

224 is the newsletter of the Deddington & District History Society. During our season we meet at 7.30 on the second Wednesday of the month, normally at Deddington's Windmill Centre. Membership is £9/16 pa singles/ couples or £2.50 at the door for visitors, who are equally welcome. The editor actively encourages contributions to be sent to 1 South Newington Road, Barford St Michael OX15 0RJ. Email editor.224@nehoc.co.uk

Discovering experiences of motherhood in Oxfordshire c1945-1970: an oral history approach

I am a DPhil student in English Local History at Oxford University and I am currently researching into women's experiences of motherhood in Oxfordshire in the post-war decades. This research has led me to conduct nearly one hundred oral history interviews with women from around the county who had their children at this time. The women I have interviewed come from a range of different localities within Oxfordshire, rural, urban and suburban, to see whether where people lived affected their understandings of family life. The communities I have been looking at are the villages of Benson and Ewelme in South Oxfordshire, the Wychwoods in West Oxfordshire, the villages around Banbury, the city centre areas of Oxford, and the contrasting suburbs of Cowley and North Oxford. The three questions that I am usually asked about my research are why motherhood, why oral history, and why Oxfordshire? In this piece I will try and give some answers.

Why motherhood?

It is only comparatively recently, in the last thirty years or so, that the family has become the focus of historical attention, encouraged by both social history and the desire to write a 'history from below' telling the lives of ordinary people, and by historians initially concerned with recovering women's history (and now gender history), another area which has been so often neglected. When considering twentieth-century British history however, the family seems to be particularly important and interesting for research because of

the great changes in both our understandings of what the family means as an institution, and people's experiences of family life. I think that women's attitudes towards and experiences of motherhood are subjects that particularly deserve attention because an examination of motherhood at this time reveals much about contemporary ideals about the respective roles of women and men in society.

The term motherhood is socially constructed and gendered. Its meaning extends beyond the biological into the psychological,

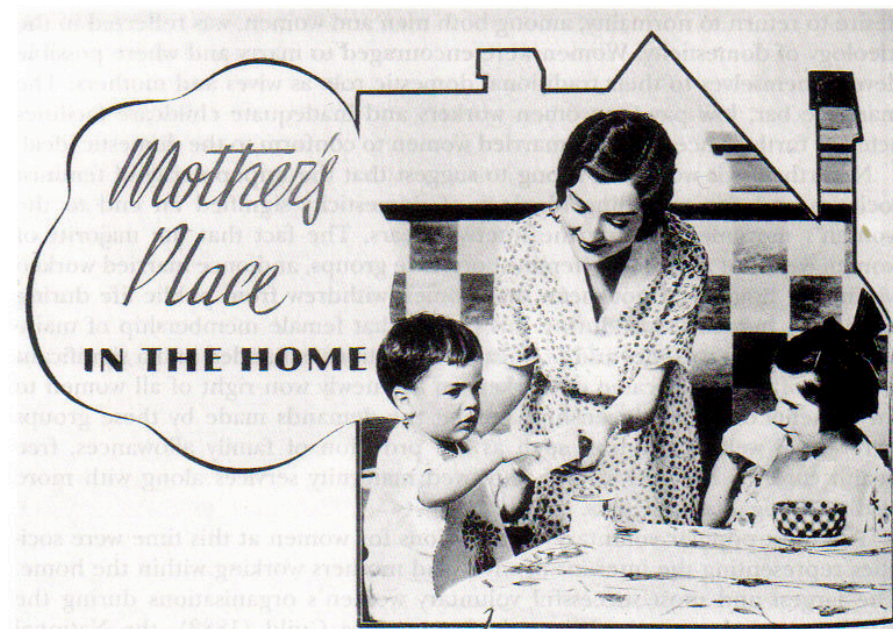
economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions of family life. This gendered and culturally specific significance changes over time, making concepts of motherhood a barometer of women's social role and status.

