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Laura Carter

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Laura Carter* *Faculty of History, University of Cambridge, UK*

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The Hairdresser Blues: British Women and the Secondary Modern School, 1946–72

Abstract

Between the late 1940s and the early 1970s, the majority of teenage girls in Britain attended secondary modern schools. Yet, histories of the meaning and experience of postwar education continue to neglect this constituent of postwar women, favouring grammar-school leavers. This article draws upon a set of fifty-eight newly mined life histories from two postwar birth cohort studies to recapture the perspectives of ordinary women who attended secondary modern schools in England, Wales, and Scotland between c.1957 and c.1963. The longitudinal sources show that these women developed their attitudes to education gradually, across their lifecourses. Hairdressing, which stood for a desire for clean, creative, and autonomous paid work that could be balanced with domesticity, is identified as a reoccurring theme in the testimonies of secondary modern women. The article diagnoses secondary modern women with the hairdresser blues, a formulation that encapsulates their collective expectations, disappointments, and regrets born out of their closely interlinked experiences of schooling and paid work across the 1960s and early 1970s. These women's educational attitudes were defined by the cumulative realization that a secondary modern education might not even be able to make you into a hairdresser. The article ultimately suggests that it was more often the hairdresser blues rather than 'missing out' on the prestigious grammar school that politicized secondary modern schools for the ordinary women who attended them.

In May 1959, 13-year-old Angela was obliged to fill out a form posing questions about her interests and future plans. Seated at her desk at her Lancashire girls' secondary modern school, Angela wrote that after leaving school she wanted to be a hairdresser because 'It is a job I will always know and will be capable of doing'. The form next asked: 'SUPPOSING

* lc449@cam.ac.uk

you could be anybody, go anywhere, or do anything, would you still want to do the same job?'. Angela circled 'Yes'.

Angela, whose mother worked in a cotton mill and whose father was a lorry driver, left school 2 years later with no qualifications. She never became a hairdresser. At 15 years old, she had also considered a career in fashion and office work before settling into a retail job. One year in and she did not like it. She found the sales pressure extreme and she cut her hands whilst handling the goods. After interviewing 16-year-old Angela, a Youth Employment Officer (YEO) derided her aspirations:

Angela is a girl whose charisma and good looks have helped to overcome deficiencies in her education. This has resulted in 2 clerical jobs falling to pieces. She & her parents are 'job-snob' and she herself is immature. Her level is about right in her present job.¹

Angela's desire to make an independent living doing clean and creative paid work in hairdressing was typical of British women with minimal secondary education and no formal qualifications from the 1940s to the 1970s.² Yet, across the postwar decades, these abundant hairdressing hopes went unfulfilled for hundreds of thousands of women. There were never enough posts to realize such an army of glamorous, urban female professionals. In 1961, the year Angela left school, c.13,000 girls became apprentice hairdressers out of c.300,000 female school leavers. This was already the largest number of female apprentices to enter any skilled trade in early 1960s Britain and, as the *Hairdressers' Journal* noted, 'Many thousands more sought hairdressing posts, but could not find vacancies'.³

But this article is not about hairdressers. Rather, it traces the trajectories of girls, like Angela, born after the Second World War who received their limited secondary education at a secondary modern school. Many of these girls specifically wanted to become hairdressers. Hairdressing represented a skilled, autonomous career that allowed for a balance of paid work and domesticity. Yet, instead of becoming hairdressers, the majority of unqualified female school leavers became retail, office, and factory workers, some became nurses, or eventually, housewives. Their ocean of dashed ambitions can tell us a tremendous amount about the female experience of secondary modern education, and its echoes across the lifecourse.

Drawing on a set of fifty-eight ordinary lives reconstructed from post-war birth cohort studies, this article argues that British women who

¹ Angela, SESC_2628. All study member names used throughout this article are pseudonyms.

² Cf. Ministry of Education, *Half Our Future (The Newsom Report)* (London, 1963), 215.

³ *Hairdressers' Journal*, 16 August 1962, 15–38, 15; Ministry of Education, *Statistics of Education 1962, Part Three* (London, 1964), 22.

attended secondary modern schools had the hairdresser blues. Upon leaving school, secondary modern women had clear and ambitious ideas of bright futures oriented around clean, skilled work and domesticity, very often articulated through a desire for a career in hairdressing. Throughout the 1960s, their experiences on the gendered labour market confirmed a lack of training routes to fulfil these expectations. This disappointment was compounded by class and region. The middle classes were often able to tap into pre-existing networks to find better-paid work, and local conditions, such as industrial change and transport links, greatly affected the availability and flexibility of juvenile female jobs and training.⁴ By the early 1970s, as they became parents and some gave up work, these mostly working-class mothers identified their educational deficits just as British secondary education was moving to a comprehensive system. Their personal disappointments were not fixated on the 'eleven-plus' or missing out on grammar schools. They were routed through the closely linked and cumulative experiences of education and paid work, the gendered realization that a secondary modern education might not even be able to make you into a hairdresser. The hairdresser blues is a formulation used here to represent the accumulated disappointments of secondary modern women, emanating from their own experiences, with and beyond hairdressing. It could also be thought of as a form of lifecourse 'resonance', a term which Penny Tinkler et al. have recently posited to conceptualize how earlier life experiences, especially regarding work and education, live on and echo into later life.⁵

Women born around the Second World War in Britain lived through extraordinary change, notably the transition to full-time paid work for married women and mothers, widening educational access, and the impact of 'second-wave' feminism. This generation, however, still lived between the morally and religiously bounded social worlds of their mothers and the postwar promise of social, economic, and sexual liberation.⁶ Lynn Abrams, Laura Tisdall, and Laura Paterson have all explored how these women negotiated change in relation to their own subjectivities and evolving identities.⁷ Helen McCarthy's study of working motherhood has

⁴ David Ashton, and M. Maguire, 'Young Women in the Labour Market: Stability and Change', in Rosemary Deem, ed., *Schooling for Women's Work* (London, 1980), 112–25. Cf. Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (London, 1978).

⁵ Penny Tinkler, et al., 'Introducing 'Resonance': Revisioning the Relationship between Youth and Later Life in Women Born 1939–52', *The Sociological Review*, online publication 22 December 2022.

⁶ The classic text is Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London, 1986).

⁷ Lynn Abrams, 'Mothers and Daughters: Negotiating the Discourse on the "Good Woman" in 1950s and 1960s Britain', in Nancy Christie, and Michael Gauvreau, eds, *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianization in North America and Western Europe, 1945–2000* (Toronto, 2012), 60–83; Lynn Abrams, 'Liberating the Female Self: Epiphanies, Conflict and Coherence in the Life Stories of Post-war British Women', *Social History*, 39 (2014), 14–35;

shown how paid work came to serve women's emotional and psychic, as well as material, needs across this period.⁸ Perhaps the supremacy of paid work is unsurprising given that the majority of women of this generation spent a much larger proportion of their lives at work than at school, and school leaving was a crucial moment of transition for them.⁹ Until the mid-1960s, most pupils in England and Wales left school at the minimum leaving age of 15 years old, having completed just three years of full-time secondary education at a secondary modern school.¹⁰

Secondary modern women remain sorely overlooked in our understanding of postwar women's lives, despite having the majority educational experience.¹¹ Eve Worth's recent oral history study argues that the welfare state was at the centre of the lives and experiences of women of this generation, including the 1944 Education Act and the 'eleven-plus' examination that facilitated it. Although the welfare state theme is compelling, the majority of Worth's interviewees attended grammar schools.¹² Stephanie Spencer has focused more on secondary modern leavers, finding that social class and domesticity conditioned their visions of adult female roles in the 1950s. They were encouraged into the 'dual role' model but ultimately marginalized from 'the male model of vocational training and employment'.¹³ Building on Spencer and introducing a new source base, this article inserts the much-neglected secondary modern school into recent historiographies on postwar women, education, and paid work.

Notwithstanding its absence in the history of postwar women's lives, the secondary modern school is very often studied as part of the post-1944 tripartite education system. Wartime discourses on motherhood kept the question of girls' education set apart from debates about equality

Laura Tisdall, 'What a Difference it was to be a Woman and not a Teenager': Adolescent Girls' Conceptions of Adulthood in 1960s and 1970s Britain', *Gender & History*, online publication 22 June 2021; Laura Paterson, 'I Didn't Feel Like my Own Person': Paid Work in Women's Narratives of Self and Working Motherhood, 1950-1980', *Contemporary British History*, 33 (2019), 405-26.

