

Courtship at the Coroner's Court¹

On 22 October 1839, Ann Homan and Samuel Foster walked out together at Newnham Hill, near Daventry (Northamptonshire).² They had been courting for six months and often went to a local lover's spot, normally accompanied by a chaperone named Catherine Hartopp. She usually turned for home ahead of the couple, giving them an opportunity to embrace. On the 22 October, however, Hartopp had 'not gone twenty yards' before hearing a dramatic scream. Running back up the hill she found Ann Homan lying on the ground, crying out 'I am done, I am done. I think the ball is on my side. He has shot me'. There was a single mark on her dress by the breastbone, but no blood. Hartopp helped Ann to her feet and turning round the two women found Samuel Foster lying flat on his back. There was a large blood stain on the left-side of his shirt. They ran for a local surgeon called Mr Clarke, who confirmed that Samuel Foster had been shot in the heart. In the right pocket of his trousers was a pistol. A second gun was found next to the corpse.

At twilight the same day a coroner's hearing was convened at Newnham public house, the business premises of Ann Homan's father.³ She gave evidence that

The deceased was 23 years of age. He had paid his addresses to me for about six months. Yesterday he was with me at Dodford, in the morning, and in the afternoon he went to Dodford again. After staying about three hours he walked me to Newham accompanied by a girl named Catherine Hartopp. When we reached the top of the hill, Hartopp left us. The deceased wished to accompany me home and I said he might if he thought well. He then, without saying a word, fired a pistol at me, and the ball stuck me on the left breast. Fortunately the bone of my stays protected me, glanced it off after it passed through my shawl ... I was so terrified that I became insensible.

The force of the shot from close-range knocked Ann to the ground. Incredibly the bullet had ricocheted off the whalebone of her corset, killing Foster instantly. At the packed coroner's hearing the jury wanted to know more about the nature of the emotional, romantic, and physical relationship of the young couple.

Under cross-examination, Homan reassured the jury that: 'No quarrel had taken place between us. He had made no offer of marriage. I had not given him to think I had any aversion to him, as indeed I had not.' The chaperone, Catherine Hartopp, likewise stressed in her evidence that: 'The deceased and Ann Homan appeared to be good friends while I was with them and there had been no quarrelling'. Ann's near-relations also testified on her behalf. Her father, William Homan, admitted that Samuel Foster had 'showed me two pistols, three weeks since' in his public house. But he was not alarmed because Foster told him he 'carried them for protection, as he was in the habit of travelling at night'. Yet, John Hartopp (the chaperone's brother) gave evidence that provides an important clue as to the real motive for the shooting. He explained that 'The deceased asked me on the turnpike road whether any young men went after Ann Homan. I replied that there had been one or two, but not lately, at which he smiled, and went on'. Close kin and neighbours confirmed that Samuel Foster had suspected Ann of infidelity. Irrational jealousy seemed to have motivated an attempted murder and accidental death.

The jury were satisfied that Samuel was ‘love-smitten’ and the verdict was one of ‘death while temporarily insane’.

Ann Homan’s story is neither an isolated or unusually well documented case. Coronial records are rich (for some areas at least) during the eighteenth century⁴ and remain so through to the twentieth century. They constitute a largely untapped resource through which to explore important questions about the character and meaning of British courtship rituals and the wider emotional framework within which courtship was inscribed. The Coronial Court was after all a ‘forum in which the labouring poor could challenge the powerful’ and which provides surprisingly abundant evidence of the detailed courtship practices of ordinary people, right down to the level of the dependent poor.⁵ In this article we focus on the period from the early 1800s to the 1890s and with a particular emphasis on the 30,000 Coronial records of the Midland Circuit, comprising the counties of Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, parts of Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Rutland and Warwickshire.⁶ Our periodization is deliberately chosen. It runs from the early nineteenth century – when some historians have located a transition in the courtship and marriage patterns of ordinary people, in which couples themselves are believed to have garnered more choice and love came to be a dominant emotional driver to courtship – and to the later nineteenth century, when it has been variously argued that parental control over courtship, marriage and residential arrangements was forcefully reasserted.⁷ The focus on the Midland Circuit offers a balancing provincial perspective to a literature on marriage and courtship that has focussed disproportionately on the largest urban areas.

Using witness statements, presented evidence, and contemporaneous newspaper reporting of Coronial inquests, our article addresses two broad themes: Firstly, whether it is possible to take the thousands of courtship stories that emerge directly or indirectly out of this material and to create a typological framework of courtship experiences for the nineteenth century. Secondly, how these stories can be used as a lens to explore lacunae in the historiography of courtship and related areas such as the history of emotions. In this regard we will explore three core questions. Firstly, what range of actors (family, friends, neighbours, employers, lodgers etc) was involved in courtships among the labouring classes? More widely we will test the established sense that individuals and couples amongst the labouring classes of nineteenth century England had a considerable capacity for agency. Secondly, we will ask: what was the emotional context within which the courtships of ‘ordinary people’ were played out? How were hopes and dreams inscribed into courtships? How frequent were multiple (sequential and simultaneous) attachments? What potential was there for frustration, despair, guilt, jealousy, boredom, enjoyment, gratitude, obsession, ignorance, curiosity, foolishness, deliberate provocation, flirting, teasing, simple naivety, tittle-tattle, and anger to disrupt and shape the courtships of working people? And how far was it possible (a sub-text in the accounts of Samuel Foster’s courtship of Ann Homan) for men and women to experience and construct courtship as a completely different emotional investment? Finally, we will explore how ordinary people experienced the human journey of courtship. How fragile were relationships? What expectations about the durability and duration of courtships did people hold? What economic expectations were brought to romantic attachments and how did couples balance the public and private in playing out their courtship? Of course, this is a formidable list of questions, some of them familiar from work on earlier or later

periods but under-explored for the nineteenth century, while others have attracted little sustained attention for any period. It is to this historiographical framework that we initially turn.

For historians who have worked on ‘breach of promise’ cases in England, Scotland or Ireland, some of the detail of Ann Homan’s story will be familiar. Courtships could be extremely fragile in the face of influences such as unemployment, misunderstandings or jealousies, as well as outright deception.⁸ Frustrated courtships did not always end up in the criminal court. Disappointments in love propelled some people to the asylum, or, as in the case of Samuel Foster, to more extreme measures.⁹ Nor, perhaps, would the violence that attended the case of Ann Homan be surprising to the historians who have recently done much to expose the under-current of domestic violence in eighteenth and nineteenth century relationships.¹⁰ Given that violence was a strong undertone in some marriages, it is unsurprising to discover it being played out in courtship too.¹¹

Yet, if some of the elements of this story are familiar, there are still considerable imbalances and blind spots in the historiographical literature. Understanding of the nature of courtship has grown ever richer for the early modern period.¹² Recent research now encompasses an increasingly detailed appreciation of the legal regulation of marriage processes¹³, the complex intertwining of illegitimacy and courtship¹⁴, and a series of excellent studies of elite groups which collectively deal with the role of family and friends in the decision of who to court and when to marry.¹⁵ Studies of diaries, love letters, keep-sakes and token gifts as expressions of intimate affection, have significantly refined our understanding of the complexion of early modern courtship, such that couples themselves, and women and their agents in particular, have been ascribed more power in the process than an earlier literature allowed.¹⁶ By contrast, prior to the late-Victorian period and the work of Ginger Frost on the shading of courtship, marriage and cohabitation, our empirical basis for understanding the nature of nineteenth century courtship has arguably moved on little since the work of John Gillis.¹⁷ Considerable differences of perspective on this period remain. For Will Coster, Josef Ehmer and Rosemary O’ Day love and mutual attraction rather than economics and issues of social standing had come to dominate the conduct of ordinary courtships as couples threw off parental and communal controls by the early 1800s.¹⁸ Indeed, the sense that somehow courting couples among the poorest segments of society had a ‘different’ and perhaps freer courtship than those further up the social scale, is deeply ingrained in much of the literature irrespective of period.¹⁹ Nicole Eustace is more sceptical, arguing that while the narrative of romantic love clearly developed in the eighteenth century, ‘courtship was romanticised before it was privatised’ as individuals and couples struggled with competing notions of individualism and the creation of identity via social and familial connections and interactions. Ultimately, she argues, ‘social power lay at the heart of all courtship decisions’, such that it was not until well into the nineteenth century that one can see a decisive break in the nature of ordinary courtships.²⁰ John Gillis offers a different periodization, seeing the nineteenth century bisected by two broad periods of courtship experience. The first, starting in the 1750s and ending in the 1850s saw freer courtships with less parental and communal control. Urban lovers in particular were ‘both

more precocious and less awkward' than had been the case previously, and marriages had more of a public dimension in the sense that friends and neighbours were brought into the intimacies of ordinary couples as a way of informing and enforcing mutual obligations. Older marriage customs became the preserve of the propertied and elite classes. The second period, starting in the 1850s, was to see a re-ritualization of courtship, more instrumentalism, less of the narrative of love and companionship, an increasingly strong role for families in selecting and approving partners, and the re-establishment of courtship as 'an extended rite of passage'.²¹ By contrast those, such as Joanne Bailey or Ginger Frost, who link courtship more firmly to changing notions of masculinity, fatherhood and the family, have seen less scope for definitive periodization.²² For Frost the lower middle and upper working-classes of late Victorian England had to balance respectability with the need for economic security. Their courtships were (in contradistinction to the characterization of Gillis) 'informal and largely unsupervised' as earlier leaving home and economic independence placed power firmly in the hands of the young.²³ There were distinctive courtship rites and timings and female kin continued to have some control over partner selection. Parents could be 'most effective at stopping weddings', but ultimately the lower middle and upper working classes 'married for love for much longer than the upper reaches of society'.²⁴

