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Title: Educating the Labouring Poor in Nineteenth-Century Suffolk

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Abstract: This article demonstrates the utility of a new source, prison registers, for the history of literacy and education in nineteenth-century England. It focuses on two sets of prison registers from the two county gaols in Suffolk, located at Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds, which contain personal information on 16,690 individuals over the period 1840 to 1878. First, the article examines the context in which personal information about prisoners was recorded and tests the data against benchmarks from other sources to prove its reliability. Second, the article employs two methods, statistical analysis and digital mapping, to study in depth the rich data on prisoners' literacy and schooling. Finally, the article shows how the results of this analysis significantly revise our understanding of the prevalence of schooling among the labouring poor, the use of different types of schools, the role of the partially literate in the drive towards mass literacy, and the importance of life-long learning.

Keywords: education, prison, Suffolk, literacy, working class

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Educating the Labouring Poor in Nineteenth-Century Suffolk

Since the 1980s, statistics on literacy and schooling in nineteenth-century Britain have come to be regarded as 'notorious snares for the unwary'.¹ Historians have shown that, while providing a standard and direct measure, the ability to sign one's name, marriage register data create an artificial dividing line in working-class culture, while telling us very little about the meaning of literacy.² Similarly, school surveys and sources such as census enumerators' books are inconsistent in their definitions of 'school' and 'scholar', display a problematic prejudice against unsupervised educational institutions, and do not allow for widespread practices such as intermittent school attendance by the working classes.³ This sustained critique has had two important consequences: first, the emergence of a number of studies which have emphasised the substantial achievements in popular education made largely in the absence of the state;⁴ and second, the proliferation of research on the uses of the literacy, especially the reading skill, which has increasingly focused attention on the diverse experiences of communities and individuals.⁵ Arguably, it was not the intention of scholars in the 1980s to throw the baby out with the bath water. David Vincent and David Mitch have pointed out that literacy and schooling statistics are our only consistent record and, when examined rigorously, can significantly further our knowledge of the acquisition and potential use of the literacy skills.⁶ Moreover, they provide an essential framework for understanding the experiences of communities and individuals revealed in qualitative sources. This article, therefore, aims to refresh the study of the acquisition of the literacy skills in nineteenth-century Britain through the use of an entirely new source: nineteenth-century prison registers.

Prison registers were one of several different types of records (including gaol delivery calendars, officials' journals and reports, convict captions and convict indents) used to capture personal information about suspected and convicted offenders in nineteenth-century England. Robert Shoemaker and Richard Ward have described both the emergence of these records and their use to create national statistics as driven by a 'desire to better understand the criminal and the causes of crime', and can be regarded as 'one of the first stages in the history of criminology as an intellectual enterprise'.⁷ In the main, the uses to which criminal justice historians have put these records continues this tradition: to study the characteristics of nineteenth-century offenders and to better understand the social conditions in which crimes were committed.⁸ Key methodological concerns about the creation of these records and their focus on the offending population have limited their use by social historians to chart patterns in the experience of labouring populations.⁹ However, a growing body of work led by Deborah Oxley on the use of biometrical data such as heights, weights and age to explore living standards, and my own previous work on the representativeness of prisoners' literacy data which this article seeks to expand, present a much more optimistic view of the potential of prison registers as valuable sources for social history.¹⁰

Between 1840 and 1870, more than 16,000 men and women incarcerated at one of the two county prisons in Suffolk, located at Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds, had their personal details entered into the Gaol Receiving Books (or prison registers).¹¹ These included, not just their level of literacy, but whether and where they had attended school and for how long. Herein lies their immense value. The Suffolk prison registers are unique in their connection of literacy levels with modes of learning for a large section of the labouring population over a significant time span.

On one level, the registers offer evidence on the educational experiences of the labouring poor of nineteenth-century Suffolk, a predominantly rural county with some distinctive trends in literacy and schooling. For example, Suffolk's literacy rate was lower than the national average, from mid-century proportionately more women than men were literate, and the county had neither a shortage of schools nor scholars.¹² On another level, given that historians have been continuously thwarted in their attempts to identify trends in literacy acquisition specific to rural and urban communities, as well as to men and women, the Suffolk registers have the potential to expose patterns relevant to other English counties.

The purpose of this article, then, is threefold. First, it will test the utility of prison registers as a source for social history by examining the context in which the Suffolk Gaol Books were created and comparing their data against benchmarks set by other sources on literacy and schooling. Second, the article will highlight the different methodologies that can be used to analyse prison register data. In particular, it will demonstrate the value of digital mapping and the recreation of landscapes of social institutions using multiple historical sources to better understand their use and cultural significance. Third, by applying these methods to the prison register evidence, the article will shed new light on the acquisition of the literacy skills by the labouring poor in the sixty or so years preceding the introduction of national (1870) and compulsory (1880) education. Its findings on modes of learning, types of schools, reading literacy and life-long learning suggest that current understanding of the achievement of universal literacy requires significant revision.

The Source

Although the combined county gaols and houses of correction located at Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds were just two of about ten penal institutions operating in early Victorian Suffolk, they were the largest and most important.¹³ The geographical expanse of Suffolk had created the need for two county gaols, one to serve the administrative district of East Suffolk (Ipswich), and the other West Suffolk (Bury St Edmunds). Both were erected around the turn of the nineteenth century (Ipswich in 1790 and Bury St Edmunds in 1800-05) and by the 1840s each received between 400-500 prisoners per year. These prisoners were accused of or had committed crime in all parts of the county, though typically where there was no other local gaol with jurisdiction to receive them. Thus an important difference in the shape of the prison population existed between the two county gaols: whereas Bury St Edmunds, in the absence of a borough prison, received prisoners from that town, Ipswich boasted a distinct city gaol and house of correction to which were committed around 200 prisoners each year, the result being that Bury St Edmunds gaol included a larger proportion of prisoners typically accused of urban crimes.

The prison registers kept by the two county gaols were broadly similar. Moreover, they closely resembled those of at least one other English prison, the County House of Correction at Knutsford in Cheshire.¹⁴ However, compared with other examples of surviving prison registers, the Suffolk registers were exceptionally detailed. For every prisoner, we are told their name, residence, occupation, age, height and other physical characteristics, state of health, distinguishing marks, place of birth, father's name and residence, marital status, and number of offspring together with their ages; we are given information on their offence, trial, punishment and previous crimes; and we are told whether they had served in the armed forces, could read or write, and had gone to school and for how long. In addition, for those offenders incarcerated at Ipswich, we are further informed

of where they had learnt their trade (if they had one), their religion, and their spouse's residence and means of subsistence. The Ipswich registers survive in an unbroken sequence for the period 1840 to 1870, the Bury St Edmunds registers for the years 1844 to 1848 and 1863 to 1878. Combined, the registers contain 22,093 completed entries (14,026 at Ipswich, 8067 at Bury) about 16,690 individuals (10,441 at Ipswich, 6249 at Bury) and 22,637 separate charges (14,368 at Ipswich, 8269 at Bury) or 20,236 unique offences (12,885 at Ipswich, 7351 at Bury).¹⁵

Some historians have expressed concern about the conditions in which information on inmates was obtained. For example, Donald Fyson and Francois Fenchel have cautioned against giving too much credit to the skills of prison officers, especially the ill-paid admitting turnkey 'who might be roused from his bed at any hour by city police depositing drunk and disorderly people', and expressed suspicion about prisoners' ability to self-report on age, nationality, marital status, etcetera.¹⁶ Yet these remarks must be balanced against evidence of the care that was taken to ensure at least some information in prison registers was accurate. From the mid 1830s, local gaol records, including prison registers, were regularly examined by the new prison inspectors, not just to raise professional standards, but, more importantly, because national judicial statistics were based on the information they contained. Between 1836 and 1877, there were only two occasions when officials at Ipswich were admonished for poor record keeping, and none with regard to Bury St Edmunds.¹⁷