⁸ Helen McCarthy, *Double Lives: A History of Working Motherhood* (London, 2020).

⁹ Cf. Penny Tinkler, et al., 'Girls' Transition to Adulthood and their Later Life Socioeconomic Attainment: Findings from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing', *Advances in Life Course Research*, 46 (2020), 1-16.

¹⁰ In January 1959, only 29.2 per cent of fifteen-year-olds in England and Wales were still in maintained secondary schools. By January 1963, this had risen to 36.1 per cent, indicating the steady growth in voluntary staying on beyond fifteen.

¹¹ In 1962, 59 per cent of the state-educated female population in England and Wales was being educated in secondary modern schools, see Ministry of Education, *Education in 1962* (London, 1963), 120; Ministry of Education, *Statistics of Education 1962, part one* (London, 1963), 30-31.

¹² Of the thirty-six oral history interviewees, five undertook their full secondary education at a secondary modern school, Eve Worth, *The Welfare State Generation: Women, Agency, and Class in Britain since 1945* (London, 2022), 12, Appendix. Cf. 34-35.

¹³ Stephanie Spencer, *Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s* (Basingstoke, 2005), 78.

in the postwar educational settlement and obscured the gendered trends within psychological testing regimes.¹⁴ Historical and sociological literature highlighted that secondary modern schools were poorly resourced and ultimately lacked coherent pedagogical or educational goals for their pupils.¹⁵ Although rarely singled out, gender compounded these disadvantages. Early sociological research found that single-sex girls' secondary modern schools (c.20 per cent of all secondary modern schools in the early 1960s) were at the bottom of the pile on measures such as academic attainment, the number of graduate teachers, the number of teaching vacancies, and facilities.¹⁶ Middle-class girls, just like middle-class boys, had an advantage over working-class girls at all secondary modern schools.¹⁷ However, the implications of these structural disadvantages for girls across the female lifecourse were disregarded by the educational sociologists who spent time in the secondary modern schools of the 1960s. They situated boys within a school-to-work trajectory, whilst girls' lives were framed by domesticity and leisure. Michael Carter noted that the female school leavers he interviewed in Sheffield welcomed a new life 'in which high heels and bright lights replaced ankle socks and dusty book cases'.¹⁸ This article posits a new formulation, the hairdresser blues, to offer an original, gendered analysis of secondary modern education, showing that the experience of attending a secondary modern school was closely connected to women's transition to and experiences of paid work.

Birth Cohort Studies and Secondary Modern Women

Locating qualitatively rich, non-retrospective, and socially and geographically representative source material on the lives of women who attended secondary modern schools demands methodological creativity.¹⁹ These women are much less likely to have written, either published or unpublished, about their short and often unremarkable school years.²⁰ In school archives, if slim secondary modern collections do survive, then they are

¹⁴ Deborah Thom, 'Better a Teacher Than a Hairdresser? 'A Mad Passion for Equality' or, Keeping Molly and Betty Down', in Felicity Hunt, ed., *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850–1950* (Oxford, 1987), 124–45.

¹⁵ For a broader discussion see Laura Carter, "'Experimental" Secondary Modern Education in Britain, 1948–1958', *Cultural and Social History*, 13 (2016), 23–41.

¹⁶ J. W. B. Douglas, et al., *All Our Future: A Longitudinal Study of Secondary Education* (London, 1968), 69; Ministry of Education, *Statistics of Education 1962, part one*, 30–31.

¹⁷ Douglas et al., *All our Future*, 47–48.

¹⁸ M. P. Carter, *Home, School and Work: A Study of the Education and Employment of Young People in Britain* (Oxford, 1962), 73. Cf. Harold Loukes, *Teenage Religion: An Enquiry into Attitudes and Possibilities Among British Boys and Girls in Secondary Modern Schools* (London, 1961), 94.

¹⁹ Gary McCulloch, and Liz Sobell, 'Towards a Social History of the Secondary Modern Schools', *History of Education*, 23 (1994), 275–86, 276–7.

²⁰ Emma-Louise Williams, and Michael Rosen, 'My Secondary Modern: Stories from the Invisible Generation', *FORUM*, 59 (2017), 331–44.

seen almost exclusively through the eyes of the local authority or head-teacher. And as discovered by both Spencer and Worth, secondary modern women have proven particularly elusive in oral history recruitment.²¹ In an effort to move forward, the source base for this article is fifty-eight freshly mined lives of ordinary women who attended secondary modern schools in England, Wales, and Scotland between c.1957 and c.1963. These lives have been reconstructed using data from one national longitudinal and one local, semi-longitudinal, postwar birth cohort study.

The national study, comprising thirty-six of my secondary modern women, is the Medical Research Council (MRC) National Survey of Health and Development (NSHD), also known as the 1946 British birth cohort study, a sociological and epidemiological study that follows a nationally representative sample of 5,362 babies born in March 1946 throughout their lives.²² The local study, comprising the remaining twenty-two of my secondary modern women, is the Newcastle Thousand Families 1947 Birth Cohort (1000F). The 1000F is an epidemiological study initiated in May 1947 to monitor infectious diseases through regular health visits to a representative sample of 1,142 Newcastle families with babies born in that year.²³ The NSHD secondary modern women entered secondary school aged 11 years in 1957 and most left secondary school at the age of 15 in 1961. The 1000F secondary modern women followed just 1 year behind them.

Although chronologically aligned, the two cohort studies evolved within very different institutional and scientific contexts, and they did not ask participants exactly the same questions.²⁴ Whilst the NSHD study contains a representative sample from across Britain, the 1000F study has an urban, regional, and working-class skew.²⁵ In general, the 1000F data have more missingness, is less qualitatively rich, and parental voices are

²¹ Stephanie Spencer, 'Reflections on the "Site of Struggle": Girls' Experience of Secondary Education in the Late 1950s', *History of Education*, 33 (2004), 437–49, 443. Spencer discusses this in more detail in *Gender, Work and Education*; of her twenty-three oral history interviewees all but one was grammar-school educated, see Spencer, *Gender, Work and Education*, 165; Worth, *Welfare State Generation*, 12.

²² The NSHD data used in this article are available to bona fide researchers upon request to the NSHD Data Sharing Committee. Further details can be found at <<http://www.nshd.mrc.ac.uk/data>> J. Douglas, et al., 'MRC NSHD 1946-2005 Data', *MRC Unit for Lifelong Health and Ageing at UCL* (2015) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5522/NSHD/Q101>>. Cf. M. Wadsworth, et al., 'Cohort Profile: The 1946 National Birth Cohort (MRC National Survey of Health and Development)', *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 35 (2006), 49–54.

²³ M. S. Pearce, et al., 'Cohort Profile: The Newcastle Thousand Families 1947 Birth Cohort', *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 38 (2008), 932–7.

²⁴ For context on the NSHD see Helen Pearson, *The Life Project* (London, 2016); Hannah J. Elizabeth, and Daisy Payling, 'From Cohort to Community: The Emotional Work of Birthday Cards in the Medical Research Council National Survey of Health and Development, 1946–2018', *History of the Human Sciences*, 35 (2022), 158–88.

²⁵ For context on the 1000F see J. W. Miller, et al., *The School Years in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1952–62, being a Further Contribution to the Study of a Thousand Families* (London, 1974).

more prominent than in the NSHD.²⁶ However, metadata on the Newcastle secondary modern schools were collected and it is supplemented in this article with school-level records from Tyne and Wear Archives and published, working-class memoirs.

The NSHD contains study members from across England, Wales, and Scotland, whose experiences were more defined by class, gender, region, and school type, than by nation. However, some important differences in the Scottish education system must be acknowledged, especially its flexibility. During the tripartite period of secondary education, secondary schools in Scotland were not labelled 'grammar' and 'secondary modern', rather they were distinguished by whether or not they offered a 5-year secondary course; girls selected to take 3-year courses in both junior and senior secondary schools in Scotland were broadly equivalent to secondary modern school attendees in England and Wales.²⁷ One of only two secondary modern women in the NSHD sub-sample to become a teacher was able to do so because of the option to move between course types in Scotland.²⁸ Single-sex education in Scotland was almost exclusively Catholic; of the three women recorded as attending single-sex schools in Scotland, one attended a senior Catholic secondary school and the other two were officially in co-educational junior secondaries, but likely with all girls' streaming or departments.²⁹ The small number of girls who attended multilateral (comprehensive) schools and bilateral schools are included in the secondary modern sub-samples because these schools were more similar to secondary modern schools than to grammar schools in the late 1950s.³⁰ The bilateral schools attended by the two girls in the NSHD secondary modern sub-sample were both effectively secondary modern schools, located in rural areas with intakes from professional or skilled families and relatively close ties with the local grammar schools. Full details of the samples taken from the NSHD and 1000F cohorts are shown in Fig. 1.³¹ Figure 2 provides key data on the female secondary modern sub-samples from each cohort.