Reconciling these very different characterizations of the nineteenth century is hampered by a tendency in the historiography to avoid the biography of courtship²⁵, to focus disproportionately on metropolitan relationships²⁶, and to explore the dynamics, power relationships, internalisation of parental and community expectations, and familial management of courtship for elites groups and the middling sorts rather than for ordinary labouring and poor people.²⁷ In practice, remarkably little is known about the sustainability and patterning of courtship among the labouring classes in this period, or about how family ties, friendship groups, considerations of material and symbolic capital, and religious beliefs, helped to shape courtship rites and outcomes.²⁸ Even less is known about how neighbours figured in the courtship experiences of ordinary people, or about the particular role of siblings, lodgers and employers.²⁹ And the emotional dynamics, physical encounters, hopes, dreams, economic expectations, petty jealousies, and irrational emotions inscribed into the courtship process have rarely been explored outside the particular context of breach of promise cases. For much of the nineteenth century we might even argue that understanding of courtship has become 'emotion light' at the very time that frameworks for understanding the history of emotion and the mechanisms by which contemporary emotional responses were formed and rhetoricised has become much more sophisticated.³⁰ This is a matter to which we return below.

To some extent, of course, these lacunae are rooted in the nature of the available sources. Tanya Evans reminds us that reconstructing the intimate details of ordinary courtships is an herculean task often dependent upon letters and diaries/autobiographies of the sort that survive irregularly for the labouring poor.³¹ It is for this reason that historians of nuptiality across the period from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries have come to rely disproportionately on evidence from court cases or the reporting of them. Marriage and courtship feature as central or peripheral themes in legal action along a spectrum from disputed inheritance and enforcement of marriage settlements, through to breach of promise cases and criminal prosecutions for violence and murder, and in Quarter and Petty Sessions, the Civil and Criminal Courts, and the Consistory and

Church Courts. In particular, the reporting of breach of promise cases has come to be the mainstay for research into nineteenth century courtship experiences. Frost's compelling study of the reporting of 875 individual cases from amongst the lower middle or upper working classes and centred mainly on the 1870-1900 period, suggests that while engagements might have been long, courtships were relatively short; that gift-giving was normal and that later nineteenth-century courtships had a distinctive and well-established ritual and timetable. Much courtship was in epistolary form, and whereas men demonstrated the most passion and drive in the courtship itself, once an engagement had taken place and women were unable to see other men it was they who took up the role of the more ardent lover.³²

Such findings are important, but court cases in general and breach of promise actions in particular embody complex problems of representation and representativeness. It is unclear, for instance, why from the many hundreds of thousands of failed courtships that must have happened each year, only a small number ended up in the courts as breach of promise cases. There must inevitably have been a bias towards women courting men who had or could access significant monetary resources, since it was hardly worth taking legal action against someone who could not pay compensation. Prior to 1869, neither party in the disputed courtship actually testified in person, while the case itself had both an accepted ritualization and took the form of melodramatic theatre. Prosecution and defence chose from a well-established list of arguments and followed an increasingly well-known script by the late nineteenth century. The evidence in breach of promise cases thus represents a mixture of the reporting of facts, gossip, posturing, negotiation and partisan shaping of a story to achieve a particular end.³³

Our article, as we have already noted, shifts the focus in trying to understand the character of ordinary courtships from breach of promise prosecutions to testimony at the Coroner's inquest. As the case of Ann Homan suggests, romantic tragedies provide an opportunity to triangulate the testimony of those directly caught up in the death under investigation with that of neighbours, family members and friends, providing rich detail on precisely the emotional, symbolic, participatory, physical and psychological aspects of courtship that have figured so lightly in the literature for the nineteenth century. In turn, the richness of this source has long been recognised. In 1988 Victor Bailey called attention to the importance of coronial records as a 'one of the great neglected sources of English local history'.³⁴ His important insight has only been partly explored subsequently, and then mainly for the study of crime and the law.³⁵ This is despite the fact that the coronial court overwhelmingly dealt with the detailed and usually hidden minutia of ordinary people's lives. The cases might involve street fights, suicides, child neglect, infanticide, co-habitation, marriage breakdown, family troubles and domestic violence, as well as crimes of passion and homicides. Each Coroner had a broad 'circuit' for which he was responsible and the often controversial or (for a public interested in scandal) delicious nature of his work ensured an intense media interest in the activities of the Coronal court. In turn, evidence gathering involved intruding into matters of personal identity, femininity and masculinity, life-style, beliefs, possessions, and faithfulness and fecklessness in love. The work required diplomacy, physical tenacity, and an instinct for human nature in all its emotional complexities.³⁶ Coroners had considerable power to compel testimony and to require the presentation and examination of items such as diaries, letters, possessions and tokens. These features of the work of the coroner mean

that a record of the inquest is preserved in three, sometimes overlapping, places: expense claims for travel and inquest fees, which had to be accompanied by a list (often a detailed list) of inquests/places and to be signed off by Justices at the Quarter Sessions, in the archives of which they are often preserved; the extensive and often detailed newspaper reporting of individual inquests; and the detailed inquest records themselves, usually including witness statements, jury deliberations and sometimes physical evidence such as letters or drawings.

Unlike breach of promise, the cases coming before the coroner were in essence random and from across the community and class spectrum. Testimonies ranged from the young to the aged, comprised both men and women, and often included sojourners as well as the more established members of a community. The court proceedings were not theatrical, had no behavioural templates and required the testimony of all of those closely involved in a case. They were of course biased towards human relationships that had unhappy outcomes and to relationships which proved fatally fragile, but prior to the unexplained deaths that drove coronial investigations, the lives of those concerned were nothing if not ordinary. The question of representativeness is not, therefore, one that should detain us for long. While it is true that evidence was mediated - that is, recorded by a clerk or reporter - those providing testimony tended to have looser and more informal tongues than people participating in breach of promise cases. It was important not to generate misunderstandings about an individual's involvement in a set of circumstances that had led to a death. Few wanted to risk being charged as an accessory to manslaughter or murder because they had been economical with the truth. Moreover, the inquest process was complicated by the fact that technically Coroner's could not instigate proceedings until a suspicious death was formally notified to them. This meant that the report of a death and the witness testimony subsequently taken was generated by the community itself. In practical terms there was a great deal of pressure for those involved in a tragedy to detail and justify their actions accurately and in public. The Coroner's role was then to sift the factual evidence and associated gossip, rumour and innuendo, to arrive at a consensus about causation. Both testimony and process thus offers a window onto the nature of ordinary lives and emotional landscapes in the nineteenth century somewhat wider than is the case with other sources.³⁷

Ian Burney has suggested that there were 'roughly 300 coroners for England and Wales' in the nineteenth century, and that they were responsible for investigating 5-7% of deaths annually.³⁸ Of the corpus of 30,000 cases from the Midland Circuit collected and analyzed for this article, 18% (5400) touch in some way on matters of courtship, facilitating a spatially and chronologically bounded investigation of pre-marital relationships in communities at the heart of provincial England. While some of the Coronial archives have clearly been 'weeded' of their most contentious cases, much of the material is extraordinarily rich, comprising the statements of those who discovered bodies, family members, neighbours, friends, doctors and other officials, lovers and work colleagues. Witnesses might have been involved directly in the case, be testifying as to character, or they may just have been bystanders. Sometimes the evidence is related directly to the case in question, as for instance when a lover murdered his/her partner or frustration in love led to suicide. At other times insights arise because of anecdotal evidence presented by less central witnesses who had to explain why they were in a certain place at a certain time or were called upon to provide information about

communal and family tensions. This dual evidence base is dissected in the article via emblematic case studies. Used cautiously the multiple layers of testimony and diverse viewing points offered in these records allow us to retrace the lived experience of everyday courtship. Since they also represent a national system, these courts provide, eventually, a mechanism for a detailed consideration of the regional dimensions of provincial courtship patterns and practices to mirror that of Adair for the early modern period.³⁹ Such exercises cannot, however, simply rely on the accumulation of stories. Rather, a system for typologising the courtship experiences that came before the Coronial Courts is required, and it is to this question that we first turn.