Local prison officials had a particular interest in ensuring the accuracy of data on prisoners' literacy as it was used for internal and external purposes. The collection of this data was a consequence of the 1823 Gaol Act which directed that provision be made in all gaols for the instruction of men and women in the skills of reading and writing. In order to instruct, officers needed to know who already possessed the skills and who did not. Prison schools were in operation at both Ipswich (from at least 1843) and Bury St Edmunds (from at least 1825).¹⁸ From 1835, the collection of data on prisoner literacy became mandatory when the newly established government statistical department decided that it should be included in the annual criminal and penal statistics. There is much evidence to suggest that officials at the majority of local prisons did not rely on self disclosure by prisoners but actively tested new inmates, for instance, by asking them to read aloud from a given passage, and to copy a piece of text.¹⁹ Those who used self disclosure initially soon became critical of it when errors in profiles became apparent in prison schools and had to be corrected in the registers (including at Bury St Edmunds County Gaol in 1836).²⁰ After the establishment of the prison inspectorate, officials in the few institutions where inspectors found prisoners were not tested were reprimanded for the consequences of their laxity on the national statistics.²¹

While there was no way to test the accuracy of prisoners' accounts of their schooling, there is no compelling reason to mistrust their answers, nor the recording practices of those who filled in the registers. In his study of working-class private schools, Phil Gardner drew attention to the substantial degree of prejudice against unsupervised educational institutions in official sources such as school surveys and censuses. The existence and hence contribution of these schools to popular literacy was seriously under estimated in order to help drive them out of the educational marketplace.²² The motivations of penal officials, however, were contrary. In their search for the causes of crime, it would have suited them if the answers given by prisoners exposed the widespread use of unsupervised working-class private schools by convicted offenders.

Further proof of the reliability of this evidence is provided by the range of answers given by those who specified the type of school they attended. As for the majority, who only gave the name of the parish in which their school was located, survey data from 1818, 1833 and 1851-55 suggest many prisoners attended schools in parishes where there were no 'official' or 'formal' state or church-run institutions. And, given the fact that the majority of prisoners with skills had information on their acquisition strongly indicates that apart from the period 1845-48 and 1863-70 at Bury, schooling data was collected consistently. Any remaining doubts then lie in the formulation of the question – 'where did the prisoner go to school, and for how long' – which had the potential to privilege 'schools', broadly conceived, over other forms of skills acquisition, including domestic instruction and self teaching.

The robustness of the data can also be checked by analysing the profiles of repeat offenders in the registers, a method used by Fyson and Fenchel. For these historians, 'incarceration histories' of individual prisoners challenged the usefulness of register data because they exposed inaccuracies in data on age, height, marital status and physical characteristics.²³ In contrast, I would argue that a more nuanced approach is necessary, that identifies categories of information which should not change between convictions, such as an offender's place of birth, accepts some minor variations in subjective categories or those where estimates were more likely, for example, physical characteristics and age, and embraces changes in information about marital status, residence, occupation, literacy and even religion for what this might tell us about the contours of life within the labouring classes.

The Suffolk prison registers contained a small proportion of offenders who appeared multiple times: at Ipswich, 1929 offenders (or 18%) and at Bury St Edmunds 979 offenders (or 16%). The majority did not have any significant changes in their personal data between convictions. Only 5% of repeat offenders at Ipswich and about 2% at Bury St Edmunds had a different place of birth recorded on subsequent convictions. With regard to information on literacy and schooling, between 12 and 13% of repeat offenders at both gaols had inconsistent literacy profiles, showing neither a clear pattern of skills acquisition or decline. These records should not be dismissed outright as errors. The schooling information provided in some of these profiles draws attention to short bursts of instruction at different institutions which may account for the instability. Only 7% of repeat offenders at Ipswich and barely 1% of repeat offenders at Bury St Edmunds had schooling information which seemed contradictory. Surrounding contextual information for the majority suggested it was likely that they had learnt their skills via different modes or schools at different times. Out of a total of 2908 repeat offenders at both gaols, only 36 had schooling information which was likely wholly inaccurate. This is a very low rate of error.

Even if the data is generally dependable, how typical were the experiences of prisoners? Offenders who came into contact with the nineteenth-century criminal justice system were overwhelmingly male (at Ipswich, 86% of inmates were male, and just under 90% at Bury), and typically aged between 16 and 30 (63% at Ipswich and 59% at Bury). They were also more likely to come from the poorest levels of society: 59% of offenders at Ipswich and 66% of offenders at Bury St Edmunds were unskilled workers (or daughters of unskilled workers), overwhelmingly described as 'labourers'. To put this in context, the 1851 census found that 28% of the population in Suffolk worked as labourers (agricultural and general), or 40% of those aged between 15 and 30.²⁴ Most of the offenders in the Suffolk prison registers cannot be described as members of a 'hardened criminal class'. The great

majority were arrested for: petty thefts (35% at Ipswich, 18% at Bury), a crime which could often be described as a strategy to supplement meagre incomes or to cope with periods of unemployment; poaching (10% at Ipswich, 12% at Bury), a possible exertion of customary rights but more likely another survival strategy used by the poor, and at the very least action largely condoned by the local community; low level assaults (9% at both Ipswich and Bury), possibly resulting from the use of a traditional method of dispute resolution; public order or moral offences (4% at Ipswich, 9% at Bury, and not including damage to property), many of which were new crimes under laws enforced by new police forces; and crimes associated with poverty (18% at Ipswich, 14% at Bury), such as vagrancy, misbehaviour in the workhouse, and failure to maintain one's family.²⁵ Despite the 'ordinariness' of their criminal behaviour, it remains a challenging task to isolate those characteristics associated with their criminality and those common to Suffolk's labouring poor.

Many nineteenth-century contemporaries did not believe that prisoners' literacy was representative of the general population. In fact, this assumption motivated the collection of national statistics on prisoner literacy, as the government statisticians as well as members of the newly formed statistical societies were eager to prove that deficiencies in popular education were linked to rising crime rates.²⁶ Prisoners proved to be more literate than expected, a fact that was conveniently explained with reference to their schooling: the great majority had imperfect skills in reading and writing, and hence had not attended the right school, or for long enough, to have received a proper, moral education.²⁷ The debate prompted the collection of data on schooling at a number of penal institutions, including at the Suffolk gaols, although this was never included in the national judicial statistics.²⁸ Local data collection and management gave rise to a chorus of dissenting voices in the debate, predominantly prison chaplains, who argued that prisoners' literacy skills broadly matched those of the communities from which they came.²⁹ Their conclusions have been supported by at least two historical studies.³⁰

The representativeness of the literacy of the Suffolk prisoners can similarly be proven by testing their abilities against those of the men and women who signed the marriage registers in that county. Table one shows the results. Several trends were notable in the comparison of prisoners and free men and women. First, the prisoners' literacy (male and female) increased at broadly the same pace as the county literacy rate. Second, matching county trends, the level of literacy among female prisoners overtook that of male prisoners by c1860. Third, the gap in the achievements of prisoners at Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds (around 15 points) roughly matched the gap between literacy rates in East and West Suffolk in this period (roughly 10 points).³¹ Furthermore, that prisoners were less literate than free people in every period can be explained first by the potential difference in standards, that prisoners had to demonstrate an ability to read and write even if imperfectly rather than just signature literacy, and second with reference to the over-representation of the labouring poor in the prison population. Historians have shown that a tight correlation existed between occupation and literacy in the nineteenth century.³² Hence, table one also includes the literacy levels for unskilled males and females calculated by David Vincent from parish registers.³³ Both the male unskilled prisoners and the female prisoners compared favourably with Vincent's averages.³⁴

Having demonstrated the viability of prison registers and disproved the supposed link between poor literacy and criminal behaviour, the remainder of this article will discuss the patterns in skills acquisition for Suffolk's labouring poor which were exposed by combining data on prisoners' literacy with schooling information and other key personal details. Although all prisoners – county natives,

residents and strangers – were used in the above comparison of prisoner and county literacy, the following analysis (unless otherwise stated) is limited to those prisoners born in Suffolk, about 75% of the total number of prisoners, in order to avoid any possible skewing by those who (possibly) learnt (or did not learn) their literacy skills in another county.

The findings of this study are based on the use of two methods: descriptive statistics and digital mapping. The latter was essential, as it allowed prisoners' educational experiences to be contextualised and thus understood within the schooling landscape of Suffolk. This landscape was created by extracting data on the locations and types of schools from imperfect but comprehensive schooling surveys and county directories from 1818, 1833 and 1851-55.³⁵ The result was the creation of three sets of exceptionally detailed layered maps, which not only supported but substantially expanded the patterns of skills acquisition evident in the descriptive statistics. In addition, the process of plotting locations of prisoners' schools alongside those listed in the official sources further highlighted the utility of the prison registers as a source for the study of popular schooling. The registers not only help to fill gaps in the official record by uncovering the existence of additional schools, but also highlight and so deepen our understanding of the transitory nature of some popular schooling facilities.