The post-war decades were a time of uncertainty about the place of women in society and their role was under question. The combined effects of post-war prosperity and social reforms meant that women were better educated, better fed and had improved access to health care, and women's interactions with maternity services were greatly transformed. Women's experiences during two World Wars, with their participation in the war effort, had given them an increasing role in the public sphere and women were increasingly likely to engage in paid work. In reaction to this upheaval the growing emphasis on motherhood gave credence to the view that women's place was still in the home. Post-Freudian psychology and sociology in the post-war period provided new rationales for the idealisation and enforcement of women's maternal role. Writing in the early 1970s at a time of reaction against these views, the

feminist Lee Comer says John Bowlby's theory of maternal deprivation was exactly what the world had been waiting for. He provided a 'scientific' basis for what was, by then, the status quo. Encouraged by the experts' conformation of the 'naturalness' of the situation, public policy continued to promote pronatalism and domesticity, long after mothers began returning to the labour force and fears about the declining birth-rate had subsided in the post-war baby boom. Moreover, despite the focus upon motherhood at this time, the processes by which women developed their identities as mothers was largely ignored and taken for granted and this is a deficiency of existing historiography that I hope my research will address.

Why oral history?

While many studies of education, family life, and the maternity services were undertaken between 1945 and 1970, and their findings do shed light on attitudes towards motherhood, their studies were not primarily focused on the thoughts and feelings of the women themselves. The questions asked by the interviewers often reflect their own preoccupations rather than the concerns of the women they are talking to. For example, many community studies are focused on differences in family structure between those living in traditional urban communities and on new suburban housing estates. Medical studies are often more concerned with looking into new clinical advancements rather than what women felt about the care they received. Oral history has proved a par-



Mother's place in the home', from Woman, July 1937

ticularly profitable methodology for historians investigating the family and domestic life because more traditional written sources dealing with the subject are scarce. I think that personal testimony will prove the most effective way for my research to add to our understanding of women's experiences of motherhood at this time.

There are difficulties for oral historians, though, due to the way in which people remember. While people are able to remember accurately, memory can also be distorted. Memory is selective and subject to self-censorship. People recall the things they want to, and which correspond with the image of themselves that they are trying to present. However, I think oral history is a particularly germane methodology for my research because, to quote the Italian historian Alessandro Portelli, 'oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did'.

It is these topics that I want to find out and this is why I think that oral history is such a suitable methodology for my research. Official records document the date a child was born and who its parents were, but not how a mother felt on the birth of her first child, and it is the women's feelings that I want to investigate. I want to see what women think about their past experiences; how they look back upon the births of their first child in the light of later developments both in their own lives, for example becoming a grandmother, and in the light of changing attitudes towards women and maternity that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century.

Why Oxfordshire?

The obvious answer to why I have chosen to conduct my study in Oxfordshire is because I live here! There are many other reasons, however, why I think Oxfordshire presents a particularly interesting area. Perhaps the most beneficial feature of Oxfordshire to my research is



Above and below: *The infant welfare service* and *The child medical service* at Swalcliffe Village Hall. Images courtesy of Film Images/COI.



that the county contained a range of different types of locality and community in the post-war decades enabling the researcher to examine a range of experiences. For example the areas I have been examining include the traditional urban working-class areas of city-centre Oxford; the working-class suburb of Cowley dominated by men who worked at the car fac-

tories and their families; the middle-class suburb of North Oxford where many of the university academics and their families resided; and the rural areas of the Wychwoods in West Oxfordshire, Benson and Ewelme in South Oxfordshire and the villages around Banbury in North Oxfordshire, all of which have their own characteristics. Taking Oxfordshire as a case-

Why 224?

When choosing a title for our newsletter we wanted one that reflected in a distinctive manner the Deddington area.