The case of Ann Homan and Samuel Foster keenly demonstrates the complex nature of nineteenth century courtship. Simple dichotomies that have often driven the literature on courtship and emotions – between love and desire, longing and rationality, self-interest and duty, sentimentality and instrumentality, love and familial interest, passion and coolness – provide an inadequate framework with which to address such material. Homan was distant and periodically disinterested. Her emotional journey moved between passion and love through mischief-making and to confusion, terror and fear. Foster was keen but unable or unwilling to express himself, and he moved across an emotional landscape that encompassed love, passion, desire, longing, possessiveness, obsession, jealousy and homicidal intent. This was neither a romantic courtship nor one in which everyday experience and emotion was driven by an inevitable journey to marriage. Homan, like many others in this corpus, saw courtship and marriage as divisible, something that a literature on courtship and emotion dominated by elite experiences has failed to pick up. Moreover, and as William Reddy has keenly observed in his formulation of emotives, courtships like Homan's were both experienced as physical and emotional engagements but also constructed through acts of remembering, speaking and storytelling.⁴⁰ The fact that Foster ended his days with a bullet in the heart occasioned the telling of stories in the Coronial Court, but testimony in this forum clearly points to much wider rhetorical creation – conversations between lover and potential brother-in-law; between lover and chaperone; between both lovers and their friends; between neighbours about the lovers - of the landscape of emotions for this couple.

Considered as a corpus, the underlying data suggests (see figure 1) five typologies which can drive a better understanding of the complexity of courtship experience in nineteenth century England. Thus, the majority of cases (2,500) could be described as *contingent* in the sense that a successful outcome was dependent on factors outside the couple's immediate control. This might include gaining financial support from family members, parental approval for the choice of partner, and the absence of: rumour, hidden encumbrances, third parties or economic turmoil in the locality. By way of example, the sixteen year old Mary Croft's courtship ended when she drowned herself in June 1847. She left a note for Henry Hobson, a railway stoker. It said

Now all young girls, an ear; pray warning take of my untimely death. O my grief is more than I can bear. I'm disregarded everywhere. Like blooming flowers I am cut down, and on me now my love does frown. Dear Henry [Hobson], since you

are false to me a watery grave this night I have resolved to have. I'll plunge myself into the deep, and leave my friends behind to weep. Dear Henry, when this you see, remember how you slighted me.⁴¹

Croft's suicide and the tragic end to a passionate young courtship were occasioned by the discovery that Hobson was already married, the ultimate hidden encumbrance.⁴² By contrast, broadly constructed 'free' courtships in which couples could conduct their relationships at will, so much a feature of the historiography dealing with the nuptial experiences of the labouring classes of nineteenth-century England, are largely absent from the corpus. In turn, the emotional landscape and language associated with *contingent* courtships appears to have been developmental and restrained, firmly anchored in sentimentality rather than in longing and passion and coming to a rhetorical peak when disappointment and love were fused together.

Figure One here

A second type of case – the *frustrated* courtship – also has an insistent presence (more than 1,300 cases) in the underlying data. While much of the literature has understood such courtships in terms of adverse changes to economic circumstances or the discovery of new facts about one of the parties, our data clearly locates miscommunication between the sexes as *the* key feature. Relationships might stumble because of communication failures over the pace of courtship, expectations over sex, a desire by one to weigh the character of the other, the meaning of tokens, an imbalance in the public versus private nature of courtship, boredom or the dilution of love and passion in extended courtships. A refusal to discuss matters of sex or household formation might be read as evasion; a failure to be open about economic circumstances might be read as deception; and being seen with another party might be read as deceit. Emotional and practical expectations were expressed subtly, sometimes directly but often via third parties, and it was all too easy for either partner to miss or misread oblique signals. Such was the case, for instance, with James Bruce, aged 25, who poisoned himself in July 1846 because 'a young woman about three feet high and nineteen years of age had refused to marry him [after a sustained courtship]. Before the coroner she assigned two reasons for her refusal: the first was that she was subject to violent fits, and the second that she did not like the man'.⁴³ Bruce and his intended had clearly constructed very different versions of the meaning, likely outcome and emotional framework of their relationship, something that sits uneasily with a wider literature which has tended to privilege a unity of purpose and outcome to courtship.

Unsurprisingly given the case of Ann Homan, a third typology was the *obsessive* courtship. Of course, it might be argued that a focus on coronial evidence privileges intense courtships and unstable individuals but we should remember that many hundreds of witnesses testified that passion, obsession and intense jealousy were a normal part of courtship whether or not these emotions spilled over into suicide or murder. Partners might be domineering, overprotective, possessive, jealous, physically violent, and emotionally blackmailing, features laid bare by friends, neighbours, employers, landlords, love letters, suicide notes, and even newspaper articles. Most comically in the underlying corpus, George Healey and Mary Ann Hill of Great Gonerby (Lincolnshire) experienced

a tempestuous courtship in which his attempts to withdraw were reciprocated by Hill having the banns of their marriage read. In turn her attempts to run away occasioned newspaper reporting of the couple when ‘they arrived at the Blue Man at Grantham by Long’s Lincoln Wagon, the woman being handcuffed to Long’s man, and Healey acting as a constable, and saying that she was his prisoner!’.⁴⁴ This sort of relationship has figured lightly in a literature on nineteenth-century courtship which tends to be dominated by perspectives on, arguably, more calculating elite groups. In turn, where both partners shared the obsession, courtship was dominated by the language and sentiment of passion, love, longing and desire. Where one party was the object of obsession then, as we have seen in the case of Ann Homan, such emotions were met in practical and rhetorical terms with distance, coolness and probing.

Some obsessive lovers also featured in the fourth typology – the *clandestine* courtship. While Coronial records certainly orientate towards situations where people were trying to hide things, attempts at secrecy are common in the underlying corpus. Sarah Eliot committed suicide after being thrown over by her secret lover, a grocer’s assistant. Like many young people with low self-esteem – she was overweight and was not especially pretty – she welcomed the initial thrill of being in love, believed the promises that were made and followed her lovers’ exhortations to secrecy.⁴⁵ The 17 year old Barbara Robinson of Lincoln drowned herself in February 1844 after the stonemason with whom she was in the habit of secretly flirting began to spread rumours about her moral conduct.⁴⁶ Most *clandestine* cases led to some form of social isolation and loneliness; secrets and lies proved a fatal burden for those overwhelmed by the rollercoaster of emotions when dreams and fantasies could not be realised. Suicide was common, but it was generally an expression of despair rather than the sort of anger and bitterness seen in obsessive cases. Here was an emotional landscape experienced in silence and rhetoricised only when something, positive or negative, happened to lift the cloak of secrecy.

Of course, none of these categories are distinct and hermetically sealed. A single courtship could encompass or hint at all of our typologies. Nor should we forget that both contemporaries and subsequent historians had a final normative categorisation – the *serene* courtship – as a yardstick. Some 10% of cases, in which courtship was associated with but not central to a fatality or where accidental death brought an otherwise promising relationship to its end, fall into this typology. Harriet Skipworth and Thomas Bolt demonstrated all that might be wanted in a partnership. They were both emotionally well-balanced; well-suited in terms of their character traits; were social equals; had economic skills to match their material expectations; and had both friendship and a physical attraction. Their serene courtship was brutally curtailed when, kissing under a tree, the couple were struck by lightning and Harriet was killed instantly. More widely, the normative standard of the serene courtship was given expression by one witness before the coronial court of Peterborough, who commented ‘how fortunate some people are to be *in proper* love’.⁴⁷ In turn, the notion of a normative ‘proper’ love – a romantic attachment fusing love, desire, family duty, the building of a strong conjugal unit and longing – has strongly shaped the historiographical literature on courtship. Its muted place in this sample, allied with the relative absence of freedom of action, romantic love and simple emotional dichotomies, is striking and suggests the need for a more detailed

analysis of the basic architecture of nineteenth century courtships. An obvious starting point is the question of control and freedom, to which we now turn.

The issues of which actors were involved in the marriage decisions of ordinary people and what agency courting men and women had are familiar mainstays of the analysis of early modern and eighteenth century courtship experiences. As we suggested above, the nineteenth century is often portrayed as one of multiple transitions, in which families and other traditional actors lost power in ordinary courtships as the couple themselves garnered more agency and privacy and the ability to experience and rhetoricise a more open emotional landscape. On the other hand, Ginger Frost argues that families retained considerable power to block marriages and that ‘Parental interference in courtship is one of the great continuities of modern family history ... cousins, aunts, uncles, and even guardians and in-laws took an interest in the courtships of their relatives’.⁴⁸ Coronial records offer a way to navigate and nuance these very different views. Thus, the obsessive courtship of Ann Homan and Samuel Foster with which we opened this article evidences the existence of an intricate network of people who were involved in or took a perspective on the relationship, suggesting at the very least that the agency of the couple was not unfettered. Catherine Hartopp (the chaperone) was a friend of Ann and clearly provided advice as well as a physical presence to give the courtship some respectability. Her role, set against the backdrop of a secondary literature which has often seen the nineteenth century as a time of relative freedom for young couples, is an interesting and important feature of the case.⁴⁹ Foster (the lover) was clearly on amicable terms with Homan’s father and the brother of Homan’s friend Catherine Hartopp. Other kin and even neighbours confirmed that Foster had approached them with questions of Ann’s fidelity and they felt informed enough to assure both him and the court that any rumours of infidelity were baseless. This was, in short, a courtship in which the public and the private, the customary and ‘modern’, were blurred and where kin and a wider friendship group and community were active observers and participants in both the practice of courtship and its rhetorical and emotional construction.