Modes of Learning

Although historians have been eager to highlight the significant role played by informal modes of learning, especially instruction within the home, in the decades before 1870, data in the Suffolk prison registers re-emphasise the importance of the school in the drive towards mass literacy.³⁶

Very few prisoners claimed to have acquired their literacy skills through informal forms of education exclusively. At Bury St Edmunds, only 10 prisoners claimed to have learnt their skills at home, from friends, while in service, or to have taught themselves. Such a low number could be reflective of the relative inconsistency with which schooling information was collected at that gaol. The Ipswich data was more robust. Still, only 2% of offenders at Ipswich claimed to have acquired skills informally. An additional 2% had skills but did not say how they had acquired them. It is possible that, given the way in which the schooling question was posed in the register, that these prisoners might also have been exclusively educated informally. They double the numbers, but even so the proportion remained very small: 4%. Analysing the presence of informal instruction across birth cohorts made little difference to the shape of the data. Of those born in the decades between 1800 and 1849, the proportion of those informally educated hovered between 2% and 3%. Concerning outcomes, those who were informally instructed were much more likely to learn to read only (62%), than to read and write (38%).

No particular group showed a tendency towards informal instruction. Proportionately more women than men learnt their skills informally, but the difference was slight (3% compared with 2%). The proportion of skilled and unskilled men with exclusive informal instruction was identical (both at 2%). The difference between the religious denominations was also negligible: 2.2% of those who claimed to be of the established church were informally educated, compared with 2.8% of those of a dissenting denomination. Those of the Independent Church were the most likely to receive exclusive informal instruction (3.4%), but then a slightly higher proportion of Independents attended school (65%), which cautions against using a religious supply/demand argument.

Furthermore, the schooling maps showed no clear relationship between informally educated offenders and a lack of schools in their parishes of birth. In fact, it was a fairly even split between the presence of the informally educated in parishes with high levels of illiteracy and no schools and parishes with high levels of literacy and multiple schools. It is even difficult to prove that school capacity was a common factor. For example, the one Sunday school in Iken in 1833 might well explain why only one of 15 offenders in that cohort attended school in the parish, but the remaining 14 included those who received no education, who had been home-schooled, and who attended school in a neighbouring parish. Individual circumstances and choices, rather than overarching social conditions, seem to have been the primary determinant for informal education.

While the Ipswich prison registers caution against an over-emphasis of the incidence of exclusive informal instruction, it is likely that they under estimate the role of informal instruction generally. Schooling was not a bar to informal instruction. Evidence from working-class autobiographies highlight the extent to which methods such as home schooling, peer instruction and self-teaching supplemented the efforts made at school, by providing groundwork, expanding the skills or facilitating relearning.³⁷ Very few prisoners claimed to have received both formal and informal instruction in the literacy skills: only 12 offenders at Ipswich and 1 offender at Bury St Edmunds. Mary Barnes, imprisoned at Ipswich in 1840, stated that although she had been to a church school for a 'short time', her father had taught her to read.³⁸ Charles Wilby, imprisoned at Bury St Edmunds in 1869, claimed to have both spent 6 months at school in Brandon and taught himself to read and write.³⁹ Because the prison register asked prisoners specifically about 'schooling', mixed modes were probably only revealed under certain conditions, for example, where a prisoner was keen to communicate that only a short time was spent in formal education and the real learning happened elsewhere, or where a prisoner expanded on his or her skills through adult education, typically the prison school.

But, it is still an important finding that the majority of those imprisoned at Ipswich (62%) and Bury (58%) had attended a school at some point in their lives, and that nearly all of those who possessed literacy skills had some experience of schooling. Significantly more women (69% at Ipswich and 70% at Bury) attended school than men (61% at Ipswich, 57% at Bury), and more skilled men (79% at Ipswich, 68% at Bury) attended school than unskilled men (55% at Ipswich, 41% at Bury). The data on religion collected at Ipswich gaol showed that Dissenters were only slightly more likely to have attended school than those of the established church: 63% compared with 62%. However, some of the Dissenting denominations boasted a higher proportion of school attendees, namely, Independents (65%), Primitive Methodists (74%) and Wesleyans (96%). One Dissenting denomination, Baptists, fell below the average school attendance rate, with 58% of adherents having gone to school. This was not matched by an increase in the proportion of Baptists taught informally (2.5%).

If learning to read was the most likely outcome of informal instruction, those who went to school were much more likely to achieve full literacy. At Ipswich, 62% of those who attended school could read and write, and 36% could read only; and at Bury St Edmunds, 83% of those who went to school could read and write, and 17% could read only. The prison registers also showed that skills learnt at school could be fragile: 1.4% of prisoners at Ipswich and 0.4% of prisoners at Bury St Edmunds claimed to have been to school but at the time of their imprisonment were unable to read or write. Gender had a notable impact on outcomes. Of the Ipswich women who went to school, only about

half (50.4%) were able to read and write, the other half (49.2%) able to read only, compared with 64% of men who could read and write and 34% who could read only; and of the Bury St Edmunds women who went to school, 72% could read and write and 28% could only read, compared with 84% of men who could read and write and 16% who could only read. Although, from about 1830 onwards, females were more likely to be sent to school than males, when a male was sent to school there was a greater commitment to ensuring that the investment resulted in full literacy.

Finally, the relationship between schools and skills was further strengthened by the data on the length of time prisoners spent at school, as there was a close correlation between this and the level of literacy achieved. The average number of years spent at school increased with each skill level: in other words, those who could read and write typically spent more time at school than those who could only read (4.2 to 4.6 years compared with 2.5 to 2.7 years at Ipswich and Bury respectively). Women spent longer periods at school to achieve the same outcomes as men (to read 3.1 to 3.7 years and to write 4.6 to 4.9 years, compared with 2.3 to 2.5 years and 4.1 to 4.6 years respectively for men), probably the result of their more intermittent attendance, and providing further evidence of the greater commitment to ensuring schooled males achieved full literacy. The average length of time spent at school declined with each successive birth cohort from the 1800s (4.5 years at Ipswich, 4.7 years at Bury) through to the 1850s/1860s (2.8 years at Ipswich, 3.4 years at Bury respectively).

Data assembled by other historians, such as Jane Humphries, show a similar decline up to the 1840s (from 3.01 years for those born in the 1800s to 2.37 years for those born in the 1830s) but then an increase of average time up to the 1870s (for example, from 4.79 for those born between 1840 and 1869).⁴⁰ Humphries' data, however, was primarily derived from the experiences of those in industrial regions, and that is the likely explanation for the divergence. The continued decline of schooling years in agricultural Suffolk after 1840 could be attributed to the 'High Farming Period' of 1850-70, a time of agricultural growth and productivity. As Humphries and other historians have argued, when the economy was growing and employment available, school attendance suffered.⁴¹ But the decline could also be explained with reference to changing pedagogies in what seemed to be the most popular schools among the Suffolk prisoners, subsidised schools, most of which were subject to government inspection, at which the literacy skills began to be taught concurrently from about 1830, and where the focus on skills delivery intensified after the Revised Code of 1862.⁴² It is this issue, preferences for particular schools, to which we now turn our attention.

Types of Schools

Historians have emphasised the variety of schools that existed before 1870, highlighted the attractiveness of those which neatly fitted the rhythms of working-class life, and even stressed the importance of private working-class or dame schools, typically derided by nineteenth-century contemporaries, in the drive towards mass literacy.⁴³ Data from the Suffolk prison registers challenges this, by reasserting the importance of government support for and funding of popular education. Not only do prisoners' schooling profiles suggest a preference for subsidised day schools, typically those run by the two religious school societies, the National Society and the British and Foreign Society, among the labouring poor, but they also illuminate the operation of several types of school, established through legislation and entirely supported by public funds, which proved remarkably successful in imparting the skills.