We were getting nowhere, and were uncomfortably close to going to press with our first issue, when I remembered the nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey drawings for the first edition of the one-inch maps. I had come on these during my researches into a history of the Barfords at the British Library

The drawing is for the area, from Aynho to the Swerford gate on the turnpike, north of the Buckingham to Burford Turnpike (now more prosaically known as the B4031). It was carried out in 1814 in pencil, ink and with detail added in red and blue.

The drawing that gives its name to our title, which incorporates the northern part of Deddington, as well as Hempton, Clifton and the Barfords carried the unique number 224, and the Oxfordshire sheet that made use of it was finally published in 1833.

Colin Cohen

study therefore, enabled me to see how living in these different communities determined women's experiences of raising their children.

The historian trying to form a picture of Oxfordshire life at this time is aided by the numerous

contemporary surveys of Oxfordshire that were conducted by social scientists, often based at Oxford University, such as John Mogey's comparative study of Barton and St Ebbe's published in 1956, and the survey of twenty-four square miles in North Oxfordshire for the survey *Country Planning* published in 1944 and the re-study of 1975. In addition recent historical research has taken place by Elizabeth Peretz on maternity and child welfare in the inter-war years. I can therefore place my findings in the context of other research conducted in this area and contrast their discoveries with the accounts of the women I interview. Another reason why I chose to conduct my research in Oxfordshire is that no comparable study exists

for this area while there have already been studies done on other locales, such as Elizabeth Roberts for Lancaster, Preston and Barrow. My research will therefore enable regional comparisons to be made.

Conclusions

From my research to date the finding I believe to be most interesting is how important locality was upon women's experiences of motherhood and how largely it featured in the narratives of those interviewed. I think that the significance of locality as a factor in shaping women's attitudes and experiences of maternity was largely overlooked by the authors of the studies conducted at this time. The discourses of class and later gender dominated their analyses. While I am not denying that

class and gender were significant factors in shaping how women experienced motherhood at this time, the results of my interviews showed how important the type of community in which a woman lived could also be. I think that the agendas held by the authors of many studies from the 1950s and 1960s determined their findings and this was to their detriment. While we have their opinions about what was interesting and important about becoming a mother at this time, we do not know what the women themselves would have characterised as the central issues for them. I am hoping to redress this through my research.

Angela Davis

[Angela Davis was our April speaker]

From the Chair

I would like to remind members of the threat that family and local history in our area faces from the proposed sale of the papers of the Cartwrights of Aynho. The papers are now on loan to Northamptonshire Record Office. The disposal of the archive is a matter of concern not only to our neighbours in Aynho or even in Northamptonshire more widely: the Cartwrights owned extensive property west of the Cherwell, including much in Deddington. A few years ago a group of us visited Northampton to look at the archive and were struck by the wealth of material relating to our area and our interests. Several have returned to carry out research. The Cartwright family has expressed its intention to sell the papers. They are entitled to do so, even though they have been looked after at public expense for many years.

Unless Northants RO can raise the not unreasonable asking price of £300,000 it seems likely that the archive will end up in the United States. From our point-of-view that would be disastrous, since it would effectively deprive us of free and easy access to the source material for a great deal of our history. The History Society has made a contribution, on the understanding that the money will be refunded in the unfortunate event of the appeal failing. Individual members might want to do the same. Every little will undoubtedly help, but what will certainly be helpful to the Northants RO are expressions of support from outside that county, indicating to potential grant-making bodies that this is an archive of importance to a wide range of people from a broad area. The person to whom we should write is Sarah Bridges, County Archivist, Records Office, Wootton Hall Park, Northampton NN4 8BQ.

On a happier note, we have had another successful year, with some excellent speakers interspersed with highly entertaining events and regular issues of the ever-impressive 224. I would like publicly to thank our committee members for all their hard work: Jill Adams, Janet Broadbent, Moira and Trevor Byast, Colin Cohen and Sue Shattock. We wish you all a wonderful summer and we look forward to greeting you again for the start of our new season on Wednesday 13 September.

Chris Day