A sense that the courtships of ordinary people in nineteenth century England continued to be enmeshed in a more complex framework of familial, friendship, neighbourhood and community influence than existing periodization allows is common to the vast majority of Coronial cases. An emblematic story is that of a 40 year old shoemaker named Samuel Clayson whose frustrated courtship of the 18 year old Mary Bedford began in 1843.⁵⁰ When Clayson was accused of embezzling leather from his employer, the couple moved from Northampton to the small industrial town of Irthlingborough, located in East Northamptonshire, as part of a process by which courtship elided accidentally into co-habitation. Mary soon, however, missed her friends and family and in any case (subsequent court records reveal) Samuel was not her ‘first love’. She had previously courted a man named Barber when she was 16 years old.⁵¹ In turn, Barber heard rumours (via mutual friends) that Mary was unhappy in her new situation and he came across to Irthlingborough when Clayson was at work to persuade her to renew their courtship and to marry him. When Clayson returned he discovered that Mary had packed up her things and left. In ‘a fury’ he went to Northampton and ‘called at

the house in Market Street, demanding to see' Mary but 'she refused to speak to him in private'. Neighbours later reported that there had been 'an altercation and he [Clayson] left, shouting threats'. The sheer anger of *frustrated* love is not something often reflected in the existing historiography of courtship or its attendant emotions.

Word soon spread amongst the county shoe-makers that 'Barber and Mary Bedford were to be married'. Clayson duly set off again for Northampton, pretending to his neighbours that he needed to visit his sister, Martia Kidsley, who lived in the town. His real motive was to search the streets for Mary Bedford. On Tuesday 26 December, 1848, Mary went into town with her future sister-in-law, Mrs Boddington, and another near-relation.⁵² Suddenly they heard heavy footsteps and turning round Mary saw Clayson running towards them. After a confrontation Clayson shouted 'Revenge is sweet' and, taking a shoe-maker's knife from his pocket, he 'stabbed her in the shoulder twice, twice in the neck'. The final thrust 'severed the jugular vein and the trachea, leaving the weapon sticking out of her neck'. Mary slumped forward into the arms of her two companions. A local newspaper reported that 'Torrents of blood gushed from her neck and Mrs Boddington screamed 'Murder'. Clayson ran away and Dr. Percival, a local surgeon, pronounced Mary dead at the scene.

The police suspected that Clayson's sister, Martia, was hiding him but she denied this and agreed to help with the house-to-house enquiries. At first light, Samuel's corpse was found in the river. He had committed suicide. A constable arranged for his body to be carried to the Station House, where Mary's body was also located. The Coroner reminded a hastily convened jury that whatever their religious beliefs or personal morality, 'scarcely any circumstances could justify a man drawing a knife upon a fellow creature'. He nonetheless accepted that the conduct of the courtship required closer examination. Mary's female companions were the first to testify, noting that Mary was frightened when she saw Samuel Clayson, known locally as 'Sot-Pot' presumably because of his liking of drink. They reported her dramatic last words:

Oh Ann, there's old Sot-Pot! Oh what shall I do? What shall I do?'

Clayson refused to go away, demanding, 'Mary, Mary, I want to speak to you'.

She said: 'What do you want me for?'

He replied: 'I want to speak to you!'

She said: 'Then speak to me. You can speak in front of them, not by myself'.

He said: 'No, I can't'.

She said: 'Then I shan't come'.

He said: 'You bugger, won't you? Then revenge is sweet and I'll have it now'...

Mrs Boddington said: 'Mary, has he hurt you much?'

'Ann' she said, 'He's killed me! He killed me!'

Ann called out, 'Murder!'

Mrs Boddington (who claimed that Mary had spoken to her about both courtships) then confirmed that it was not the first time her future sister-in-law had recently met Samuel Clayson. A month before Mary's death, he called at their shared family house, an event which confirms the co-residence of Mary with her future sister-in-law. Since Mary was now betrothed, she did not want to speak to Clayson alone. Ann told the coroner that when 'she [Mary] positively refused' to step outside into the street on two occasions to

speak to Clayson he shouted out ‘You bitch, revenge is sweet and I’ll have it out with you some day’.⁵³

The Coroner also pressed other local witnesses to tell him more about Mary’s stormy courtship history. John Warren, a shoemaker from Irthlingborough informed the court that Samuel Clayson had been lodging with him for four months. He stated authoritatively that he had ‘heard him talk of a girl named Mary Bedford’, whom he had been courting since she was 18. The young girl’s first love, Warren intimated, had been a man called Barber when she was 16 and she had recently returned to him because he had offered her marriage. John Warren’s wife, Ruth, told the court that she too had spoken to Clayson about Mary Bedford: ‘I have heard him say he would freely forgive her, if she would live with him’. He had been ‘writing to the girl that was murdered’ but to no avail, facts in turn confirmed by Clayson’s sister, Martia. At the conclusion of the case, the jury wanted to question Mary Bedford’s sister, Mrs Walmesley, because local gossip suggested that she ‘might give evidence about the bitter words, ‘Revenge is sweet’. Mary was pregnant at the time of her death and it was unclear who the father was.⁵⁴ The Coroner, however, intervened:

I shall not stop you from making whatever enquiry you might think right, into the past life and conduct of this unfortunate woman, but I must remind you, even assuming she had behaved improperly to Clayson that would in no manner, shape, or form, justify an act as this. If after this deliberation you still think it desirable to go into an inquiry of the nature suggested, I shall call her sister Mrs Walmesley.

The jury deliberated, but declined. A verdict of wilful murder was passed. Mary Bedford and her unborn child were buried in the consecrated section of the churchyard of St. Giles parish. Newspapers reported that ‘a great crowd followed the coffin’ through central Northampton.

While this case can inform on a considerable range of courtship experiences - violence, sex, jealousy, the fragility of relationships and the existence of multiple sequential courtships – it throws a particularly penetrating spotlight on issues of agency and power. Clayson, Mary Bedford and James Barber played out their courtships very much in public, something inadequately highlighted in the existing literature. In one sense they all demonstrate agency and control of the sort generalised for the first part of the nineteenth century by John Gillis. On the other hand, a considerable range of friends, kin, potential in-laws, occupational colleagues, and landlords had knowledge of and an active interest in the two courtships, which were thus only partly shaped by the three people directly involved. It is notable that once Mary Bedford returned to Northampton she was resident with and chaperoned by her future sister-in-law as Mary willingly gave up her agency in the courtship and marriage process. Indeed, the wider corpus of Coronial records assembled and analysed for this article is redolent with instances in which courtships were still deeply enmeshed in a framework where kin, friends and others held real power to make, shape, and break relationships.

For the ordinary labouring classes, then, existing attempts to periodize the character of courtships are inadequate and even Frost’s observation that families might stop marriages but could not control courtships fails to do justice to the complexities of power, control and knowledge inscribed into these detailed stories. Certainly there is little

evidence here or in the wider corpus that individuals and couples amongst the poorer sorts of nineteenth century England had a greater capacity for agency than other social groups. Equally, one is struck by the extraordinary emotional complexity of Clayson and Bedford's *frustrated* courtship which on her part encompassed love, loneliness, grieving, sentimentality, guilt and fear, and on his part love, desire, extreme anger, jealousy, obsession, coolness, revenge and a loose sense of the capacity to offer forgiveness. Emotional frameworks which focus on romantic love, longing or lust thus only partially encompass the everyday reality of these relationships, and it is to this issue that we now turn.⁵⁵

The hopes and dreams, frustrations, boredom, guilt, naivety, jealousy and despair felt jointly and separately by courting couples – the emotional journey of falling into and out of love, often writ large in nineteenth century novels⁵⁶ - have attracted little sustained historiographical attention. In the case of Ann Homan and Samuel Foster possessive jealousy was a key theme, and one repeated across the underlying sample of inquests for both men and women, as our typologies suggest.⁵⁷ The Stamford coroner encapsulated such feelings when he referred to a series of suicides in 1847 as taking place under the influence of 'ruffled love'.⁵⁸ Yet the unwitting testimony in court also reveals other emotional dimensions to the Homan courtship. It seems likely that Ann was frustrated by the lack of any marriage proposal and sought to force one by flirting with other men.⁵⁹ Catherine Hartopp's brother after all testified there had been other suitors, even if 'not recent'. She was also wary and keen to ration intimacy, calling on Hartopp's assistance whenever she and Samuel were due to meet. Indeed, one might argue that Homan and Foster constructed in their own minds completely different emotional versions of their courtship. Mary Bedford and Samuel Clayson certainly did. Such observations are important when set against the backdrop of a literature which has constructed 'love' and 'affection' as monolithic categories. Of course, Coronial records are peculiarly orientated towards instances and experiences of conflict and high emotion, but the frequency with which witnesses traced long and multi-layered histories of emotional turmoil suggests the importance of a deeper analysis of the emotional framework of nineteenth century courtship.