²⁶ For instance, school-leaving age data are missing for six of the 1000F female secondary modern sub-sample, see Fig. 2.

²⁷ Lindsay Paterson, et al., 'Social Class, Gender and Secondary Education in Scotland in the 1950s', *Oxford Review of Education*, 37 (2011), 383–401, 385.

²⁸ Penelope, SESC_4329.

²⁹ On the development of Catholic secondary education in Scotland see Lindsay Paterson, 'Democracy or Intellect? The Scottish Educational Dilemma of the Twentieth Century', in Robert Anderson, et al., eds, *The Edinburgh History of Education in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2015), 226–45, at 233–4.

³⁰ Of the full NSHD cohort 134 boys and 146 girls were attending comprehensive schools at age fifteen and nearly one-third of these pupils had entered the school as a secondary modern, which then changed to a comprehensive, see Douglas et al., *All our Future*, 58–65.

³¹ The SESC qualitative research samples were undertaken as part of the ESRC-funded project 'Secondary education and social change in the United Kingdom since 1945' (SESC), see <<https://sesc.hist.cam.ac.uk/>>. J. D. Carpentieri, Laura Carter, and Chris Jeppesen, 'Between life course research and social history: new approaches to qualitative data in the

	Full cohort	SESC qualitative research sample	Female secondary modern sub-sample
NSHD	5362	144	36
1000F	1142	60	22

Figure 1.

Samples taken from the National Survey of Health and Development (NSHD) and Newcastle Thousand Families 1947 Birth Cohort (1000F).

	NSHD female secondary modern sub-sample	1000F female secondary modern sub-sample
Total	36 (25%)	22 (37%)
<i>School type</i>		
Single-sex secondary modern school (England)	7	13
Co-ed secondary modern school (England)	16	8
Single-sex secondary modern school (Wales)	1	n/a
Co-ed secondary modern school (Wales)	3	n/a
Multilateral/bilateral	3	1
Single-sex 3-year course (Scotland)	3	n/a
Co-ed 3-year course (Scotland)	3	n/a
<i>Key educational data</i>		
Childhood social class: working class	28 (78%)	22 (100%)
Childhood social class: middle class	8 (22%)	0 (0%)
School leaving age 15 or <	29 (81%)	15 (68%)
School leaving age 16 or >	7 (19%)	1 (5%)
No formal qualifications at age 43	19 (53%)	n/a
O Level, A Level, or equivalent at age 43	9 (25%)	n/a
Vocational qualification at age 43	8 (22%)	n/a

Figure 2.

Key data on the NSHD and 1000F female secondary modern sub-samples.

British birth cohort studies', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* (forthcoming). The 1000F-SESC sample was created for SESC by Allison Lawson on behalf of the 1000F study. It consists of sixty 1000F study members, thirty females and thirty males. The sample is 10 per cent middle class, 84 per cent working class. The childhood social class of 6 per cent of the sample (four study members) was not recorded. Neither the NSHD nor the 1000F collected data on race and ethnicity, but both cohorts contain almost entirely white, British-born study members.

The longitudinal data collected on these cohorts are traditionally available in coded datasets. In both cases, I have worked instead from the original, archival questionnaires from a smaller, representative sample of each full cohort (from which the secondary modern women constitute a further sub-sample, see Fig. 1), reading thousands of pages of qualitative, free-text answers that were never coded or analysed using quantitative methods.³² The main topics of these free-text answers are summarized in Fig. 3. In the case of the NSHD secondary modern women, these handwritten, free-text answers ranged from 52 to 214 words in length, describing their thoughts, feelings, and opinions on their everyday lives. This qualitative material was then linked to key quantitative markers across each individual's lifecourse, such as social class, occupation, marital status, and social mobility.³³ Both the quantitative and qualitative data were then combined to create detailed narrative 'pen portraits', charting the educational, occupational, and personal trajectories across an individual lifecourse. The 'pen portraits' of the female secondary modern sub-samples are the principal source base underpinning this article.

Recently historians have been re-using the records of historical social-scientific studies to access subjective, lived experiences, an evolving yet contested 'social scientific turn' in the discipline.³⁴ Working with birth cohort data is a related, but not parallel practice. The cohort studies were designed to aggregate individuals into patterns and trends. This method disaggregates them, to draw out the people behind the coding, situating them in their historical time and place. One interdisciplinary team seeking to 'recompose persons' from the birth cohort study data characterizes their approach as a process of 'scavenging', accounting for the changing research practices of the NSHD as well as the subjectivities and relationships of the survey respondents.³⁵ Whilst attentive to these contexts, my approach has been more focused on tracking the singular topic of education. Indeed, these sources reveal how attitudes to education evolve incrementally and are actually recalibrated at particular junctures across the lifecourse. Access to the metadata on the full cohorts means that the individual lives from these small, qualitatively rich samples can be contextualized against broader national and local trends, another major

³² Qualitative research on the NSHD has focused on interviews and has not been undertaken using the material summarized in Fig. 3, see J. Elliott, et al., 'The Design and Content of the HALCYON Qualitative Study: A Qualitative Sub-study of the National Study of Health and Development and the Hertfordshire Cohort Study', *Working paper, Centre for Longitudinal Studies* (2011).

³³ Data on the 1000F women were only available up to age 22, whereas quantitative data on the NSHD women were available across their entire lifecourse, and data up to age 43 were used for this article.

³⁴ Lise Butler, 'The Social Scientific Turn in Modern British History', *Twentieth Century British History*, online publication 30 May 2022.

³⁵ Resto Cruz, et al., 'Recomposing Persons: Scavenging and Storytelling in a Birth Cohort Archive', *History of the Human Sciences*, 34 (2021), 266–89.

Year and age of study members	Topics of free-text answers
<i>NSHD</i>	
1959, age 13	Work aspirations
1961, age 15	Work and further education plans and aspirations; 3 wishes; definitions of success and happiness
1962, age 16	School leaving; YEO commentary
1968, age 22	Relationship between education and work; looking back on school and careers advice; opinions on life in general
1969, age 23	Opinions on life in general
1972, age 26	Relationship between education and work; attitudes to work; social attitudes and social mobility; 2 future hopes
<i>1000F</i>	
1959–60, age 12	3 wishes; activities; diary
1962–3, age 15	Parents' survey: finding work; school leaving age; health and personality
1969, age 22	Work; post-school education

Figure 3.

Summary of topics in free-text answers used from the NSHD and 1000F female secondary modern sub-samples.

advantage of the birth cohort data. This methodology is the result of a recent, innovative collaboration between historians and a lifecourse studies researcher, offering the potential to unlock the birth cohort archives to a new generation of historians.³⁶

Awaiting Clean Work, c.1957–63

This section examines the girls' opportunities and experiences during their time at secondary modern schools, arguing that for most girls in Britain, these schools were temporary holding spaces for brighter futures ahead. They offered limited academic opportunities, rather they positively reinforced a vocational and domestic life model that correlated with girls' lives outside of school. Secondary modern schools prepared girls practically and psychologically to expect cleaner, more modern working lives in postwar Britain than their own mothers had undergone (such as in hairdressing). Fifteen of the mothers of the NSHD sub-sample of secondary modern women were not in paid work after marriage, the rest were in domestic, factory, waitressing, or agricultural work.³⁷ All but three left school at the age of 14 or younger, one as young as age 9. This was quite typical of women growing up in interwar Britain; in the full NSHD cohort 56 per cent of mothers had left school at the age of 14, 2.2

³⁶ See Carpentieri et al., 'Between Life Course Research and Social History'.

³⁷ Of those who answered in 1954 (2296/5362), 48.1 per cent of mothers in the full NSHD cohort had been in paid work since 1952. All data are from the NSHD metadata browser (hereafter *Skylark*) <<https://skylark.ucl.ac.uk/Skylark/>>.

per cent at the age of 13 or younger.³⁸ In contrast, all of the NSHD secondary modern women left school aged 15 or older, a result of the raising of the school-leaving age, legislated for in 1944 and implemented in 1947.