The three sets of maps created from the location data of offenders and schooling information from national and local surveys revealed key trends in the types of schools attended by the labouring poor. Offenders of every description – male and female, skilled and unskilled, churchmen and dissenters – were far more likely to be schooled in their birth parishes, or not schooled at all, than to travel to another parish for their education. In 1818 and 1833, parishes with fewer schooling options, and especially those which only contained fee-supported day schools, had larger populations of offenders who were not schooled or who were schooled in different parishes. Because the information in White's *County Directory* made it more difficult to identify fee-supported day schools in 1855, it was still the case that clusters of these groups of offenders existed in parishes with fewer schooling options, for example, they only had Sunday schools. The relationship between Sunday schools and offenders was hard to delineate. Although there seemed to be a link between home-parish schooled offenders and the existence of Sunday schools in 1818, it became less clear in 1833 and 1855, mainly because the growth in Sunday schools after 1818 meant that by 1833 there was one in almost every parish. Much more obvious in all three sets of maps was the correlation between significant clusters of offenders schooled in home parishes and the existence of subsidised day schools in those parishes. Conversely, there was a noted absence of subsidised day schools in parishes that contained clusters of offenders either not schooled or schooled in other parishes.

Patterns of movement of those offenders schooled in parishes different from their home parish mapped using the spider diagrams further emphasised these trends. For all three periods, the great majority of these offenders were schooled in neighbouring parishes. Of the remainder, most attended specific types of institutions which schooled offenders from afar under particular circumstances, namely, workhouse schools, reformatories, and prison schools. In only two cases (out of 30) – the schooling of offenders from Thornham Parva in Thornham Magna in the 1833 map, and the schooling of offenders from Framsdon in Helmingham in the 1855 map – did either of the corresponding surveys mention a pre-existing formal arrangement between the parishes (i.e. to send children from one parish to the other for schooling). Although on every map, the great majority of receiving parishes had more schooling options than the origin parishes, more often than not origin parishes did contain schools. The typical pattern exposed was that offenders who resided in parishes that lacked subsidised day schools were schooled in parishes that contained these schools. This was further supported by data on the overall proportion of offenders schooled in different parishes: whether male or female, skilled or unskilled, of the established church or dissenter, the proportion schooled away from home only notably decreased between 1833 and 1855, the period in which the number of subsidised day schools increased significantly.

Similarly, an examination of the relationship between dissenting schools and prisoners of dissenting denominations presented little evidence to challenge the overall preference for subsidised day schools. Although it is true that the relationship between dissenting schools and dissenting scholars strengthened in successive maps – a growing number of parishes with clusters of home-parish schooled offenders contained dissenting schools, and an increasing number of examples of offenders residing in parishes with no dissenting schools attended schools in a parish with a dissenting school – this may have been incidental, as the number of dissenting schools increased substantially between 1818 (36 schools) and 1855 (203 schools). An equally significant number of parishes in each period which contained dissenting schools had clusters of dissenting offenders either not schooled or schooled in other parishes. There were as many dissenting offenders who had

dissenting schools in their home parish but were schooled in neighbouring parishes with no dissenting schools.

Even narrowing the study to specific dissenting denominations made little difference. In 1855, seven dissenting offenders were schooled in different parishes despite the fact that their home parish contained a dissenting school. Each was of the same denomination as the school in their home parish. Three of the receiving parishes had no dissenting schools. Two receiving parishes had schools of a different denomination. Only one receiving parish had a dissenting school of the same denomination. In this case, the final receiving parish (Stowmarket) was a regional centre, which not only had six dissenting schools of various denominations, but in total 21 educational facilities. Instead, like the larger groups of prisoners that the dissenters belonged to, their decisions on schooling were more heavily influenced by the scale of schooling options available, as well as the presence of subsidised day schools. Clusters of home-parish schooled dissenters were found in parishes with subsidised day schools more often than in parishes with dissenting schools. And more dissenting offenders with no subsidised day schools in their home parishes either remained unschooled or were schooled in parishes which did contain subsidised day schools.

The experiences of a significant minority of prisoners at Ipswich who did specify the type of school attended – 19% or 942 prisoners – provided yet further evidence of the importance of subsidised or state-funded schools. The largest proportion attended Sunday schools (8% of the total number schooled), 3% attended workhouse schools, and around 3% also attended church-run (establishment and dissenting) day schools.⁴⁴ Looking at the types of schools attended by churchmen and dissenters, an equally proportionate number of whom disclosed this information, confirmed the ultimate pragmatism of the labouring poor: although they may have preferred to attend schools of their own denomination, dissenters and churchmen alike used schools of different creeds when it suited them to do so.⁴⁵ Data on outcomes (arranged in table two) from attending different types of schools cautioned against any attempt to argue that Sunday schools played a greater role in the drive towards mass literacy because the prisoners who disclosed information seemed to show a preference for them. Sunday schools created a far larger proportion of partial literates than full literates, at best providing a foundation from which literacy skills could be expanded later. Church-run day schools also produced more partial literates than full literates. However, day schools run by the Church of England, of which there were significantly more in the county, produced more literates than the day schools run by dissenters. And the statistics demonstrated improvement over time: of those born in the 1810s who attended church-run day schools, 36% achieved full literacy, compared with 100% of those born in the 1840s.⁴⁶

Perhaps most unexpected in the data on outcomes was the effectiveness of educational institutions established through legislation to address skills gaps in particular communities and which were entirely publicly funded: namely, workhouse schools, reformatories and regimental schools. On the one hand, because of the nature of the prisoner population, attendance statistics probably cannot be used to accurately assess the proportion of the labouring poor who used these schools. Yet, on the other hand, it is only through prison register data that we can appreciate their significance. The higher rate of literacy achieved at these institutions was probably linked to longer periods of attendance. Boys were sent to reformatories, where instruction was compulsory, for a minimum of five years and sometimes longer.⁴⁷ The average length of attendance for offenders educated at Suffolk workhouses was 5.1 years (6.2 years for women and 4.7 years for men), longer than

attendance at church-run day schools (3.2 years) and Sunday schools (2.9 years). Even the data from those who attended a prison school showed that close to 50% exited the system fully literate, after serving sentences of less than two years and often less than one year. In sum, this evidence highlights the effectiveness of the state in providing education, as well as the overall importance of public funds in driving literacy rates, before 1870.

Reading Literacy

Despite their many advantages, the use of marriage register data has created an artificial line between full literates and illiterates in nineteenth-century society. The skills of reading and writing were taught sequentially in most schools at least before the 1840s. After this date, many types of educational institutions (such as Sunday schools) continued to instruct pupils only in the reading skill. As a consequence, there existed a large number of partial literates, men and women who could read but not write. Snippets from qualitative sources such as journals and autobiographies have made historians aware of their presence and suggested that they were a significant group. But bar a small handful of speculative studies, there have been no attempts to assess its likely size, or to consider its role in the drive towards mass literacy.⁴⁸ Moreover, the recent proliferation of studies of the Victorian reading public, largely associated with the rise of book history, has heralded a return to the marriage register data in order to strengthen arguments that the growing number of textual products was supported by an ever-increasing number of readers.

The results of separate skills testing in the Suffolk prison registers (table three) provide an opportunity to explore further the dimensions of literacy in nineteenth-century society. They show, that in rural communities at least, labouring populations were substantially more 'literate' than previously assumed from the marriage register data. Men and women alike were much more likely to possess at least the skill of reading, than to have no literacy skills. Partial literacy was much more prevalent amongst the unskilled men than skilled men. More importantly, separate skills testing suggests that the primary driver behind rising literacy rates, in rural England at least, was the conversion of would-be partial literates into full literates, and not necessarily the attraction of substantial numbers of entirely new scholars. Table three shows that the proportion of those who were totally illiterate experienced only a small decline across the period 1840 to 1870. At the same time, the proportion of males and females who could only read declined steeply and at roughly the same pace as the increase in full literacy. Thus, while the Victorian reading public may have become more literate, its size did not substantially increase before 1870.