Our underlying database is replete with instances (at least 2,000 in number) of fragile courtships, jealousy, stupidity, hope, dreams, attempted reconciliation, shame, and despair. A case that encapsulates many of these issues is the *contingent* courtship of John Riseley, who committed suicide in Northampton on an October morning in 1857.⁶⁰ His body was transported to a town centre pub, where a coronial jury noted that 'one side of his face had been blown away by gunshot'. A witness named 'John Boothey, the labourer' testified that he 'saw the man coming down New Walk' in the town at midday'. He thought he knew Riseley, smiled at him, but was rebuffed. Boothey looked away and then 'when I looked again he wasn't there ... I saw smoke coming from the place he had been ... I saw the man lying on his back and blood running out of him, a pistol by his side'. The superintendent of the local police, Henry Keen, reported that 'the left jaw was completely torn away ... there can be little doubt that holding the pistol in his right hand,

he had put the muzzle in his mouth'. Inside Riseley's trouser pocket he found an emotional suicide-note:

Now Ann, you have caused me this. I would rather meet death than be *scorned, jeered and laughed at*. I came down here this morning hoping to meet you here. If so, you would have shared the same fate. Meeting with disappointment *I can bear it no longer*, so I have put an end to my existence. Good bye and God bless you. Make your mind as easy as you possibly can.

The coroner asked the constable to locate Riseley's sweetheart. Her name was Ann Holton and she testified that:

I am a nursemaid at Mr John Jeyes' house. I knew the deceased for nine months. He was 24, a boot-maker. I last saw him on Saturday afternoon, when I went out walking with him. We *quarrelled* that day but we were *reconciled* before we parted and he accompanied me home. I hadn't seen him since. I sent him a letter on Tuesday night and I received one from him yesterday. My letter was to break it off with him because of a quarrel he had with his sister on Sunday. We had not been engaged to be married. I was not there when he quarrelled with his sister.

Holton was in no rush to marry John Riseley.⁶¹ When he pressed her to co-habit after six months of courting and started to talk of marriage, she was cautious. These facts were confirmed by 'Mrs Bamford, the pawnbroker' who testified that her husband was a boot-maker and knew the deceased was courting Ann Holton. Riseley had purchased 'about a fortnight ago ... a table and paid ten shillings on account' from their pawnbroker's shop. He told Mrs Bamford that he 'should come in and pay the rest in about three weeks and took the table away'. She assumed that he was setting up house for Ann Holton whom he 'dreamed of marrying'. On the day of his suicide, Riseley came into her pawn broker's shop at about 11 o'clock in the morning. She was concerned that he 'looked dull and very white ... in despair'. He told Mrs Bamford that 'the person for whom he was going to have the table didn't want it. He wanted a pair of pistols instead'. She told him that only her husband could authorise the purchase of two 'pistols ... in the window marked at 7s 6d'. It was self-evident that he had shot himself with one of the weapons sold that morning and had intended in a fit of misery and frustration to do the same to Holton. The resonances with the case of Ann Homan are clear.

The Coroner naturally had to investigate the courtship. A synthesis of the evidence indicates that Ann took full advantage of her job situation to ensure that she proceeded with caution in the courtship. Sometimes she met her lover when out walking with her employer's children. Normally though she stage-managed the courtship on her half-day off meeting up with her friends who acted as chaperones, the latter an insistent feature of the Coronial evidence. The Coroner noted that at first there was a strong physical attraction. Ann's lover was handsome, had a skilled job as a boot maker, and she enjoyed his attentions during the first flush of romance. Then Ann gradually got to know Riseley. He relaxed in his love-letters and each revealed more about their respective emotional traits. When Ann met Riseley face-to-face she noticed a disparity between his romantic sentiments in print and aggressive conduct and rough temper in person.⁶² She

began to suspect his motivations, but did not discuss these concerns with Riseley. The quarrel mentioned in the evidence above was occasioned by the fact that Riseley had beaten his sister, and Ann withdrew her affections, recognising a controlling, jealous nature which saw domestic violence as normal in labouring families.⁶³ Riseley thought her attitude was unreasonable. He was humiliated in front of local shop owners and work colleagues and felt that a community was laughing, scorning and jeering at him. One particular love letter was read to the court. It was sent by John Riseley to Ann Holton the previous week. The Coroner selectively edited the letter as he spoke:

It begins Dear Anne and goes on at length deprecating her resolution to break off the engagement on the grounds of his giving way to anger: - If I were Robson, the Crystal Palace forger⁶⁴, you could not have used me worse. As for beating my sister, I do not agree with you that a man who would do that would also beat his wife. A man might beat his sister and not lift a finger against his wife. *I cannot think what you mean when you see nothing but misery before you if you marry me.* I again entreat you to reconsider. If you do not reply, I shall contemplate suicide for *I cannot live without you.*⁶⁵

Ann was asked to explain how she reacted to this bitter letter. She stated that 'I replied to that letter but only to reiterate my intention to break off from him', thinking that a man that would beat his sister would also beat his wife. The decision to end this obviously *contingent* courtship was met with rather more emotional detachment on her side than his. A neighbour and work colleague corroborated the general circumstances, confirming again how public courtship could be in this period.⁶⁶ After hearing this evidence, the jury passed a verdict of 'a suicide while temporary insane', but they asked the coroner to note that they 'had a great deal of difficulty determining his insanity' believing him to be a love-struck, jealous, and violent young man.

While we must be cautious of biases towards the passionate situation implicit in Coronial records, this case and many more like it point to nineteenth century courtships being embedded in a complex emotional framework, one which made for fragility. Love letters emphasised each partner's character traits in a positive light but they could also mask the fact that those partners were constructing very different emotional scaffolds and sets of expectations. John Riseley wanted (and experienced in his own mind) a quick, passionate, and all-consuming relationship. He expected his lover to accept that he might have a sharp temper and heavy fist, but a good heart, and he inscribed his hopes and dreams into the courtship, even going so far as to make plans for furnishing a home. The Coroner himself generalised this emotional situation to other young men, noting that most young men were 'fools for love'. Ann Holton constructed a more disinterested and cautious – *contingent* - courtship and wanted to weigh John's character more fully than the exchange of letters would allow. When she heard of his violent temper she withdrew, with apparently little regret or frustration and her hopes and dreams intact. The extent to which she failed to understand the depth of his feelings and his affronted manhood, or was simply disinterested, is unclear in the court record.

This emotional imbalance between the different parties to a courtship is often evidenced in Coronial testimony, and spans both the period and the life-cycle spectrum. Ann Cawson, aged 42 committed suicide in January 1844 because of 'disappointed

affections' in her employer Mr Samuel Sharpe.⁶⁷ Eliza Bucknall, aged 17, also committed suicide, at Eastville in Lincolnshire in November 1847, because 'A servant man to whom she was much attached [in a clandestine courtship] had recently left the same service, causing her to despond'.⁶⁸ At the very end of our period, on 3 June 1893 newspapers across the country gave extensive coverage to the death of Dr Andrew Aikman who had qualified in medicine at Edinburgh before practicing in Rugby.⁶⁹ There he fell hopelessly in love with a woman – Miss Baritt - from a respectable but labouring family. His feelings were not fully reciprocated and Baritt broke off the courtship. Tragically, he committed suicide with poison. At a Coroner's hearing, his last love letters were read to the jury. He begged Baritt,

My bonnie darling, my eyes are aching for you. *Many people have written to me* to prove to me that you don't really care for me. Oh for God's sake, say or write whether you do or not. Write for yourself and say it.

Friends testified that Baritt refused to write back since he had made her 'a promise - solemn promise not to write to you' once the courtship ended. Aikman's final love letter stated that 'my love has proved stronger than any promise' and then tried emotional blackmail: 'I must write and tell you that I am weary and long to see you before I die'. He wrote finally,

My darling, tell me before I die. I am writing in my pyjamas and alone. I cannot live without you, and *according to others* cannot make you happy by living with you. Oh my darling, whose hair I am continually kissing, let me know if you really love me. I have no stamp. In a few days I shall either write or wire you to join me alone at Rugby. If you do not really love me, write and say you will not join me

Baritt had naively gifted him a keepsake – a lock of her hair – which had given him undue hope that his feeling were reciprocated, but as with Ann Homan and Samuel Foster, and John Riseley and Ann Holton, the two parties constructed very different courtships and inscribed them into very different emotional framework. The coroner exonerated Baritt from blame. This was a very public courtship in which his friends and hers, work colleagues and neighbours sought to mediate the relationship via letters and in person. Acknowledging that the deceased's feelings were 'heartfelt', the coroner considered that his love-making was a 'fool's errand'.

Nor were men the only fools. Mary Jane Ballard aged 17 was found hanging from a nail in the privy 'quite dead' at the home of her father and stepmother in Hinckley (Leicestershire) on the 25 March 1871.⁷⁰ Her parents were astonished and unable to tell the Coroner why she had committed suicide. Between the finding of the body and the convening of the coroner's court the next day, however, it was discovered that Mary Jane – who was according to a neighbour, Sarah Eliott, 'very stout in her person for so young a girl' - was lovesick: 'some grocery man had courted her but had given her up'. Family and friends had noticed a change in her behaviour over the 'last two or three weeks' and she had seemed 'at times very dull' but they thought she was just feeling off colour. Her employers also noticed a change: a foreman called Job Bennett explained that: 'I had a

good opinion of her at first but lately I have noticed that her mind seemed to be absorbed so much that she had done her work very badly ... she broke so many needles ... from inattention and from her mind being so thoroughly engrossed'. He dismissed her with a week's notice and recounted that 'she made no reply at all and did not seem in the least put out'. The father did admit in court that 'he had scolded her on Monday night and had given her a scuff on her head because she had stopped out late and the deceased was saucy with him in return' but the parents thought this was the normal behaviour of a seventeen year old challenging their authority. The father then confirmed: 'I was not aware that she had any sweetheart but since death I have heard that she had a grocery man who paid her attention but had forsaken her' after five weeks. At the conclusion of the case the coroner expressed the view that Mary Jane had been too immature to handle the emotional intensity of a *clandestine* relationship with the unnamed grocery man. It was her first love and she had invested all her emotional energy into what was clearly from the man's point of view a short-lived dalliance not to be played out in public like normal courtships. Indeed, casual courtships like Mary Jane's occur with a compelling regularity in the underlying data.

