

A BROADER PICTURE

Among the wealth of historical data now being published online is Cambridge University's Atlas of Victorian and Edwardian Population, which can be seen at www.populationspast.org. This takes all sorts of fascinating facts, such as age at marriage or infant mortality, and plots them on a map of England and Wales, allowing you to view trends between 1851 and 1911. It's broken down by area, so that you can also compare your locality with other places.

Dorney is not shown separately, but as part of the Burnham sub-district of Eton RD. This also included Eton Wick, Taplow, the Farnhams, Wexham and Stoke Poges, and by 1911 had been extended to include Hedgerley, Fulmer and Gerrards Cross. But it still provides some interesting insights into what life was like for earlier residents of Dorney.

Between 1851 and 1901, this area was classified as agricultural, but in 1911 it was defined as professional, following the trend of the surrounding districts. Population density had gone up from 0.35 persons per acre in 1851 to 0.52 in 1911. The proportion of the male workforce who were farm labourers had declined from 43% to 12%, while non-manual male workers had risen from 10% to 22%. This must reflect one of the most profound changes for Dorney and neighbouring villages, when, after centuries during which farming was the predominant activity, people living here worked in a much broader range of jobs, often outside the village, resulting in the semi-rural environment we live in today. Examples from Dorney itself in the 1911 census include the two sons of the farmer at Pigeon House farm working as clerks, for a ship broker and on the railways; a self-employed general and agricultural machinist; another farmer's son who was an agricultural engineer and implement agent; an upholsterer working for a house furnisher; a cabinet maker; a stone mason's superintendent; and two traction engine drivers.

By contrast, working life for women in our area had not changed much over this period. Roughly half the female workforce was still employed in domestic service, although by 1911 18% of households had live-in servants, compared with 8% in 1851. However, big changes had occurred for women's families. The birth rate had dropped significantly for both legitimate and illegitimate babies, and infant mortality had also fallen markedly. In 1861, 10% of babies died before their first birthday; this was less than 7% by 1911. For children aged 1 to 5, the death rate had fallen from over 8% to under 3%.

Older children locally had benefitted from greater emphasis on the importance of schooling. Less than 2% of boys aged 10 to 13 were not at school in 1911, compared with 17% in 1851. Girls in the same age group were always more likely than the boys to be still at school, and by 1911 less than 0.5% were in work.

We tend to assume that our Victorian forebears lived shorter and less healthy lives than we do today. However, a recent study of the period from 1850 to 1880 has shown that life expectancy in the UK (having reached the age of 5) was as good or better than it is now. This was mainly due to a healthy diet and plenty of exercise. Fresh meat and vegetables were more widely and cheaply available than previously, and it's estimated that the mid-Victorians consumed about 10 portions of fruit and vegetables daily. The quality of the diet actually fell later in the 19th century when food became more refined and convenient – tinned meat and fruit, white bread, and cheap confectionary.

The mid-Victorians also led active lifestyles, typically burning twice as many calories as today's recommended daily allowance. Most jobs, for men and women, were physically demanding, and in addition domestic chores and walking to work added to the effort expended. Alcohol consumption was relatively low, and few people at this time smoked tobacco. As a result, they tended not to suffer from the chronic degenerative diseases that are the most important causes of ill health and death today – coronary artery disease, cancers and strokes.

So, the agricultural way of life in Dorney which was to come to an end in the early years of the 20th century did have the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, once the risks of infancy were past. And perhaps we have something to learn from that lifestyle which would help us today.