Data on schooling in the prison registers further supports this finding. Given the conclusion above, that the great majority of labourers with literacy skills attended school, we could expect school attendance to increase alongside literacy rates for each successive generation. Instead, the proportion of those schooled in each birth cohort increased between those born in the 1790s/1800s (49% at Ipswich/ 37% at Bury) and those born in the 1830s (66% at Ipswich, 59% at Bury), but then declined until the 1850s cohort (59% at Ipswich, 55% at Bury), before increasing again for those born in the 1860s (65% at Bury, no data for Ipswich). The increase for men in the early 1800s was more modest than for women (for example, at Ipswich, 55% for the 1800s cohort, stabilising at 62% for the 1810s and 1820s cohort, rising only to 64% for the 1830s cohort, compared with a jump for women from 55-57% in 1800s/1810s to 73-74% for the 1820s/1830s cohort). These patterns can be explained with reference to the agricultural economy of Suffolk, for example: that the sharper

increase in the proportion of women sent to school was the result of the displacement of women by men in farm labour after about 1811; that the decreasing number of men sent to school from about the 1850s (those born in the 1840s) matched the need for more labour during the 'High farming Period'; and that the increase in the numbers of men schooled from the 1860s cohort paralleled the advent of agricultural depression in the 1870s.⁴⁹ That last cohort (1860s) may also have been the first beneficiaries of the national (but not yet compulsory) system of education established by Forster's Education Act of 1870.

The Suffolk data further suggests that changes in pedagogy, especially in those schools found to be most 'preferred' by the prisoners, which meant that more scholars exited the system fully literate rather than partially literate, was more important in driving rising literacy rates than increasing school attendance. In other words, literacy rates continued to rise in the generations born in the 1840s and 1850s despite a decrease in schooling because concurrent instruction in reading and writing had become common in state subsidised and state-funded schools. This also explains why female literacy in Suffolk overtook that of male literacy around mid century. Women were the direct beneficiaries of concurrent instruction. The higher proportion sent to school meant that, even though the commitment to ensuring full male literacy was greater, more women learnt to read *and* write than men. The higher proportion of women schooled also meant that there were more female partial literates than male partial literates in society. Until the 1870 Education Act, labouring men were more likely to be totally illiterate than labouring women.

Life-Long Learning

Because the vast majority of men and women in the nineteenth century were married between the ages of 21 and 30, signatures and marks in the marriage registers tell us about the literacy of that age group. Yet other sources have alerted historians to the loss of skills gained in childhood through the lack of practice, as well as the acquisition of skills later in life. Furthermore, education historians have largely focused on schooling institutions predominantly attended by children. Much less research has been carried out on the education of adults, and most of that which does exist focuses on the expansion of existing skills, rather than the acquisition of new skills. Yet long ago J.F.C. Harrison coined the term 'living and learning' to highlight the fact that learning was not a sequential or linear process, but a life-long process heavily influenced by the ebb and flow of living.⁵⁰ Sylvia Harrop also has argued that post-school education played a vital role in the establishment of a literate society in nineteenth-century England. Both studies were based on qualitative evidence.⁵¹ The quantitative evidence on life-long learning in the Suffolk prison registers expands our knowledge of the process of acquisition as well as loss over a lifetime and, at the same time, sheds light on institutions set up to address adult illiteracy which have been almost entirely overlooked by historians.

The literacy of Suffolk-born male prisoners of different age groups (15 and under, 16-20, 21-30, 31-40 and 41+) was analysed for each five year period between 1840 and 1879.⁵² At no time were the skills spread evenly across the different age cohorts. The proportion of partial literates declined across all age groups between 1840 and 1879, except for those aged 41 and over: reading literacy for this group was remarkably stable, though in the 1840s the proportion was also much lower than for other age groups. Older age cohorts tended to be more literate than younger age cohorts. The age group which nearly always boasted the highest proportion of full literates was that comprising

men aged 31 to 40. Moreover, closely tailing this group was the 41+ cohort; and, in fact, if the men aged 41 to 50 were considered as a separate group, until the 1860s they were most often the most literate. This is an important finding, not least because it directly contradicts marriage register evidence used by David Vincent which showed a consistent reduction of literacy by age.⁵³ In sum, while the data provided some evidence of the loss of skills with advancing age, namely, a steady attrition rate for those who had only learnt to read, the dominant pattern was of the acquisition of literacy skills after the typical age of schooling (ie. 5-15 years) and even after average marital age.

The profiles of repeat offenders which show changes in levels of literacy not only confirmed this pattern but provided further evidence on the process of acquisition and loss. At Ipswich, 368 offenders (19% of repeat offenders) and at Bury St Edmunds 147 offenders (16% of repeat offenders) were assessed as having a different level of literacy on subsequent appearances at the gaols. The great majority of those who changed their literacy status had profiles which consistently improved over the course of their offending careers: 70% at Ipswich (258 offenders) and 66% at Bury (97 offenders). Only a very small number of these were aged 15 or under for at least one confinement (26 across both gaols), and of these only a tiny handful acquired a new skill while still aged 15 or under, the majority acquiring new skills in their late teens, 20s or even 30s, matching the experience of those aged 16 or over at their first confinement. A further 17% at Ipswich (63 offenders) and 22% at Bury (33 offenders) had literacy profiles which consistently declined, showing a loss of fragile skills. A significant proportion of these prisoners had attended school for periods of one year or less. Accompanying data on age and the length of time between convictions suggested there was no likely time in adulthood for loss to occur. Only a small proportion, 12-13% at both gaols (47 offenders at Ipswich and 17 at Bury) had literacy profiles which were inconsistent, with neither a clear pattern of improvement nor decline. The records were not necessarily errors; the schooling information provided by these offenders typically highlighted short bursts of instruction in different institutions. This messiness is likely reflective of the experiences of a small but notable section of the labouring poor.

The tendency of repeat offenders to acquire skills together with the evidence on the higher literacy of older adult prisoners, gives weight to Harrop's argument about the importance of adult education for rising literacy levels. So too does the information on the schools attended by Suffolk prisoners. Table two, showing the outcomes of attendance at different types of schools, draws attention to the effectiveness of institutions geared towards adults rather than children in delivering full literacy, for example, evening schools. The success of evening schools could be explained either by the greater commitment of the adults attending to acquire full literacy (compared with the likely levels of commitment and even understanding of the importance of literacy skills by 5 to 10 year olds), or by the possibility that many attending were seeking to convert their partial literacy into full literacy. The latter assumption is supported by the data on skills across age groups. This evidence further contributes to the finding that partial literates played a crucial role in the drive towards mass literacy. Prisoners' schooling experiences also remind us that educational institutions presumed to cater for children could include adult scholars. For example, William Perry was convicted for five workhouse offences between 1841 and 1854. On his first four convictions, he was described as totally illiterate. However, on his last conviction, which followed a gap of six years and by which time Perry was in his mid 60s, he was recorded as able to read and write, skills he had learnt at Eye Union House.⁵⁴

Perhaps even more importantly, prisoners' schooling experiences bring to the fore several adult educational institutions of which we know very little. At least 19 Suffolk-born prisoners had attended regimental schools during periods of military service, the majority of whom were fully literate as a result.⁵⁵ Many more were educated in prison schools. Official sources describe schools in operation at Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds gaols (including the Ipswich borough gaol), as well as Beccles House of Correction, during the 38 years covered by the prison registers. At Ipswich and Bury, instruction in reading and writing was offered by the schoolmaster daily to those without these skills; at Beccles, prisoners were instructed in reading only until the appointment of a schoolmaster in 1848.⁵⁶ Only 11 prisoners at Bury, ten of whom served their sentences during the 1840s, claimed to have learnt their literacy skills in prison. But, at Ipswich, between 1840 and 1870 as many as 103 offenders acquired their skills at prison schools (at least 71 at Ipswich county gaol), and a further 136 repeat offenders, given the contextual data in the registers, had likely learnt their skills at Ipswich county gaol. The majority of these offenders were male; only 15 females were instructed in prison.