The cumulative impact of stories such as these in the Coronial records is both to confirm the involvement of multiple parties in ordinary nineteenth century courtships, but also to emphasise the capacity for courtships to become the focus for complex and multi-layered emotional experiences. Tokens might be given and received with very different intentions and come to mean very different things to the different parties. Obsession, naivety, frustration, unrealistic dreams, character failings, guilt, hope, expectation and low self esteem might drive a courtship to destruction. The inability to read or the inexperience to recognise subtle signals could generate obsession on the one hand and contribute to suicide on the other. Jealousy was written into the very fabric of the courtships described in the sources, and statements which point to boredom, particularly on the part of women, are surprisingly common. In many ways this sort of emotional landscape is something that we can recognise from courtships across time, though the sorts of detailed perspective offered here are as rare as they are necessary.

These observations signal a wider sense in which we have lost sight for the nineteenth century of the essential human journey implicit in the decision about who and when to marry. Living through fragility and strength, forming and reshaping economic expectations, responding to tensions with family and community, reconciling courtship and marriage with religious and other beliefs, and balancing the public and private performance of courtship are insistent narratives in the Coronial records. Relationships even crumbled in the face of devilment by third parties. Sarah Tustin, for instance, was engaged to Samuel Herringshaw and left her situation as cook at the Lincoln asylum to live with her future sister-in-law Mrs Sharp. She subsequently received a letter, ostensibly from Herringshaw with his 'determination to resolve the partnership'. On the advice of a female friend she 'had some conversation with Herringshaw, who said that he had never written the letter, and that he did not mean to give her up ... the letter had been written by a fellow servant named Robert'. A meeting of the two lovers was set for the next day but in Herringshaw's place came the servant Robert 'and he told her that Sam

did not mean to come, but was going to another part of the country with Mr Dawson's housemaid'. On this news, artfully manufactured by Robert who had told Herringshaw that the meeting had been moved to a different location, Tustin wrote a letter to Herringshaw and promptly committed suicide by swallowing acid.⁷¹

Even without the malign influence of others, courtships were usually experienced as a fraught journey. One of the most detailed and saddest cases in our sample, that of the suicide by Fred Baxter and heard at Kettering Coroner's court on Christmas Day 1858, is particularly illuminating.⁷² The facts were that Thomas Baxter was a 'dealer in china, glass and earthenware in Kettering' town. He ran the family business with his son Frank, who customers described as a 'cheerful, honourable and sober' young man. In early 1858 Fred began to court a local girl called Sarah Morris despite the fact that his father disapproved of the match. Sarah was the daughter of a labourer and Thomas Baxter thought his son could do better. Evidently, the father could not prevent Fred conducting the (clearly *contingent*) courtship, something that sits well with Frost's characterisation of family involvement in courtships for the late-Victorian period.⁷³

Thomas usually met his sweetheart at her mother's house in the town. Gradually their love grew and Frank had proposed by early December when he turned twenty-one. His father claimed in the coroner's court that he was 'not aware' of the fact that his son intended to marry Sarah on Christmas Eve 1858. The betrothal date was however well-known in the vicinity. Mr Crump, clothier and tailor on the High Street testified that Frank 'called on me a short time ago and ordered a suit of clothes to be married in'. He said to Crump: 'Now remember I shall pay you ready money so, do not disappoint me'. Crump replied that he would have everything finished by his wedding eve, even 'if I had to sit up all night with it'. Likewise William Dorr the shoemaker said in court that Frank had purchased a 'wedding ring worth £1 18s ... In his pockets there were bills for about £20, all receipts for furniture and domestic articles'. He kept a common prayer book and showed him 'a marker on the 16th and 17th Sunday after Trinity' when his marriage banns would be read in church. His future mother-in-law, Hannah Morris, confirmed that the couple intended to take rooms in her house after their marriage day.⁷⁴ Neighbours witnessed Frank and Sarah carrying 'domestic utensils there [inside] ... he bought meat, bread, flour and other food a week before the wedding'. Everyone recognised that 'he kept company with Sarah Morris', confirmation once again of the very public nature of most ordinary courtships.

On Christmas Eve, Thomas and Frank Baxter worked in the china shop. It was a busy trading day. Thomas noticed that his son 'was whistling and singing in the shop'. After closing time, they ate supper and drank a pint of ale. His father refused to talk about the marriage. In the Coroner's court he admitted:

Four or five weeks ago he came to me in the stable and said: "Father I have news for you. I must get married". I don't think we had a long conversation about it. I told him he was too young to be married ... I understood he was to marry Sarah Morris, but I do not know her ... On Friday evening after our conversation about business matters he asked me how much I was going to allow him per week.⁷⁵ I told him I would talk it over with his mother and let him know in the morning ... I told him that when we came to terms he would be satisfied with the agreement on Saturday. A short time ago he asked me to allow him fifteen shillings per week.

The Coroner, however, was not satisfied with this account. It seemed to contradict the testimony of other witnesses who alleged that the father and son had quarrelled over money. These witnesses claimed that Thomas Baxter was trying to control his son by withholding his wages if he married Sarah Morris. Mrs Baxter, Frank's distraught mother, could not face going to court. She sent instead a letter which stated that: I heard my son say to his Father, you must give me that money". The jury recalled Thomas Baxter and under cross-examination he reiterated that:

The money he took in the shop [day's takings] was £3 11s 8d, he handed it to me and did not ask to retain it. He did not ask for money for his wedding. He told me he had taken money but did not say how much. On the previous Saturday I had given him a pound in silver to use for change in the shop. I always gave him money for himself whenever he asks for it.

Again the jury could read between the lines and thought that Thomas Baxter was literally being economical with the truth. Frank's friends said that he had wanted to wear a family watch on his wedding day but his father had demanded it was handed back. Thomas then chased after his son later that night. Marianne Biggs knew Frank and Sarah. She witnessed Frank's father calling at Mrs Morris's house at midnight on Christmas Eve 'to inquire after his son'. The following morning they were expecting Frank to appear to walk to the church. When he did not turn up, they knocked at the door of his room in Mrs. Morris's house and found him lying on the bed 'with a lot of blood on one side of his face – a pistol was on the floor by his bed – his right hand was lying out of the bed, blackened by the gun powder'. Other witnesses reported 'blood and there were brains on the bedclothes'. The saddest part was that Sarah was waiting at the church unaware of the events. In despair at his lack of money to marry – and in the face of frustrated expectations of his family - Frank had laid out a 'prayer book by his bed, and a likeness of his intended wife – it was in full view when he shot himself'. The Foreman of the jury concluded that:

We are greatly dissatisfied with the evidence given by the Father of the deceased. We are of the opinion that under a sudden impulse the deceased became greatly excited and rapidly sank into a state of despondency. Our Verdict is "Temporary Derangement".⁷⁶

Baxter's case encapsulates the complex human journey of a courtship in this period. Father and son struggled for power over who was eligible and symbols – a family watch, the reading of banns and a suit of clothes – took on considerable power. The courtship was underpinned by a raft of assumptions about economics which, when ultimately confronted, led to despair and frustration. All parties formed expectations which were unspoken and untested. A son with honour and an evident religious faith was unable to fulfil his promises to a loved one and to play the part he had constructed for himself within his community, at the same time as a father was unable to fulfil his role as such. Expectation and optimism turned to hopelessness and despair over a single meal,

and a courtship that seemed to the community robust was curtailed suddenly, publicly (he would after all have known that the guests would find his body) and horribly. And it was curtailed with the greatest of symbolic acts - a lover, a bible and brains on the bedclothes of a bed in a stranger's household rather than that of his parents - which simultaneously inscribed the courtship into a deep religious faith at the same time as it was calculated to do most damage to the father's standing in his community. Friends, neighbours and others approved the match and the normative courtship standards - walking out together, setting up home, and preparing for their wedding day - were closely and optimistically followed once Frank was twenty-one and could publish the banns. Yet the theatre of courtship masked the fact that the young couple had become engaged without thinking about the basic economic mechanics of married life - a common feature of this Coronial material - and it was on these basic mechanics that the contingent courtship floundered. A literature on courtship and marriage which, for ordinary people, has tended to focus around successful outcomes misses for the nineteenth century the essential fragility of courtships in the face of multiple expectations by and about the couple. Courtships played out very much in public during this period meant that confounded or frustrated expectations took on particular power in the minds of courting couples and that the human journey of courtship was littered with many dead ends and dead lovers. More work on this human journey - more biographies of courtship - are essential if we are to understand where the nineteenth century might fit into wider attempts at periodizing trends in nuptiality between the early modern period and the twentieth century.