The average number of pupils in the classes of the NSHD sub-sample at the age of 13 was 33.4 pupils, compared to 32.4 in the full NSHD cohort.³⁹ The quality and nature of the education these girls received at their secondary modern schools depended heavily on their geographical location and local arrangements. Extra-curricular activities and school visits were prominent and always highly gendered, local, and vocational. Newcastle girls could look forward to industrial visits to Throckley Filter Beds, Wills Tobacco Factory, Byker Park Nursery, Fenwicks department store, Cowgate Dairies, and the Northern Counties Gas Board, to name a few.⁴⁰ Most secondary modern girls studied English, History, Geography, Religious Instruction, Sciences, Maths, and sometimes languages. Curricula became more work focused for pupils close to school-leaving age. As a major curricula survey in the early 1960s found, girls spent more time in practical courses and their Maths teaching was frequently reduced to arithmetic.⁴¹

Domestic education (Needlework, Dressmaking, and Housecraft) remained absolutely central to the secondary education of most British girls until at least the early 1960s, even if some found it poorly matched to the realities of working-class life.⁴² But secondary modern girls did not passively imbibe domestic instruction in preparation for their roles as the mothers and wives of the welfare state.⁴³ They interpreted it as a viable vocational route with tangible benefits for working motherhood.⁴⁴ Carys's trajectory is an example of this. She was born into a Roman Catholic, working-class family in Wales in 1946. Carys attended a mixed-sex secondary modern school in North Wales, and her parents clocked her interest in needlework from a young age. At the age of 15, on the cusp of leaving school, Carys was set on working in a dress factory because, she wrote 'I can make my own clothes and I like machining', noting that dressmaking factory work was abundant and relatively well paid. Her parents supported these ambitions due to her fondness for sewing and the fact that she would also be able to 'make her own dresses & so save money'. Carys left school and worked as a nylon spinner and

³⁸ 5357/5362 response rate, *Skylark*.

³⁹ 4091/5362 response rate, *Skylark*.

⁴⁰ 'Atkinson Road Secondary School Logbook, 1949–1965', Tyne and Wear Archives, Newcastle (hereafter TWA), E.BE1/1/2; 'Welbeck Road Secondary School Logbook, 1951–1967, TWA, 53/100.

⁴¹ *Newsom Report*, 627–75.

⁴² Spencer, 'Reflections on the 'Site of Struggle'', 446; Cf. Yvonne Young, *Cobbled Streets and Penny Sweets: Happy Times and Hardship in Post-War Britain* (London, 2019), 74–76.

⁴³ Cf. Worth, *Welfare State Generation*, 48.

⁴⁴ Cf. Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender* (London, 1997), 59–60.

then as a dressmaker in the early 1960s, before getting married and having children. She eventually went into business with her husband running a café. Despite leaving school with no formal qualifications, Carys was socially mobile and achieved a good deal of personal and professional success through linking her vocational and domestic ambitions.⁴⁵

In the 1950s and 1960s, the General Certificate of Education (GCE) O Level was not just a gateway to A Levels and university, it carried a huge amount of cultural esteem and recognition amongst prestigious private-sector employers.⁴⁶ As national pressures towards comprehensivization mounted, some secondary modern schools adopted a short-term strategy of securing a couple of their 'best' girls in these positions (usually taken by grammar school girls), by entering them for a handful of O Levels.⁴⁷ This is what happened to Vera, a working-class girl from a Lincolnshire farming family who wanted to do skilled, secretarial work. At her mixed-sex secondary modern school, she rose to Head Girl and was entered for five O Levels and five internal school certificates. She passed only one of the O Levels, in dressmaking. In context, Vera was over-achieving. She left school at 17 years and joined the Armed Forces. Although she looked back and regretted not staying on longer, she praised her school for preparing her for the world of paid work. Through the military, Vera would go on to become a senior staff nurse.⁴⁸

But, of my fifty-eight secondary modern women, just eleven left school with any kind of formal qualification, only five of which were GCE O Levels. This was typical of national trends for secondary modern girls; only 14 per cent of the females in the full NSHD cohort had at least one O Level by the age of 16, the vast majority of whom would have been grammar school girls.⁴⁹ Around the time of their school leaving, girls could instead enter a patchwork of technical, professional, and commercial examinations.⁵⁰ Some LEAs created their own general school-leaving examinations.⁵¹ There were also several regional examining bodies, offering qualifications such as the Northern Counties School Certificate, available from 1959 in either a practical or academic group of subjects.⁵² Four of the 1000F girls in my sample had the opportunity to sit these exams, all

⁴⁵ Carys, SESC_1237.

⁴⁶ Val Brooks, 'The Role of External Examinations in the Making of Secondary Modern Schools in England 1945-65', *History of Education*, 37 (2008), 447-67.

⁴⁷ A practice actively encouraged by the state, see Ministry of Education, *Education in 1960* (London, 1961), 15.

⁴⁸ Vera, SESC_2336.

⁴⁹ In the full NSHD cohort (2495/5362 response rate), 62 per cent of girls had no O Levels at age sixteen, *Skylark*.

⁵⁰ Ministry of Education, *Secondary School Examinations other than the GCE (The Beloe Report)*, (London, 1960), 13-14, 62.

⁵¹ W. Bonney Rust, and H. F. P. Harris, *Examinations: Pass or Failure? A Critical Survey* (London, 1967), 26.

⁵² *Beloe Report*, 14.

going on to clerical or nursing careers. Janice, who attended one of Newcastle's early comprehensives, passed both her Northern Counties and Civil Service exams, but she was ultimately unable to take up a clerical post in government because her parents were reluctant for her to work alone in London at the age of 15.⁵³ Nationally, this erratic and fragmented system of accreditation worried policymakers, leading to the introduction of the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) in 1965, which was intended for the 40 per cent of pupils below those deemed strong enough to take O Levels.⁵⁴

Until the early 1970s, each secondary modern school year was punctuated by girls reaching their fifteenth birthdays and leaving either in December, at Easter, or at the end of the summer term.⁵⁵ These female school leavers were pragmatic; at the age of 15, they were most concerned with obtaining clean, secure paid work somewhat connected to the interests and skills they had been cultivating at school. Teresa's story illustrates this. Born to agricultural workers in rural Lincolnshire in 1946, Teresa attended a mixed-sex secondary modern school. Teresa's heart was set on becoming a dressmaker. Teresa had the opportunity to sit examinations at her school, but only the more vocationally focused O Levels that were gradually being introduced throughout the 1950s. Teresa failed her Needlework O Level the first time she took it, left school at 16, then went back to re-sit and passed. By this time, she was also working full-time, and her employer refused her request to attend College 2 days per week to obtain further technical qualifications. Looking back in 1968, Teresa wrote:

I was disappointed but I let the chance go by. I have many regrets for not going through with my interests in Needlework. I still do quite a lot and get a great deal of pleasure out of it. I shall enjoy sewing especially for my daughter when she gets pasted [*sic*] the baby stage to a little girl. If I had no family and was able to work my aim would be to get into the Dressmaking business one way or another.⁵⁶

Despite her persistence, Teresa's ambitions were stymied by the poor post-school training infrastructure for skilled work in traditionally gendered, feminine skills that had been much cultivated at her school. Vocational and professional qualifications were highly sought after by secondary modern women, but the availability and relevance of such accreditation were severely limited in the areas where they were most likely to find paid work. This was a compounded, class-gender, inequality. Boys who attended secondary modern schools were far better served by

⁵³ Janice, SESC_743.

⁵⁴ Rust and Harris, *Examinations*, 27–29.

⁵⁵ The 1962 Education Act abolished the option to leave at Christmas.