The Ipswich data illuminates some key trends in the contribution made by prison schools to literacy rates among the labouring poor. Of the 239 prisoners (explicit and implicit scholars), 68% learnt to read and write and 31% learnt to read only. However, the profiles of repeat offenders (206) showed that the majority only acquired one skill while in gaol: most converted their ability to read into full literacy (113), while 51 who entered the gaol totally illiterate learnt to read. Only 31 learnt both skills, and of these, 6 acquired the ability to read and write over several periods of imprisonment. But this picture changed over time. With each decade, while the number of prisoners claiming to have received instruction in prison declined, prisoners who did receive schooling were much more likely to achieve full literacy, including those who arrived at the prison fully illiterate. Two factors were likely at work here: first, the declining proportion of partial literates in society, which meant a decrease in the number of partially literate prisoners needing to upgrade their skills, accompanied by an increasing focus on totally illiterate prisoners; and second, a growth in the efficiency of the prison school, which meant more total illiterates could achieve full literacy by the end of their sentences.⁵⁷

There was a direct relationship between the length of time spent in prison and the skills acquired. Prisoners who learnt to read spent on average 0.26 years in gaol (or 0.33 years for those who explicitly stated that they acquired their skill in prison); who could read and learnt to write, 0.35 years (0.6 years); and who learnt both skills, 0.69 years (0.98 years). Although these averages were greater than the average length of prison sentences (82% served sentences of less than three months), the average sentence length of prisoners receiving instruction did not show any significant change over the three decades of the registers. Hence, the prison school, attended by a smaller number, achieved better results within a similar time frame. Yet overarching patterns highlighting the effectiveness of the prison school need to be balanced against a handful of prisoners' profiles which suggested skills learnt in prison were lost between convictions, drawing attention to the potential fragility of a prison education.

Finally, evidence of the 'success' of the prison school raises the question of whether the effectiveness of institutional instruction for the imprisoned population had a contrary effect to the experience of the non-prison adult population who, once out of childhood, were unlikely to receive any further instruction. Because the Ipswich registers contained detailed information on the previous incarcerations of inmates in Suffolk gaols at least, it is possible to examine the literacy skills

of men both born in Suffolk and imprisoned for the first time. If anything, this data accentuated the literacy of the older age cohorts even further, especially those aged 41 and over (or more particularly, those aged 41-50). Those aged 15 and under, and even 16-20, remained the most 'illiterate' groups for almost the entire period.

Conclusion

As this article has demonstrated, nineteenth-century prison registers are valuable sources that, when used with care, can shed light on patterns in the experience of ordinary people, especially the labouring poor. In particular, the data on literacy and schooling contained in the Suffolk Gaol Receiving Books significantly revises our understanding of the acquisition of the skills of reading and writing in the period before 1870. It shows that schools were important. They occupied a prominent place in the lives of even the very poorest and a strong correlation existed between school attendance and the presence of skills. Changing pedagogies in schools, which ensured that increasing numbers left school fully literate rather than partially literate, played a substantial role in the drive towards mass literacy. The registers tell us that rising literacy rates were sustained through the upskilling of would-be partial literates, rather than the conversion of the totally illiterate into full literates. The registers also emphasised the role of post-school education in the spread of literacy, as many men acquired their skills, especially the ability to write, in adulthood, and often after average marital age. Illiteracy was never a condition that belonged to older generations. However, arguably the most critical finding from the Suffolk prison registers was the importance of state-subsidised education in the sixty years leading up to Forster's Education Act of 1870. The data clearly highlighted a preference for subsidised schools among the labouring poor. It further showed that educational institutions backed by the state proved to be more efficient at skills delivery than private schools, or foundations solely supported by the different religious denominations.

One of the primary aims of state intervention in popular education in the nineteenth century was to repress the unsupervised, private market. For this reason historians have rightly been wary of official schooling data which both promoted the achievements of subsidised schools and highlighted the need for greater provision. While it is true that prison registers were official documents, created by disciplinary institutions for the purpose of the state, they are not necessarily subject to the same pitfalls. By the 1840s, officials began to acknowledge that prisoner literacy was roughly representative of the labouring poor. It would have suited them far better had the register data on prisoner schooling drawn attention to the widespread use of working-class private schools. Instead, it showed that many criminals had attended the very institutions – Sunday schools, and church-run day schools – intended to discipline and civilise the labouring poor.

Given this, can the Suffolk registers help prove or disprove the counterfactual typically posed, that the private market, having achieved so much before the intervention of the state through government grants to National and British and Foreign Schools in 1833, and even before the Education Act of 1870, would have continued to grow eventually ensuring achievement of mass literacy in the absence of state? The Suffolk registers disprove it in two important ways. First, the data on outcomes show that the path to mass literacy through private education would have been halting, almost certainly much longer, and not at all certain. Second, the data on skills highlight the stubbornness of total illiteracy, suggesting that the private market might well have reached its limit by the early Victorian period. Further proof is provided by the 'success' of those schools established

by legislation and almost exclusively publicly-funded set up to capture those who remained untouched by either the private market or subsidised schools – namely regimental and prison schools, but also workhouse schools and reformatories. Through these institutions, the state proved itself as an ‘effective’ provider of basic education and demonstrated the need for intervention before 1870.

Tables

Table One: Prisoners' literacy compared with county literacy and occupational literacy, 1840-1879 (%)

	1840-44	1845-49	1850-54	1855-59	1860-64	1865-69	1870-74	1875-78/9
Suffolk males	54	54	56	58	63	67	71	75
Vincent's unskilled males	n/a	31	n/a	41	n/a	51	n/a	56
Ipswich males (ma)	40	43	43	45	49	56	n/a	n/a
Ipswich unskilled males (ma)	25	33	32	34	36	48	n/a	n/a
Ipswich skilled males (ma)	65	68	68	68	73	71	n/a	n/a
BSE males (ma)	n/a	36	n/a	n/a	n/a	44	51	57
BSE unskilled males (ma)	n/a	29	n/a	n/a	n/a	33	39	48
BSE skilled males (ma)	n/a	66	n/a	n/a	n/a	79	75	76
Suffolk females	48	51	55	62	70	75	79	83
Vincent's unskilled females	n/a	33	n/a	48	n/a	61	n/a	69
Ipswich females (all)	20	30	31	42	43	52	n/a	n/a
Ipswich females (ma)	19	24	26	49	45	66	n/a	n/a
BSE females (all)	n/a	20	n/a	n/a	n/a	45	45	52
BSE females (ma)	n/a	20	n/a	n/a	n/a	38	46	71

Table notes: Suffolk males/ females are the rates of literacy for all males and females from the county described in the Registrar General's annual reports. Vincent's males/ females are the rates of occupational literacy David Vincent calculated using the original marriage register evidence. Ipswich males/ females are the rates of literacy of prisoners at Ipswich Gaol, and BSE males/ females are the rates of literacy of prisoners at Bury St Edmunds Gaol. Male prisoners have been divided into occupational groups for closer comparison. 'ma' denotes where the literacy of prisoners of average marital age has been calculated. 'n/a' is used when no data was available for that period.

Sources: Annual Reports of the Registrar-General of Births, Deaths and Marriages in England and Wales (1840-1881); David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England, 1750-1914* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 97, 102; Gaol Receiving Books, Bury St Edmunds County Gaol, Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds Branch, Q/ AGr 1-16 (1844-78); Gaol Receiving Books (prison registers), Ipswich County Gaol, Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch, A609/1 -30 (1840-70).

Table Two: Outcomes of schooling for different types of schools attended by Ipswich offenders

	total	%N	%R	%R&W
Sunday school	377	2.4	76.9	20.2
Union	159	0.6	20.1	79.3
Church-run schools	161	3.1	61.4	34.8
(establishment)	(128)	(3.9)	(58.6)	(36.7)
(dissenting)	(33)	(0)	(72.7)	(27.2)
charity school	50	0	42	58
prison	92	0	52.2	47.8
military school	19	0	26.3	73.7
evening school	27	0	29.6	70.4
reformatory	13	0	7.7	92.3

Table notes: With regard to the types of schools, 'Union' stands for workhouse school, 'prison' for those who learnt in prison, 'establishment' for day schools run by the National School Society or Church of England, and 'dissenting' for day schools run by dissenting denominations, especially those run by the British and Foreign School Society. The last two are also considered together, under 'Church-run schools'. Columns 3-5 represent the standards (or skills) attained, where 'N' signifies no skill, 'R' the skill of reading only, and 'R&W' the ability to read and write.

Source: Gaol Receiving Books (prison registers), Ipswich County Gaol, Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch, A609/1 -30 (1840-70).