The emblematic stories selected for this article provide a sense of the richness of Coronial records for the study of courtship practices in nineteenth-century England. While we must use such records cautiously given their orientation to the spectacular and the unhappy ending, it is also important not to overstate the biases thus generated. The testimony of most witnesses clearly suggests that up to the point that something fatal occurred, the character of the courtships detailed in our cases - whether it was serene and loving or violent and suspicious - was unexceptional in the experience of those who listened to or provided evidence. Set against a historiographical literature in which the experiences, languages and practices of elite groups have predominated, the large-scale exploration of the ordinary and everyday through these Coronial cases offers the scope for a reconsideration of courtship meaning and practice. Moreover, the focus on the Midland Circuit offers a balancing provincial perspective to a literature on marriage and courtship that has focussed disproportionately on the largest urban areas.

Detailed analysis of the underlying corpus suggests that it is possible to establish five remarkably stable typologies of courtship experience, typologies which will facilitate wider comparison between different Coronial circuits in future work. These ranged from the normative 'serene' courtship through to the 'obsessive' relationships which invariably ended unhappily. Set against a literature that has tended to be driven by binary dichotomies - love/not, romance/not, affection versus instrumentality or agency/not - the complex human journeys inscribed into these different typologies and summarised in figure one emphasise the need for a fundamental reconsideration of nineteenth century

courtship practice amongst the ordinary labouring people who comprised the vast majority of the population.

In this sense, we can offer significant new perspectives. There is little evidence that the nineteenth century was characterised by strong chronological demarcation or definitive turning points in practice and experience. In particular the corpus provides no support for John Gillis's sense that the 1850s marked a transition between freedom and prescription for couples. The *contingent* courtship dominated and the *serene* courtship – 'proper love' in the words of one contemporary – was relatively infrequent. Courtships were usually fragile and the commonality of casual and short-lived relationships is particularly striking in the light of a literature that has invariably yoked courtship and marriage as intimately related events. Relationships were largely played out in public and almost invariably were influenced by friends, family, neighbours and employers. There is no evidence at all that courting couples drawn from the poor and labouring classes had relative and absolute freedom in the prosecution of their courtship aspirations compared to their elite counterparts. Courting couples had agency which might at best be labelled circumscribed or constructed even in the urban areas where Gillis has suggested that lovers were 'both more precocious and less awkward'. Nor is there much evidence that ordinary couples talked about or placed at the centre of their relationship issues of economics, work or independent residence. Indeed, and as with Frank Baxter, economic matters were consistently the subject of unspoken or implicit assumptions. On the other hand, both our emblematic case studies and the wider typologies provide clear and unambiguous evidence of the power of women in the courtship process. Through intervention on a spectrum between active management and flight, the majority of our female lovers claimed, retained or regained control of the processes of which they have often been seen to be subject.

The typologies and emblematic stories also highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of the emotional landscape of courtship. The nineteenth century was not, for ordinary couples at least, an age of romantic love, sentimentality or longing. To be sure, the records are redolent with love in all of its positive and negative forms, but this was a love played out largely in public which in turn magnified the impact of quarrels, naïve acts, stupidity, changes of mind and doubt. Some of our lovers met sad ends, but triangulating the testimony before the coronial jury suggests clearly that emotional turmoil and complexity was the normative experience for most ordinary couples. Those involved in *contingent* courtships tended to use their words and emotions in restrained, not to say cool, forms. The emotional journey of courtship was cumulative and the capacity for individuals to construct very different emotional understandings of a relationship appears to have been profound. The same might be said of individuals and couples at the opposite extreme of the *obsessive* courtship. In this typology jealousy, latent violence, the formation of unspoken expectations, the symbolic power of keepsakes and letters, frustration, despair and dreaming are woven into the very fabric of the courtship experiences. These cases also bring to life William Reddy's sense that emotion was both felt and constructed through speech acts and storytelling. Our couples told their stories to each other and to friends, neighbours and family. In death their emotional stories were told and recast. The emotional framework of nineteenth century courtship for the ordinary labouring classes was thus dynamic, a work in progress where flat categorisations such as 'romantic love' do little justice to the human story.⁷⁷

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¹ We are grateful to an anonymous referee for acute observations about the structure of this article and the framing of its emotional context.

² For the details of this case see Northamptonshire Record Office (hereafter NRO) ZB 1478, Coronal Inquests, and *Northampton Mercury*, 26 October 1839.

³ On the coronial inquest see I. Burney, *Bodies of Evidence: Medicine and the Politics of the English Inquest, 1830-1926* (Baltimore, 2000).

⁴ See J. Sharpe and J. Dickinson, 'Coroners' inquests in an English county, 1600-1800: A preliminary survey', *Northern History*, 68 (2011), 305-20.

⁵ J. Sim and T. Ward, 'The magistrate of the poor? Coroners and deaths in custody in nineteenth century England' in M. Clarke and C. Crawford (eds), *Legal Medicine in History* (Cambridge, 1994), 245-67, pp.246.

⁶ For context see E. Hurren, 'Remaking the Medico-Legal Scene: A Social History of the late-Victorian Coroner in Oxford', *Journal of History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 65 (2010), 207-52.

⁷ For competing chronologies, see Frost, *Living in Sin: Cohabiting as Husband and Wife in Nineteenth-Century England* (Manchester, 2008), 5; J. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford, 1985), 110-14.

⁸ See L. Lenehan, *Promises, Promises: Marriage Litigation in Scotland 1698-1830* (Edinburgh, 2003); M. Luddy, *Matters of Deceit: Breach of Promise to Marry Cases in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Limerick* (Dublin, 2011); and G. Frost, *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England* (London, 1995). On the overlap between breach of promise in novels and court cases, see R. Craig, *Promising Language: Betrothal in Victorian Law and Fiction* (Albany, 2000).

⁹ M. Levine-Clark, 'Dysfunctional domesticity: Female insanity and family relationships among the West Riding poor in the mid-nineteenth century', *Journal of Family History*, 25 (2000), 341-61, pp. 343-7 and O. Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford, 1987).

¹⁰ E. Foyster, *Marital Violence: An English Family History 1660-1857* (Cambridge 2005); G. Smith, 'Expanding the compass of domestic violence in the Hanoverian Metropolis', *Journal of Social History*, 40 (2007), 31-54; A. Clark, 'Humanity of justice? Wife-beating and the law in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' in C. Smart (ed.), *Regulating Womanhood* (London, 1992), 187-206.

¹¹ On violence in courtship A. Davies, 'Youth, violence and courtship in late-Victorian Birmingham: The case of James Harper and Emily Pimm', *History of the Family*, 11 (2006), 107-20. M. Segalen, *Love and Power in the Peasant Family* (Oxford, 1983), 16-19 argues that 'courtship by blows' and 'brutal embraces' were a normal part of the relationship between ordinary couples.

¹² See for instance P. Rushton, 'Property, power and family networks: The problem of disputed marriage in early modern England', *Journal of Family History*, 11 (1986), 205-19; C. Frances, 'Making marriages in early modern England: rethinking the role of family and friends' in M. Ågren and A. Erickson (eds), *The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain 1400-1900* (Aldershot, 2005), 39-55; and J. Bailey, *Unquiet Lives: Marriage and Marriage Breakdown in England 1660-1800* (Cambridge, 2003).

¹³ R. Probert, *Marriage Law and Practice in the Long Eighteenth Century: A Reassessment* (Cambridge, 2009); K. Francis, "'An absurd, a cruel, a scandalous and a

wicked [Bill]”: The Church of England and the [Clandestine] Marriage Act of 1753’ in D. Trim and P. Balderstone (eds), *Cross, Crown and Community: Religion, Government and Culture in Early Modern England 1400-1800* (Bern, 2004), 277-310.

¹⁴ R. Adair, *Courtship, Illegitimacy and Marriage in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 1996). See also Frances, ‘Making marriages’, 51, who argues that weak kinship connections exacerbated the propensity for courtships to end in an illegitimacy. For one nineteenth century study, see G. Frost, “‘I am master here’: Illegitimacy, masculinity and violence in Victorian England’ in L. Delap, B. Griffin and A. Wills (eds), *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain since 1800* (Basingstoke, 2009), 27-42.

¹⁵ See R. O’ Day, *Women’s Agency in Early Modern Britain and the American Colonies* (London, 2007), 57-87, and K. Barclay, *Love, Intimacy and Power: Marriage and Patriarchy in Scotland 1650-1850* (Manchester, 2011), 70-101.

¹⁶ O’ Day, *Women’s Agency*, 118. N. Eustace, ‘The cornerstone of copious work: Love and power in eighteenth-century courtship’, *Journal of Social History*, 34 (2001), 517-46 sets this agency firmly in a wider Anglo-American context.

¹⁷ Frost, *Living in Sin*; Gillis, *For Better, For Worse*.