⁵⁶ Teresa, SESC_1544.

apprenticeships, day release, and other forms of in-work training.⁵⁷ The Department of Education noted in its 1962 annual report that only 10 per cent of girls in work under the age of 18 were receiving 'day release' training, compared to one-third of boys.⁵⁸ Marie's story shows the difference day release could make. She had had the opportunity to take Union of Educational Institution exams at her girls' secondary modern school in Bristol, and by the age of 23 was working as a cook in an industrial canteen. She wrote enthusiastically about how the day release opportunities provided to her by her employer had allowed her to gain her catering qualifications whilst still working, enabling her in turn to save for marriage and setting up home, in her words 'the best of both worlds'. A few years later Marie was a catering manager at a large company and felt highly satisfied in her work life.⁵⁹

The importance of securing clean, respectable work, far from factory or farm, cannot be overemphasized. Secondary modern women inherited this from their own mothers who came of age between the wars.⁶⁰ As postwar mothers, these women wished for the same kind of clean work for their daughters, and ideas of cleanliness are used repeatedly by both mothers and daughters in the birth cohort sources. But a subtle shift had also taken place between the generations within this notion of clean work. The postwar secondary modern women, especially those born in urban and suburban localities, were unequivocal in adding semi-professional jobs that required training such as hairdressing, nursing, and teaching into their pantheon of desirable clean work, the very jobs that grammar school girls would acquire with ease. In turn, routine shop and office work fell down their hierarchy of aspiration.⁶¹

The school-leaving hopes of the 1000F girls, as well as those of their mothers who were interviewed when the girls were 15 years old, highlight this shift in motion. They emphasized hierarchies of skilled work, mirroring the discourses that strongly framed male working-class lives in the North East of England.⁶² Working-class memoirs of growing up in Newcastle's West End recall the area as an 'Urban Village', with dance

⁵⁷ Institute of Manpower Studies, *Education and Employment: Selected Statistics for 1966-1977* (Cambridge, 1978), Table 3.1, 15.

⁵⁸ *Education in 1962*, 32.

⁵⁹ Marie, SESC_2632.

⁶⁰ Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England 1918-1950* (Oxford, 2005), 21, 42, 134-40; Hester Barron, and Claire Langhamer, *Class of '37: Voices from Working-class Girlhood* (London, 2021), 172-3, 195-201.

⁶¹ For a Leicester study with similar findings on clean work see Henrietta O'Connor and John Goodwin, "'She Wants to Be Like Her Mum': Girls' Experience of the School-to-Work Transitions in the 1960s", *Journal of Education and Work*, 17 (2004), 95-118.

⁶² Jon Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me: The Search for Community in Post-war England* (Oxford, 2019), 148-9.

halls just as prominent as schooldays. Local shipbuilding and engineering firm Vickers-Armstrong also promised office work for girls.⁶³ Yet, adding a touch of glamour to this clean, indoor work was increasingly important to the Newcastle girls.⁶⁴ Three of the girls in my 1000F sample, all born in the West End of Newcastle in 1947 to working-class parents, expressed strong desires to go into hairdressing. Either they or their mothers had attempted to secure hairdressing apprenticeships without success, and they ended up working in factories and snack bars.⁶⁵ Another Newcastle girl, Shirley, was born in the north of Newcastle in Jesmond into a skilled, working-class family. She attended a girls' secondary modern school where she was placed in the exam stream. Shirley left school at 15 years old and secured a job at Fenwicks, a respectable Newcastle department store. This tallied with her mother's wishes, who wanted Shirley to work as a shop assistant 'In a shop like Fenwicks—where they take an interest in their young staff'. Shirley's mother also insisted that she continued with evening school one day per week.⁶⁶ Like many working-class mothers, she wanted her daughter to secure clean, paid work with opportunities for progression, more elevated than normal shop work. From her vantage point staying at school would not necessarily yield the same financial or emotional rewards as working at Fenwicks would.⁶⁷

Girls at secondary modern schools in postwar Newcastle, and across Britain, spent their short time there awaiting clean work. Without prestigious GCE qualifications and within a very gendered, domestic frame, they strove for vocational training and accreditation as well as a decent wage. They were not simply waiting for marriage or resigned by being cast off from the grammar school's golden ladder. They sought forms of paid work that would reward them with a measure of independence, creativity, and security, encapsulated in hairdressing.

The Hairdresser Blues, 1960s

The 1960s marked the onset of the hairdresser blues for secondary modern women. The clean, creative paid work they hoped for at school, like hairdressing, proved elusive for the majority. At the age of 13, the vast majority of the NSHD secondary modern girls had wanted a modern, service sector job. The most popular job aspirations were nurse, hairdresser, shorthand typist, and teacher. By the age of 26, exactly half of the women

⁶³ Yvonne Young, *Westenders: Memories of Benwell, Elswick & Scotswood Part Two* (Newcastle, 2013), 39. Cf. Young, *Cobbled Streets*, 2–3.

⁶⁴ On 'glamour', in relation to a younger cohort, see Norma Sherratt, 'Girls, Jobs and Glamour', *Feminist Review*, 15 (1983), 47–60.

⁶⁵ Carol, SESC_386; Karen, SESC_585; Kathleen, SESC_845.

⁶⁶ Shirley, SESC_679.

⁶⁷ On the Newcastle girls and working at Fenwicks, see also Miller et al., *The School Years*, 244.

in my NSHD sample were not in paid work, with the other half working in offices, nursing, factories, and other retail and catering roles. Two became teachers and one became a hairdresser. This section explores their various journeys, set in the broader context of labour market opportunities for female school leavers without formal qualifications in early 1960s Britain.

Hairdressing was the ultimate career fantasy, permitting a balance of paid work and domesticity. Marriage and motherhood remained fundamental to secondary modern leavers' projections of womanhood, including the possibility of later transitioning to part-time work.⁶⁸ Although young women began entering hairdressing *en masse* from the 1930s, the career became more widely popularized in the 1950s. Guru-stylist Vidal Sassoon opened his first salon on Bond Street in 1954, sparking a mostly male boom in elite hairdressing that projected an image of a glamorous, modern industry emblematic of 'Swinging' London.⁶⁹ These images fanned outwards to girls far from London, where entry-level work in provincial salons meant 'dirty' jobs such as sweeping up hair for two pounds and ten shillings per week.⁷⁰ Still, even this remained highly aspirational. In a 1961 careers guide, *Vogue* beauty editor Evelyn Forbes painted a picture of a hairdresser weary after a day on her feet but with '... the hoard of coins in her overall pocket ... something more towards her own business or an Italian holiday'.⁷¹ Mainstream publishers even produced 'career novels' such as Elizabeth Grey's *Pauline becomes a hairdresser* (1958) and Patricia Baldwin's *Ann Hudson, Apprentice Hairdresser* (1963).⁷² As both Pauline and Ann discover, entering hairdressing through an indentured apprenticeship, technical college, or private commercial school was obtainable without any school-leaving qualifications in the early 1960s. This made it a realistic choice for secondary modern school leavers, on paper. Instead of exams, official careers advice stressed the importance of personal cleanliness, practical dexterity, and artistic ability.⁷³ In parallel, the hairdressing and beauty industry was also an important route to professional status for black adult women in the 1960s, especially those

⁶⁸ Cf. Spencer, *Gender, Work and Education*, 153.

⁶⁹ Caroline Cox, *Good Hair Days: A History of British Hairstyling* (London, 1999), 73–93, 119, 131.

⁷⁰ In 1966 hairdressing apprentices were paid £2.15s.0d weekly (London area) and £2.10s.0d weekly (provincial area) for their first 6 months. Qualified female hairdressers were paid less than qualified male hairdressers in ladies' salons, but the same in gentlemen's salons, 'Wages Regulation (Hairdressing) (Amendment) Order 1966', The National Archives, London (hereafter TNA), LAB 83/3237.

⁷¹ Evelyn Forbes, *Hairdressing and Beauty as a Career* (London, 1961), 39.

⁷² Elizabeth Grey, *Pauline Becomes a Hairdresser* (London, 1958); Patricia Baldwin, *Ann Hudson, Apprentice Hairdresser* (London, 1963). Cf. David Kynaston, *Modernity Britain, 1957–62* (London, 2015), 568.

⁷³ Central Youth Employment Executive, *Hairdressing and Beauty Culture* (London, 1969), 8–9.

newly arrived in Britain from the Caribbean.⁷⁴ In both cases, a hairdressing career promised that rare mix of creativity and respectability in a labour market structured by class, race, and gender.