Table Three: The spread of the skills amongst Suffolk-born male and female prisoners at Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds, 1840-1879

		1840-44	1845-50	1850-54	1855-59	1860-64	1865-69	1870-74	1875-79
Ipswich Men	total no	1531	1485	1864	1105	1303	1370	n/a	n/a
	% N	39	35	32	38	40	36	n/a	n/a
	% R	31	28	25	22	16	12	n/a	n/a
	% R&W	31	36	40	38	44	52	n/a	n/a
BSE Men	total no	n/a	1135	n/a	n/a	n/a	1523	1142	588
	% N	n/a	41	n/a	n/a	n/a	47	43	37
	% R	n/a	31	n/a	n/a	n/a	12	12	10
	% R&W	n/a	27	n/a	n/a	n/a	40	45	53
Ipswich Women	total no	243	254	247	189	222	197	n/a	n/a
	% N	28	24	26	19	30	24	n/a	n/a
	% R	51	45	39	36	26	24	n/a	n/a
	% R&W	20	31	34	45	45	52	n/a	n/a
BSE Women	total no	n/a	101	n/a	n/a	n/a	129	115	55
	% N	n/a	29	n/a	n/a	n/a	41	30	29
	% R	n/a	53	n/a	n/a	n/a	15	25	16
	% R&W	n/a	18	n/a	n/a	n/a	44	44	55

Table notes: 'BSE Men/ Women' stands for male and female prisoners at Bury St Edmunds Gaol. The size of the sample for each period is given in the row labelled 'total no'. The standard or skills attained by the prisoners are represented by 'N', meaning no skill, 'R', meaning the skill of reading only, and 'R&W', meaning both reading and writing skills. The proportion (or %) of prisoners of each standard is given.

Sources: Gaol Receiving Books, Bury St Edmunds County Gaol, Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds Branch, Q/ AGr 1-16 (1844-78); Gaol Receiving Books (prison registers), Ipswich County Gaol, Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch, A609/1 -30 (1840-70).

¹ D. Vincent, 'Review of David Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England* (1992) and Patricia Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture 1790-1860* (1991)', *Social History*, 19, 1 (1994), 122.

² A summary of the benefits of the marriage register data is provided by R.S. Schofield, 'The measurement of literacy in pre-industrial England', in J. Goody (ed), *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968). For challenges, see D. Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England, 1750-1914* (Cambridge, 1989), 29-32, and B. Reay, 'The context and meaning of popular literacy: some evidence from nineteenth-century rural England', *Past & Present* 131 (1991), 89-129.

³ J.S. Hurt, 'Professor West on early nineteenth-century education' and E.G. West, 'The interpretation of early nineteenth-century education statistics', *Economic History Review*, 24, 4 (1971), 624-642, P. Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England* (Breckenhams, 1984), introduction, W.B. Stephens, *Education in Britain, 1750-1914* (Basingstoke, 1998), ch. 2.

⁴ For example, J. Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2010), ch. 10, Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools*, J.F.C. Harrison, *Learning and Living, 1790-1860: A study in the history of the English adult education movement* (London, 1961), T.W. Lacqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and working-class culture* (New Haven, 1976).

⁵ Communities and individuals is the focus of the new sub-discipline, the history of reading. But for the use of reading by working-class men and women, see Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, 2001).

⁶ Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, 97, and see also Vincent, 'The Progress of Literacy', *Victorian Studies*, 45, 3 (2003), 405-431, Vincent, 'The invention of counting: the statistical measurement of literacy in nineteenth-century England', *Comparative Education*, 50, 3 (2014), 266-281. D.F. Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England* (Philadelphia, 1992), 200-212.

⁷ R. Shoemaker and R. Ward, 'Understanding the criminal: record-keeping, statistics and the early history of criminology in England', *British Journal of Criminology* (2016): <https://doi-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/10.1093/bjc/azw071> (advance access).

⁸ For example, most recently: B.S. Godfrey, D.J. Cox and S.D. Farrall, *Criminal Lives: Family life, employment and offending* (Oxford, 2007), B.S. Godfrey, D.J. Cox and S.D. Farrall, *Serious Offenders: A historical study of habitual criminals* (Oxford, 2010), H. Johnston, B. Godfrey, D. Cox and J. Turner, 'Reconstructing prison lives: Criminal lives in the digital age', *Prison Service Journal*, 210 (November 2013), 4-9.

⁹ Summarised by D. Fyson and F. Fenchel, 'Prison registers, their possibilities and pitfalls: the case of local prisons in nineteenth-century Quebec', *The History of the Family*, 20, 2 (2015), 163-188.

¹⁰ S. Nicholas and D. Oxley, 'Living standards of women in England and Wales, 1785-1815: New evidence from Newgate Prison records', *Economic History Review*, 49, 3 (1996), 591-599, S. Horrell, D. Meredith and D. Oxley, 'Measuring misery: Body mass, ageing and gender inequality in Victorian London', *Explorations in Economic History*, 46, 1 (2009), 93-119, R. Crone, 'Reappraising Victorian literacy through prison records', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15, 1 (2010), 3-37.

¹¹ Gaol Receiving Books (prison registers), Bury St Edmunds County Gaol, Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds Branch (subsequently SRO-BSE), Q/ AGr 1-16 (1844-78); Gaol Receiving Books (prison registers), Ipswich County Gaol, Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch (subsequently SRO-IPS), A609/1 -30 (1840-70).

¹² Literacy data extracted from the Annual Reports of the Registrar General, 1840 (Second Report) to 1881 (Forty-Second Report). Proportions of scholars in 1851 cited in Stephens, *Education in Britain*, p. 24. For comments on schools see J. Glyde, *Suffolk in the Nineteenth Century: Physical, social, moral, religious and industrial*, London, 1856), ch. 7.

¹³ Although the county prisons at Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds comprised gaols and houses of correction, for ease of use from now on they will both be referred to as county gaols.

¹⁴ A copy of a blank page from the Knutsford prison registers is included in the prison inspectorate reports for 1839. See Inspectors of Prisons of Great Britain II. Northern and Eastern District, Fourth Report (Parl. Papers, 1839, XXII.1), 18. Unfortunately, the Knutsford Registers do not survive.

¹⁵ There is a difference between charges and unique offences. Some offenders were charged with multiple offences, hence there were more charges than entries in the registers. Equally, some offenders worked together as accomplices for particular offences: each offender was charged separately, but only one offence was committed.

¹⁶ Fyson et al, 'Prison registers, their possibilities and pitfalls', 172-3.

¹⁷ Inspectors of Prisons of Great Britain II. Northern and Eastern District, Fifth Report (Parl. Papers, 1840, XXV.565), 137, Inspectors of Prisons of Great Britain II. Northern and Eastern District, Eighteenth Report (Parl. Papers, 1856, XXXIII.1), 56.

¹⁸ The first prison school at Ipswich is recorded in Reports and Schedules Pursuant to Gaol Acts (Parl. Papers, 1845, XXXVII.417), 185, and Inspectors of Prisons of Great Britain II. Northern and Eastern District, Ninth Report (Parl. Papers, 1844, XXIX.227), 43, and the prison school at Bury St Edmunds was first mentioned in Reports and Schedules Pursuant to Gaol Acts (Parl. Papers, 1824, XIX.359), 216.

¹⁹ See for example the reports on the Northampton County Gaol and House of Correction, Reports Pursuant to Gaol Acts (Parl. Papers, 1840, XXXVIII.1), 120, and Reports and Schedules Pursuant to Gaol Acts (Parl. Papers, 1844, XXXIX.403), 130; and on Worcestershire County Gaol and House of Correction, Reports and Schedules Pursuant to Gaol Acts (Parl. Papers, 1841, XVIII.1), 204.

²⁰ Reports on Bury St Edmunds County Gaol, Inspectors of Prisons of Great Britain II. Northern and Eastern District. First Report (Parl. Papers, 1836, XXXV.161), 99, and on Northampton Borough Gaol, Inspectors of Prisons of Great Britain II. Midland and Eastern District, Thirteenth Report (Parl. Papers, 1847-8, XXXVI.1), 92.

²¹ See, for example, reports on Scarborough Borough Gaol, Kingston Upon Hull Town and County Gaol and House of Correction, and York Castle County Gaol, in Inspectors of Prisons of Great Britain IV. Northern District, Fourteenth Report (Parl. Papers, 1849, XXVI.167), 24, 37, 44.

²² Gardner, *Lost Elementary Schools*, ch.1.

²³ Fyson et al, 'Prison registers', 171.