¹⁸ W. Coster, *Family and Kinship in England 1450-1800* (London, 2001), 57; J. Ehmer, ‘Marriage’ in D. Kertzer and M. Barbagli (eds), *Family Life in the Long Nineteenth Century 1789-1913* (New Haven, 2002), 282-321, pp. 296 and 313; O’ Day, *Women’s Agency*, 120.

¹⁹ T. Evans, ‘Women, marriage and the family’ in H. Barker and E. Chalus (eds), *Women’s History: Britain 1700-1850: An Introduction* (London, 2005), 57-77, pp.62 and 70. Adair, *Courtship*, 136, suggests the same thing for the seventeenth-century.

²⁰ Eustace, ‘The cornerstone’, 518 and 522.

²¹ J. Gillis, *For Better*, 70 and J. Gillis, *A World of their own Making: A History of Myth and Ritual in Family Life* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 135-45, 176-79 and 252-55.

²² J. Bailey, ‘A very sensible man: Imagining fatherhood in England c.1750-1830’, *History*, 95 (2010), 267-86 and Frost, ‘I am master here’, 38.

²³ For an earlier period Katie Barclay sees the same fusion of love and economic advantage in the courtship practices of the non-inheriting sons and daughters of the Scottish elites. Barclay, *Love, Intimacy and Power*, 95.

²⁴ Frost, *Promises Broken*, 9, 58, 62, 75 and 78.

²⁵ Part of a wider neglect of the ordinary lives of wives and mothers. See P. Russell, ‘Wife stories: Narrating marriage and the self in the life of Jane Franklin’, *Victorian Studies*, 47 (2005), 35-57. See, however, F. Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria: Sexuality, Class and Gender in Nineteenth-Century London* (London, 1991).

²⁶ Adair, *Courtship*, 161-2 and 226-7, remains the only systematic regional comparison of courtship processes for the pre-1900 period. His sense that the communities of the north and west caught up with the shorter, more controlled, courtship patterns of the south and London, still requires testing.

²⁷ See, for instance, N. Rogers, ‘Money, marriage, mobility: The big bourgeoisie of Hanoverian London’, *Journal of Family History*, 24 (1999), 19-34 or J. Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth Century England* (London, 1988). The contrast with the

study of these matters for the twentieth-century is marked; see C. Langhamer, 'Love and courtship in mid-twentieth century England' *Historical Journal*, 50 (2007), 173-196.

²⁸ P. Bourdieu, 'Marriage strategies as strategies of social reproduction' in P. Forster and O. Ranum (eds), *Family and Society* (Baltimore, 1976), 117-44, suggests that even the poor were concerned to expand their material or symbolic capital through marriage.

²⁹ N. Tadmor, 'Friends and neighbours in early modern England: Biblical translations and social norms' in L. Gowing, M. Hunter and M. Rubin (eds), *Love, Friendship and Faith in Europe 1300-1800* (Basingstoke, 2005), 150-76, argues that neighbourliness remained a potent force constraining and shaping actions even into the nineteenth century. On siblings, see L. Davidoff, 'Kinship as a categorical concept: A case study of nineteenth century English siblings', *Journal of Social History*, 39 (2005), 411-28; L. Davidoff, *Thicker Than Water: Siblings and Their Relations 1780-1920* (Oxford, 2012).

³⁰ See in particular the framework offered by joining together the two volumes W. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001) and W. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia and Japan, 900-1200 CE* (Chicago, 2012)

³¹ Evans, 'Women, marriage', 63.

³² Frost, *Promises Broken*, 58-75. Contrast with Barclay, *Love, Intimacy and Power*, 88-89 who suggests that women were more distant in their rhetoric for much longer in courtships.

³³ These problems are all acknowledged by Frost, *Promises Broken*, 10-26.

³⁴ V. Bailey, "This Rash Act": *Suicide across the Life Cycle of the Victorian City* (Stanford, 1998), 5.

³⁵ P. King, *Crime, Justice and Discretion in England, 1740-1820* (Oxford, 2000), 11-12, and 132-34; C. Emsley, *Hard Men: Violence in England since 1750* (London, 2005), 73; J. Archer, 'Mysterious and suspicious deaths: Missing homicides in North-West England, 1850-1900' *Crime, History and Society*, 12 (2008), 12, and 45-63.

³⁶ Hurren, 'Remaking the Medico-Legal Scene'.

³⁷ Coronial records have rarely been used to investigate courtship. Frost, *Promises Broken*, uses a single case while her study of co-habitation uses a small sample: Frost, *Living in Sin*, 6-8. Gillis, *For Better*, 185 also has minor references.

³⁸ Burney, *Bodies of Evidence*, 2 and 3. Also I. Burney, 'Making room at the public bar: Coroners' inquests, medical knowledge and the politics of the constitution in early nineteenth-century England' in J. Vernon (ed.), *Re-Reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England's Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1996), 123-53.

³⁹ Adair, *Courtship*. Note also Barclay, *Love, Intimacy and Power*, 86, who sees some regionality in Scottish elite courtship patterns.

⁴⁰ Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*.

⁴¹ *Leicestershire, Rutland and Stamford Mercury* (hereafter LRSM) 4 June 1847

⁴² On bigamy, see Frost, *Promises Broken*.

⁴³ LRSM 3 July 1846.

⁴⁴ LRSM 23 October 1846.

⁴⁵ LRSM, 14 July 1864.

⁴⁶ LRSM, 2 February 1844.

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- ⁴⁷ Lincolnshire Record Office, LQS A/1/588/12/1-2.
- ⁴⁸ Frost, *Promises Broken*, 75.
- ⁴⁹ Gillis, *A World*, 137, assigns this sort of behaviour to a pre-1800 courtship model.
- ⁵⁰ NRO ZB1478, Miscellaneous Box, Case 52, 26 December 1848 and *Northampton Mercury*, 30 December 1848.
- ⁵¹ On very early courtships among the labouring poor see R. O' Day, *The Family and Family Relationships, 1500-1900* (Basingstoke, 1994), 239.
- ⁵² Frost, *Promises Broken*, 64 discusses the relationships between potential brides and their putative female in-laws.
- ⁵³ For violence among co-habitees, see G. Frost, 'He could not hold his passions: Domestic violence and cohabitation in England 1850-1900', *Crime, History and Society*, 12 (2008), 25-44.
- ⁵⁴ Frost, 'I am master here', deals with revenge-inspired violence.
- ⁵⁵ On such frameworks, see Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love*.
- ⁵⁶ See J. Rowbotham, *Good Girls Make Good Wives: Guidance for Girls in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford, 1989).
- ⁵⁷ The rhythm of the story also sits well with Ginger Frost's sense that pre-engagement men were the passionate drivers of courtship. Frost, *Promises Broken*, 65-67.
- ⁵⁸ LRSM, 12 November 1847.
- ⁵⁹ For a later period and different class, Frost, *Promises Broken*, 70 argues that women were barred from seeing other men once a courtship was 'serious'. The Victorians periodically worried about male and female flirting. See 'Is flirting on the increase', *The Daily News*, 22 February 1894, Issue 14944.
- ⁶⁰ NRO ZB 1478, Case 63 and *Northampton Mercury*, 8 August 1857. Here and below, our italics.
- ⁶¹ This observation sits easily with Frost, *Promises Broken*, 65-67, who argues that women were often reticent in early courtships.
- ⁶² For analogous cases, see Davies, 'Youth, violence', and (on costermongers) O' Day, *The Family*, 239. Such observations illustrate well the importance of face-to-face and spoken exploration of the emotional landscape for the non-elite majority.
- ⁶³ See Davies, 'Youth, violence'.
- ⁶⁴ Robson was a clerk in the Crystal Palace Company Ltd who forged company bonds. He was transported to Australia in 1856-7. The implication is that Holton was a fraudster in the art of courtship, leaving him a laughing stock.
- ⁶⁵ On how such letter ought to be read see E. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York, 1984), 9-11.
- ⁶⁶ Thomas Earl resided with Riseley in a lodging house in Upper Mount Street, near the boot and shoe factory where both men worked. Riseley had told Earl that 'he had bought a mahogany table – had been absent from work', while he 'knew he had quarrelled with his sister and struck her'.
- ⁶⁷ LRSM, 12 January 1844.
- ⁶⁸ LRSM, 12 November 1847.
- ⁶⁹ Report round-up of Midland courts: 'Northampton Love Tragedy: The Coroner and Deceased Friends', *Blackburn Standard and Weekly Press*, 3 June 1893, Issue 2989, page 2. Here and below, our italics.

⁷⁰ Leicestershire Record Office, Coroner Records 1/9, Mary Jane Ballard, 25 March 1871.

⁷¹ LRSM 22 May 1846.

⁷² NRO ZB 1478, Case 108, 27 December 1858.

⁷³ Frost, *Promises Broken*, 75.

⁷⁴ On the importance of prospective mother-in-law's see O' Day, *Women's Agency*, 84

⁷⁵ On bargaining with parents, see Gillis, *For Better*, 166-67.

⁷⁶ For a strongly analogous and contemporaneous case that did not end in suicide, see V. Chancellor, *Master and Artisan in Victorian England: The Diary of William Andrews and the Autobiography of Joseph Gutteridge* (London, 1969), 108-13.

⁷⁷ Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*.