Demand for everyday ladies' hairdressing skyrocketed in Britain from the late 1950s. This was especially true in places with flourishing service and retail economies such as the affluent 'New Towns' of England's South East; new salons opened in their hundreds in the early 1960s.⁷⁵ Against this backdrop hairdressing was professionalizing, culminating in the passage of the 1964 Hairdressers (Registration) Act, which established the Hairdressing Council and required qualified hairdressers to register in order to raise craft standards.⁷⁶ Another key part of professionalization was the regulation and standardization of the three training pathways: apprenticeship, technical college, or private school. Salon owners complained that they could not expand to meet demand due to the fixed staff ratios that limited their apprentice intakes.⁷⁷ Unable to obtain indentured apprenticeships, young women were instead paying exorbitant fees for sub-standard courses in private commercial schools.⁷⁸ By 1962, hairdressing was the third largest apprentice industry in Britain (after engineering and construction), making it the largest apprenticeship scheme for girls, accounting for 65–75 per cent of all girls' apprenticeships (Fig. 4).⁷⁹

But the National Apprenticeship Council for the Hairdressing Craft was drastically underperforming at the expense of Britain's most disadvantaged school leavers. In 1963–4, the annual intake of nationally registered apprentices was just c.1,200, in the context of the c.300,000 female school leavers nationally.⁸⁰ Private indentures were instead being drawn up by employers and their solicitors, demanding high premiums. This racket, which gave middle-class girls an advantage, cashed-in on the desperation of school leavers to secure their futures. After bemoaning that only sixteen national apprenticeships had been secured by local school leavers in 1962, the Cheshire Education Committee concluded that girls were now being selected for hairdressing 'by their father's willingness to

⁷⁴ Kennetta Hammond Perry, 'One British Thing: "The Hair Weavers Text-Book: A Study in the Art of Hair-Weaving and Beauty Culture (1967)"', *Journal of British Studies*, 60 (2021), 169–72.

⁷⁵ *Hairdressers' Journal*, 26 July 1962, 20–29.

⁷⁶ Central Youth Employment Executive, *Hairdressing and Beauty Culture*, 22.

⁷⁷ 'Letter from R. W. Mortimer to Peter Thomas', 31 December 1960, TNA, LAB 19/699; *Hairdressers' Journal*, 27 July 1961, 17.

⁷⁸ 'Letter from D. Richardson to J. A. Swindale', 12 February 1964, TNA, LAB 19/758. Some of these private schools were, however, also catering to specific ethnic and immigrant markets and haircare practices, cf. Perry, 'One British Thing', 170.

⁷⁹ 'Memo', 5 July 1962, TNA, LAB 19/699.

⁸⁰ 'Meeting of the National Apprenticeship Council for the Hairdressing Craft', 23 September 1964, TNA, LAB 19/758; Ministry of Education, *Statistics of Education 1962, part three*, 22.



Figure 4.
 'An experienced assistant is showing new apprentices how to shampoo correctly', in *Central Youth Employment Executive, Hairdressing and Beauty Culture* (London, 1969), 11.

pay a premium'.⁸¹ In response, the Council focused on the slow process of expanding technical college courses to meet the demand for training. But parents and school leavers continued to favour apprenticeships, feeling that technical college courses made them less employable.⁸² One Ministry of Labour civil servant labelled all this dysfunction 'a minor scandal in the employment of girls', of which '... the only people who do not complain by and large are the girls themselves, who every year scramble in their thousands into hairdressing—the glamour job for the secondary modern girl school leavers'.⁸³

Non-hairdressing apprenticeships for girls are rarely mentioned in the birth cohort sources. One exception is Carolyn, a Newcastle girl who followed in her aunt's footsteps to become a Comptometer Operator apprentice at 15 years old, eventually landing a job in the wages department

⁸¹ 'Letter from Cheshire Education Committee to the Central Youth Employment Executive', 17 October 1962, TNA, LAB 19/699. Cf. '£100 Premium to Work in Hair Salon', *The Times*, 10 January 1963, 13.

⁸² 'Copy of letter from Mrs Dorothy M. Crockford', 17 October 1963; 'Letter from D. Richardson to J. A. Swindale', TNA, LAB 19/758.

⁸³ 'Memo', 19 December 1963, TNA, LAB 19/758.

of a local brewery.⁸⁴ As Hannah Charnock found in her study of teenage female sexual knowledge, career knowledge was also social, and thus closely tied to peer and family networks.⁸⁵ Moreover, such golden opportunities were disproportionately available to those already based in major cities, and geographical mobility was anyway lower amongst secondary modern school leavers.⁸⁶ The dismal situation in apprenticeships for female work contrasted with the plentiful and highly organized apprenticeship schemes for skilled, male work available to boys leaving secondary modern schools. Lesley and Mavis were typical of the aspiring hairdressers amongst the NSHD women. Both left school at 15 without taking any examinations and went into office work after finding no hairdressing apprenticeships available locally. Both later expressed regrets that they had not stayed at school longer and pursued further or higher education.⁸⁷

A third working-class girl, Maria, went to a girls' secondary modern school in Lincolnshire. During her school years, she expressed an interest in nursing. After leaving school at 15, she worked in retail before enrolling in nursing training in a nearby town, going on to become a cadet nurse. But looking back in 1968, Maria seemed to have many regrets. She said that if she had the chance to change her line of work, then she would do so for hairdressing. She wrote:

Sometimes I get fed up with the same routine of work five days a week but always enjoy my days off which I don't get bored with, because I find plenty to do. But its people at work such as the bosses they get very bad moods in and take it out of [sic] innocent people that work for them which very frustrating at times & could hit them.⁸⁸

For Maria, a career in hairdressing, although never pursued that we know of, continued to represent the promise of autonomy in paid work, liberation from 'bosses' and their 'bad moods'. This is a reoccurring theme for the secondary modern women; despite breaks for child-rearing or becoming full-time housewives, the majority continued to express desires for paid work that spoke to their interests and would grant some autonomy.⁸⁹ This was often connected to entrepreneurialism; these women hoped to, and some actually did (such as Carys, mentioned

⁸⁴ Carolyn, SESC_316. Cf. Marie Hicks, *Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost Its Edge in Computing* (Boston, 2018), 131–8.

⁸⁵ Hannah Charnock, 'Teenage Girls, Female Friendship and the Making of the Sexual Revolution in England, 1950–1980', *The Historical Journal*, 63 (2020), 1032–53.

⁸⁶ In the NSHD SESC qualitative research sample, 23 per cent (16/70) of secondary modern school leavers recorded a different region or nation between age 13 and 36, compared to 38 per cent (23/60) of grammar and independent school leavers.

⁸⁷ Lesley, SESC_5246; Mavis, SESC_1271.

⁸⁸ Maria, SESC_2244.

⁸⁹ Cf. McCarthy, *Double Lives*, 324–6.

earlier), start their own businesses alone or with their husbands. Becoming one's own boss is repeatedly mentioned in the secondary modern womens' testimonies, another element of hairdressing that strongly appealed. Fleeting or lingering, the hairdressing discourses in the birth cohort sources point to a wider problem that secondary modern women began to observe about their education as they moved into the labour market. They realized the gulf between their imagined futures and what the world was actually delivering to them. Secondary modern schools could not make them into hairdressers, they got the hairdresser blues instead.

Although less likely to attend secondary modern school in the first place, girls from middle-class families were more likely to avoid the hairdresser blues, and actually find paid work that fulfilled their potential and ideals.⁹⁰ Marlene, for example, managed to secure a hairdressing apprenticeship upon leaving school in the North of England at 15 without any qualifications. Although we cannot know if Marlene got her apprenticeship as a result of merit, paying a premium, or simply due to more opportunities in her locality, this start allowed her to plan for a family life in which she could continue working autonomously. In the end, Marlene and her family relocated and she took a part-time job in sales, although one of her hopes for the future in 1972 was 'To be able to start a little hair-dressing business'.⁹¹

Lilian, another middle-class NSHD girl, was born in the West Midlands in 1946. She grew up motherless and her father owned and operated a mixed farm. She went to a mixed-sex secondary modern school and fully expected to join her father on the farm upon leaving. In her fourth year, she was placed in the vocationally oriented rural studies group. When she was 15, Lilian's father explained that he would like to buy her a business, 'Type of business to allow some scope for artistic make-up of child'. First, it was decided that Lilian would 'stay at home and help for at least 1 1/2 years. Poultry—Pigs etc. at home', giving her time to mature. As it turned out, Lilian worked at a company with whom her father had contacts upon leaving school. Her YEO judged her to be well-placed in this position, '... open to the lower streams of the High School or the better Secondary Modern girl'.

But by the age of 20, Lilian was taking advanced qualifications in hairdressing. When asked to look back on school-leaving she wrote: '... I had no intentions of leaving, but decided that I could better myself by having a second career behind me... As I mentioned earlier I knew I was already going to work for my father, but when I decided to take up hairdressing

⁹⁰ On middle-class pupils at secondary modern schools see Douglas *et al*, *All our future*, 46–8.