²⁴ Census of Great Britain, 1851. Population Tables. Part II. Ages and Occupations. Volume 1 (Parl. Papers, 1852-53, LXXXVIII Pt.I.1).

²⁵ The following authors have shown how these crimes could be regarded as 'ordinary' behaviours in the ebb and flow of working-class life: V.A.C. Gatrell, 'Crime, authority and the policeman-state', in F.M.L. Thompson, (ed.) *Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950. Volume 3* (Cambridge, 1989), 241-310, J. Davis, 'Jennings Buildings and the Royal Borough: The construction of an underclass in mid-Victorian England', in D. Feldman and G.S. Jones (eds.) *Metropolis London: Histories and Representations since 1800* (London, 1989), 11-39; H. Osborne and M. Winstanley, 'Rural and urban poaching in Victorian England', *Rural History*, 17 (2006), 187-212, S. Williams, 'Earnings, poor relief and the economy of makeshifts: Bedfordshire in the early years of the New Poor Law', *Rural History*, 16 (2005), 21-52, Glyde, *Suffolk in the Nineteenth Century*, 153-156; J.C. Wood, *Violence and crime in nineteenth-century England: The shadow of our refinement* (London, 2004).

²⁶ G.R. Porter, 'On the connexion between crime and ignorance as exhibited in the criminal calendars', *Transactions of the Statistical Society*, 1 (1837), 97-103, R.W. Rawson, 'An enquiry into the condition of criminal offenders in England and Wales with respect to education', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 3 (1841), 331-352.

²⁷ For example, see the work of J. Fletcher, 'Moral and educational statistics of England and Wales', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 10 (1847), 193-223, 11 (1848), 344-366, 12 (1849), 151-176, 189-335.

²⁸ One attempt to collect prisoners' schooling data at the national level: Abstract return of the number of persons now in custody, in prisons in England and Wales, specifying the number who have, and who have not, received an education (Parl. Papers, 1852-53, LXXXI.311). Examples of the collection of data on schooling include: by surgeon-superintendents on convict ships, The National Archives (subsequently TNA), ADM101/13/9, ff.2-5, ADM101/16/2, ff.12, and MT32/2, and by the chaplain at Reading County Gaol, Berkshire Record Office (subsequently BRO), Quarter Sessions, Q/SO 24 & 25, Reports of the Chaplain to Michaelmas Quarter Sessions, 1854-57.

²⁹ For example, H. Mayhew & J. Binney, *The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison Life*, London, 1862, p.182, BRO, Q/SO20, Annual Report of the Chaplain at Reading Gaol, 13 October 1845, and other examples are found in chaplains reports scattered through the Reports and Schedules Pursuant to Gaols Act (1825-47) and the Reports of Inspectors of Prisons (1836-77).

³⁰ S.J. Nicholas, 'Literacy and the industrial revolution', in G. Tortella (ed.) *Education and Economic Development since the Industrial Revolution* (Valencia, 1990), 47-68, Crone, 'Reappraising Victorian literacy'.

³¹ Data on the literacy rates of the general population extracted from the annual reports of the Registrar General for England and Wales, 1840-1900.

³² For example, see R.S. Schofield, 'Dimensions of illiteracy, 1750-1850', *Explorations in Economic History*, 10 (1973), 437-454, the essays in W.B. Stephens, ed. *Studies in the History of Literacy: England and North America* (Leeds, 1983), and Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*.

³³ Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, 97, 102.

³⁴ Note: Vincent's sample did include one registration district from Suffolk – namely, Samford, in East Suffolk – which might explain why his figures match the Ipswich gaol data more closely than the Bury St Edmunds data.

³⁵ Data on Suffolk schools was extracted from the following sources: *Digest of parochial returns made to the Select Committee on Education of the Poor (1818)* (Parl. Papers, 1819, IX-A, IX-B, IX-C); *Education Enquiry: Abstract of the answers and returns on the state of education in England and Wales, 1833* (Parl. Papers, 1835, XLI, XLIII, XLII); *Census of Great Britain, 1851 Education* (Parl. Papers, 1852-53, XC.1), the Ecclesiastical Census Returns for parishes in the historic county of Suffolk, TNA HO129/ 189, HO129/ 211-227, HO129/ 249; and William White, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Suffolk* (London, 1855).

³⁶ Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, 54-56, Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, 320.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ SRO-IPS, A609/1(31), ff.57

³⁹ SRO-BSE, Q/AGr10, ff.201.

⁴⁰ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, 312-315.

⁴¹ Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour*, 312-315. See also Schofield, 'Dimensions of illiteracy', Stephens, *Education, Literacy and Society*, Nicholas, 'Literacy and the industrial revolution', and D.F. Mitch, 'Education and skill of the British labour force', in R. Floud and P. Johnson (eds.) *Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain*, Volume One (Cambridge, 2004), 332-356: all of whom argue that literacy rates dipped between c1800

and c1820 as a result of the industrial revolution. For the 'High Farming Period', see M. Turner, 'Agriculture, 1860-1914', in Floud and Johnson, *Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain*, volume two, 138-141.

⁴² Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, 73-92.

⁴³ For example, Lacqueur, *Religion and Respectability*, Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools*; though the latter has lately been challenged by E. Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn: A people's history of the industrial revolution* (New Haven, 2013), 165-185.

⁴⁴ All the other types of schools were represented by small numbers of prisoners and so did not even make up 1% of the sample. Church-run day school included the following descriptions: church school, chapel school, day & Sunday school, British school, National school, Baptist school, Lancastrian school, and meeting school.

⁴⁵ I was unable to control for gender or occupation in the same way, because proportionately more women and skilled workers disclosed the type of school attended.

⁴⁶ Note, however, that the 1840s cohort only contained 5 offenders, so caution must be exercised in using this data.

⁴⁷ With regard to reformatories and industrial schools, previous historians have similarly found better outcomes as a result of consistent and lengthy periods of attendance at these institutions. See G. Gear, 'Industrial Schools in England, 1857-1933: "moral hospitals" or "oppressive institutions"?' (PhD, University of London, 1999), 132-5, 215-6; N. Sheldon, 'School attendance, 1880-1939: A study of policy and practice in response to the problem of truancy' (DPhil, University of Oxford, 2007), ch. 3.

⁴⁸ Schofield and Webb both attempted to quantify the Victorian reading public by using marriage register evidence combined with that from other nineteenth-century social investigations. Schofield, 'The measurement of literacy', 324, Webb, 'Working-class readers in early Victorian England', *English Historical Review*, 65 (1950), 333-51. See also Crone, 'Reappraising Victorian literacy'.

⁴⁹ Turner, 'Agriculture, 1860-1914', R.C. Allen, 'Agriculture during the industrial revolution', in Floud and Johnson, *Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain*, volume one, 104-106.

⁵⁰ Harrison, *Living and Learning*.

⁵¹ Sylvia Harrop, 'Adult education and literacy: The importance of post-school education for literacy levels in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society*, 13, 3 (1984), 191-205.

⁵² Attempting to analyse the literacy of female prisoners in this way created noisy data because the cohorts were just too small.

⁵³ Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, 26-27.

⁵⁴ SRO-IPS, A609/1(31), ff. 249, A609/4, ff. 256, A609/7, ff.151, A609/8, ff. 31, A609/15, ff. 271. See also Caroline Self, SRO-IPS, A609/4, ff. 127, 175, A609/6, ff. 405, A609/7, ff. 87, 427, A609/8, ff. 43, 443, A609/13, ff. 81, A609/18, ff. 47.

⁵⁵ Because military prisoners were confined at both gaols, the presence of regimental schools in the registers is even greater if those born outside Suffolk are taken into consideration. Virtually no research has been carried out on regimental schools since R. Blanco, 'Education reforms for the enlisted man in the army of Victorian England', *History of Education Quarterly*, 6, 2 (1966), 61-72.

⁵⁶ See note 18. Accounts of the prison schools at Beccles and Ipswich Borough Gaol similarly appear in the Reports and Schedules Pursuant to Gaol Acts and the Reports of Inspectors of Prisons, both published as Parliamentary Papers. See also Crone, *Educating Criminals in Nineteenth-Century England* (forthcoming).

⁵⁷ There were no prisoners in the 1850s or 1860s whose profiles suggested the acquisition of reading and writing over several commitments.