details of your achievements to the nearest address overleaf.



Working with Martins is much more than just having a job. For a start, the work is really varied and interesting. As machines and computers take over much of the routine book-keeping and clerical work, more and more girls are becoming cashiers, meeting the customers, getting to know them as individual people in a way that's difficult in most types of business. Customers rely on you, too. You handle important, confidential affairs and are treated very much as a friend and confidante - again, not something that you find in every job. Other jobs include typing and secretarial work - and the secretary to a Branch Manager is an important person in the Bank - as well as specialist jobs for machine operators. Another pleasant thing about working with Martins is the friendly atmosphere you find wherever you go. Colleagues treat you as a friend and an equal, and customers rely on your knowledge and advice. As a Bank we have a reputation for being friendly and helpful, and girls who join us often say how much they value this aspect of their job. There's a wide range of social and sporting activities open to you as well. Inter-District hockey and tennis matches and other sporting fixtures are arranged, and there are also opportunities for taking part in amateur dramatics and other activities. Staff dinners and dances, too, are held regularly in each District of the Bank and are always extremely popular and well-attended. Welfare problems are looked after by a Lady Supervisor in each District who is always ready to discuss any personal problems or worries which you may have. Salaries are good, with increases above the basic rates for merit, as well as special allowances for girls working in the London area. Holidays can amount to four-and-a-half weeks a year, according to

age and salary, and there are excellent pension, insurance and sick pay schemes. If you are looking for a long-term career there are excellent prospects in Martins, where women are increasingly taking on greater responsibilities. Whatever your aim in life, you'll find that working with Martins is more than just a job - it's a great deal of fun as well. If you would like to know more, and have an 'O' Level education or are proficient at typing or shorthand, write with brief particulars, to the nearest address overleaf.

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