⁹¹ Marlene, SESC_3984.

they were very helpful indeed'. Lilian was right about this investment. She eventually married a farmer and moved to Wales. She carried on with hairdressing, periodically in a salon or self-employed. But she described herself as '... settled as a farmer's wife, which was a matter of my ambitions. As farming to me was always will always be my number one'. It is likely that Lilian's gained access to her hairdressing training at a private, fee-paying school. We see in her case how small secondary school loomed, in comparison to familial and domestic influences. Financial support and networks lubricated her pathway towards an adult life in which she could balance domesticity ('a farmer's wife') with paid work as a hairdresser.⁹²

Nursing was another important route to professional mobility for working-class girls in postwar Britain, as seen already in the case of Maria. It was also the most popular hoped-for job at the age of 13 in the NSHD secondary modern sub-sample. Yet, becoming a nurse had all the respectability and none of the glamour and entrepreneurial potential of hairdressing. Nor was nursing as obviously compatible with companionate marriage and motherhood, since many trainee nurses undertook live-in training. But due to the expansion of the NHS, there were far more posts in nursing than in hairdressing: full-time nurses and midwives made up 32.4 per cent of the NHS workforce in 1962, the second-largest group behind domestic and maintenance workers.⁹³ According to a sample census, nurses represented the largest group of professional women in Britain in 1966, and 90 per cent of all nurses were female.⁹⁴

Vivienne was a high performer at her co-educational secondary modern school in East Yorkshire. She grew up in a working-class family in a modern council house, her mother a domestic worker and her father a labourer. From the age of 15, she wanted to be a nurse, she considered it interesting and 'a career'. She had supportive teachers and parents and had the opportunity to take O Levels, passing two on her first attempt but failing to get any more in later resits. This was not good enough to enter nursing school though, so Vivienne left school at 16 and took a technical job locally. Throughout her late teen years, Vivienne wavered, writing once that she 'hadn't the gift of nursing'. But by the age of 18, she had successfully interviewed for her 'long time ambition' in nursing training. In 1969, she depicted herself as busy yet restless; she had shifted to part-time hospital work after marriage because looking after her husband and home at the same time became 'too much' for her. Yet, Vivienne was still searching: 'I seem to want to achieve something else, after gaining my

⁹² Lilian, SESC_1102.

⁹³ Jack Saunders, 'The Making of 'NHS Staff' as a Worker Identity, 1948–85', in Jennifer Crane, and Jane Hand, eds, *Posters, Protests, and Prescriptions: Cultural Histories of the National Health Service in Britain* (Manchester, 2022), Table 1.2.

⁹⁴ ACE, *Where: Supplement Sixteen: Educating Girls* (London, 1968), 29.

exams and driving test, so perhaps I may take up some musical instrument!'.⁹⁵ Such striving to achieve was vital. Nursing, as Vivienne's case reveals, was far from a simple route for secondary modern leavers. Only two other girls in the NSHD sample ended up as nurses and both had, like Vivienne, held the ambition since school.⁹⁶ Moreover, unlike hairdressing, possessing O Levels aided direct school leavers into nursing, meaning secondary modern school leavers had to compete with grammar school girls for positions.

Stories like Vivienne's from the birth cohorts conceal the racial and ethnic hierarchies built into postwar British nursing. Colonial office recruitment schemes in Ireland, the Caribbean and across Africa seeking trained nurses and recruiting nursing students were widespread throughout the 1940s and 1950s.⁹⁷ Despite many holding higher qualifications from overseas, these women were often forcibly maintained in the junior position of State Enrolled Nurse.⁹⁸ Focusing solely on the outcomes of the domestic, British education system renders invisible the existence of this lower stratum of migrant women's labour in nursing, a reminder that the hairdresser blues also encompassed implicit, racialized attitudes to paid work. This is captured aptly in a comment from Rosemary, a working-class secondary modern leaver from Nottingham. When asked if there was anyone who did not fit into Britain's social class structure in 1972 she said: 'Also coloured people, I don't know where to put them. I don't think they sort themselves out enough to be able to put them in any one of the 3'.⁹⁹ White, domestic, female secondary modern school leavers, although disadvantaged by their lack of qualifications, were always advantaged by their whiteness. Of course, this fact did very little to alleviate their individual disappointments.

Just seven of the NSHD secondary modern women and three of the 1000F women in my sub-samples were ultimately able to convert their hoped for schooldays jobs into reality. Would-be nurses and teachers were equally as susceptible to the hairdresser blues as the women who actually wanted to be hairdressers. In 1968, at the age of 22, the NSHD women looked back on their school leaving choices with much ambivalence and a sense of possibility. Their testimonies reveal the cumulative

⁹⁵ Vivienne, SESC_449.

⁹⁶ Vera, SESC_2336; Catherine, SESC_727.

⁹⁷ Louise Ryan, "'I had a Sister in England": Family-Led Migration, Social Networks, and Irish Nurses', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34 (2008), 453–70; Catherine Babikian, "'Partnership Not Prejudice": British Nurses, Colonial Students, and the National Health Service, 1948–1962', *Journal of British Studies*, 60 (2021), 140–68.

⁹⁸ Stephanie Snow, and Emma Jones, 'Immigration and the National Health Service: Putting History to the Forefront', *History & Policy Policy Paper*, 8 March 2011, [<https://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/immigration-and-the-national-health-service-putting-history-to-the-forefront>].

⁹⁹ Rosemary, SESC_4244.

effect of attending a secondary modern school, but not in the ways we might expect. The secondary modern women did not regret having failed the 'eleven-plus'. But they did increasingly regret early leaving school, having seen how little currency they had on a highly gendered and regionally uneven labour market. Their experiences of paid work gradually clarified and amplified their sense of educational disadvantage. Although the qualitative data available for post-school years for the 1000F women sample are much poorer, one recent study by Josephine Wildman based on fourteen life history interviews with study members points to parallel conclusions about the Newcastle women. In the interviews the women recalled 'a labour market hostile towards working mothers', but as they moved into middle age, social attitudes changed and so did their work patterns.¹⁰⁰

Educational Deficits, 1970s

By the early 1970s, the secondary modern women born in 1946–7 had reached their mid-twenties. All but four of the NSHD secondary modern women were married, and twenty-six out of the total thirty-six had at least one child. These women, who had received the slimmest of educational offerings from the postwar welfare state, began to locate their malaise in education. This final section explores how they calculated their educational deficits. They saw they had had better opportunities than their mothers at school, yet worse than their male peers since leaving. They did not want their daughters, maturing into the 1980s, to experience the hairdresser blues. In 1972, the school-leaving age was raised to 16 and comprehensive reorganization of secondary schools in Britain was well underway; the secondary modern school had long been rejected.¹⁰¹ Maintaining the consensus around this educational settlement for the late century relied upon the cumulative, lifecourse experiences of mothers who attended secondary modern schools.

It is well established that this generation was extremely upwardly mobile, and that this was a result of work rather than education. Most women who achieved upward social mobility over the 1960s did so by moving from the manual to intermediate classes.¹⁰² The majority of NSHD secondary modern women achieved absolute upward social mobility. But this social mobility had very different meanings and impacts for women than it did for men, leading to different attitudes to

¹⁰⁰ Josephine M. Wildman, 'Life-Course Influences on Extended Working: Experiences of Women in a UK Baby-Boom Birth Cohort', *Employment and Society*, 34 (2020), 211–27.

¹⁰¹ In January 1972, 41 per cent of pupils at state secondary schools in England and Wales were attending comprehensive schools, Department of Education and Science, *Statistics of Education 1972, volume one* (London, 1972), 4–5.

¹⁰² Peter Mandler, 'Educating the Nation: III. Social Mobility', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 26 (2016), 1–23, 6.

education.¹⁰³ When the NSHD secondary modern women were asked about their social attitudes in 1972, they naturally resisted the categories imposed on them by sociological models. They saw being ‘working class’ as a result of going to work and being ‘middle class’ as a result of status and money.¹⁰⁴ Education was rarely seen as an important factor when they were asked about changing social class, this was, according to them, achieved through hard work and skills.

But when asked the more general question, ‘what kinds of things would you say help people to “get on in the world” nowadays?’ education was mentioned much more often. The secondary modern women over-privileged education as a general factor in self-improvement and under-privileged it as a specific, personal class signifier. This follows broader trends in the full, representative NSHD sample.¹⁰⁵ Jane, for example, thought getting on was down to: ‘Better education. Women can go out to work now, they can earn more money which helps to buy the things for a more comfortable home’.¹⁰⁶ Bridget thought it was not difficult to change social class, you could do it by moving away from a working-class area, to meet people who were ‘wiser with education, ambition’. For her, ‘getting on’ was about: ‘Parents who encourage their children at school etc. One’s own attitude towards getting on. A lot of hard work’.¹⁰⁷ Anita thought that although the different social classes in Britain were defined by money and jobs, education was uniquely a route for the working classes to change social class. She thought you could ‘get on’ through: ‘Good schooling and training for skilled work—better paid work’.¹⁰⁸ As we have seen, education and paid work had become deeply interconnected over the course of the 1960s for these women. Paid work might have yielded them social mobility, but their faith in education indicates a realization of what they had missed out on in attending a secondary modern school. Upward social mobility ultimately did little to alleviate the hairdresser blues. These women wanted further vocational education and in-work training, but these interests only grew over time and as a result of experience in the workplace.

¹⁰³ Cf. Eve Worth, et al., ‘Women, Mobility, and Education in Twentieth-century England and Wales: A New Analytical Approach’, *Twentieth Century British History*, online publication 6 January 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Nicky Britten, ‘Class imagery in a National sample of Women and Men’ *The British Journal of Sociology*, 35 (1984), 406–34. This is the only other study I have located that uses the qualitative data from the NSHD 1972 sweep, cf. Pearson, *The Life Project*, 111.

¹⁰⁵ In response to the question ‘What would you say it is that mainly distinguishes one class from another?’, 22.6 per cent of respondents mentioned education and training as a factor. When asked ‘What kinds of things would you say help people to “get on in the world” nowadays?’, 58.8 per cent of respondents mentioned education, training, travel, or ‘what you know’, 3750/5362 response rate, *Skylark*. Cf. Britten, ‘Class Imagery’, 413.

¹⁰⁶ Jane, SESC_3569.

¹⁰⁷ Bridget, SESC_2667.

¹⁰⁸ Anita, SESC_1033.

How did these adult women seek to make up for the educational deficits they identified as they matured? Oral history evidence has suggested that returning to education later in life via the expanding further education networks of the 1970s and 1980s was important to women born around the Second World War.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, in the full, representative NSHD sample, women were more active in adult education than men.¹¹⁰ But, the lives of my NSHD secondary women correlate with broader quantitative findings that those who undertake adult education are more likely to already have qualifications and or be of a higher social class.¹¹¹ Thus, it was most often female, early grammar school leavers who made the most of adult education opportunities. Three of the women in my NSHD secondary modern sub-sample did indicate they were members of evening or adult education classes at the age of 43, two of them had stayed on at school as teenagers beyond the age of 15 to take examinations.¹¹²

Instead, some secondary modern women in paid work sought further vocational or professional training in the workplace. Many others not in paid work were more likely to turn to emigration or entrepreneurship to offset their educational deficits. Robyn, for example, regretted leaving her Edinburgh school early and wished she had gone to university, adding: 'I left school at the age of 15, because my Mother was a widow then, I felt I wanted to be bringing home some money. I felt I was wasting my time and the teacher at that particular school'. By 1969, she saw emigration as the only option to improve the family's prospects. With her husband ground down by low pay and finding being a housewife 'too boring to mention', Robyn wrote '... we are thoroughly disillusioned by this country, were [*sic*] it seems if you are working class then it's all work and no play. That is why we are seriously thinking of going abroad'.¹¹³

When asked about their hopes for the future in 1972, the NSHD secondary modern women most often mentioned home ownership, expanding their families, and good health. A few, like Georgina who had had a highly disadvantaged rural childhood, hoped 'To give my children a

¹⁰⁹ Worth, *Welfare State Generation*, 76–78; Cf. Mary Hughes, and Mary Kennedy, *New Futures: Changing Women's Education* (London, 1985).

¹¹⁰ At the age of 26, 9.7 per cent of study members, 163 men and 201 women, said they belonged to an adult education or evening class, 3750/5362 response rate, *Skylark*. At age forty-three when asked 'How often do you take part in evening class/adult education activities?' 11.3 per cent, 261 women and 106 men, responded 'weekly', 3262/5362 response rate, *Skylark*.

¹¹¹ Stephani L. Hatch, et al., 'The Continuing Benefits of Education: Adult Education and Midlife Cognitive Ability in the British 1946 Birth Cohort', *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 62B (2007), 404–14.

¹¹² Rita, SESC_2951, a primary school teacher and Catherine, SESC_727, a nurse. The third (exception) was Sarah, SESC_151.

¹¹³ Robyn, SESC_2158.

good education'.¹¹⁴ By the time their children were secondary-school aged in the early 1980s, 83 per cent of pupils attending state secondary schools in England and Wales went to comprehensive schools, whilst comprehensivization was already near complete in Scotland by the early 1970s.¹¹⁵ Moreover, girls were starting a revolution inside the school gates, overtaking boys in staying-on rates and exam performance, which would result in a gender education gap in favour of girls for the new millennium. The comprehensive school, and the standardized GCSE school-leaving qualification from 1986, was a good thing for white girls in Britain.¹¹⁶ And their secondary modern school-educated mothers knew this. Their own mothers had been part of the 'revolt of the Mums' that pushed the early tide towards comprehensive schooling, whilst their personal experiences of the hairdresser blues armed them with the political will to support and sustain comprehensive schools in their communities.¹¹⁷

This article has argued that British women who attended secondary modern schools in the 1950s and 1960s had the hairdresser blues, a formulation that signifies their cumulative disappointments around education and paid work. For these mostly working-class women, clean, creative, and autonomous paid work, compatible with family life, was at the heart of their hopes for adulthood. These hopes went unfulfilled for the vast majority, shaping their long-term attitudes to education. This research impacts our understanding of the lives of women in postwar Britain in three significant ways. First, it demonstrates that the 'resonances' of educational experience are deeply and continuously implicated in women's trajectories of paid work.¹¹⁸ The hairdresser blues foregrounds the interconnectedness of education and paid work for secondary modern women across their lifecourse. Secondly, it is an example of how qualitative, longitudinal birth cohort data can be rendered useable and useful for historians. Here, the data have allowed me to track cumulative and incremental changes in women's attitudes to education that would be less apparent, or compromised by memory, in retrospective evidence such as oral history interviews conducted at midlife or retirement.¹¹⁹ What emerges in

¹¹⁴ Georgina, SESC_4941.

¹¹⁵ Department of Education and Science, *Statistics of Education Schools 1982* (London, 1983), 9, 13; J. Scotland, 'Scottish Education, 1962–1982', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 30 (1982), 122–35, 131.

¹¹⁶ Department for Education and Skills, *Gender and Education: The Evidence on Pupils in England* (London, 2007). Cf. Mary Fuller, 'Black Girls in a London Comprehensive School', in Deem, ed., *Schooling for Women's Work*, 52–65.

¹¹⁷ Peter Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy: Britain's Transition to Mass Education since the Second World War* (Oxford, 2020), 49.

¹¹⁸ Tinkler et al., 'Introducing "Resonance"'.
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these sources is not a narrative in which one moment, such as failing the 'eleven-plus' and not going to a grammar school, shaped these women's attitudes. Rather, it is a story of incrementally acquired educational dissatisfaction, accumulated through the lived social and material realities of postwar women's work and family life across the 1960s and 1970s.

Thirdly, this research contributes to an expanded understanding of 'second-wave' feminism that pays attention to the meanings working-class women invested in the material, economic, and social changes happening around them, argued for recently by Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson using the term 'vernacular gender equality'.¹²⁰ There are only two explicitly 'feminist' demands in the testimonies of the NSHD sub-sample, and they both came from women who had achieved relatively high professional statuses. In 1969 Vera, the army nurse, reflected on the long hours and low pay in her profession, adding: 'I hope one day someone will realize just how hard we work and give us equal pay with men'.¹²¹ Rita, a primary school teacher, concluded in 1968 that the only solution for working mothers was better childcare: 'I look forward to the day when education authorities provide for the increasing demand for well-run and well-equipped Nursery schools'.¹²² Yet, as this article has shown, secondary modern women were routinely making important claims for 'vernacular gender equality'. Their subtle demands for better training and access to meaningful paid work compatible with their domestic lives were a direct result of their lived experiences, quietly recorded, year on year, in the birth cohort studies.

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¹¹⁹ Cf. Helena Mills, 'Using the Personal to Critique the Popular: Women's Memories of 1960s Youth', *Contemporary British History*, 30 (2016), 463–83.

¹²⁰ Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, and Natalie Thomlinson, 'Vernacular Discourses of Gender Equality in the Post-war British Working Class', *Past & Present*, 254 (2022), 277–313.

¹²¹ Vera, *SESC_2336*.

¹²² Rita, *SESC_2951*.

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