

Research shows the hands-on dad isn't a new phenomenon

January 15 2015, by Kath Paddison

The 21st Century dad – as defined by celebrity fathers such as David Beckham, Brad Pitt and Jamie Oliver – isn't a new phenomenon according to research from the universities of Manchester and Leeds.

Historians examined [fatherhood](#) in Britain during the 19th and 20th centuries and found strong evidence that dads were much more involved in their [children's](#) lives than previously recognised.

The research quashes the widely-held belief that there has been a generational shift in attitudes to fatherhood and that the 'New Man' is more at ease with his parenting role and more engaged with his children – a departure from previous generations.

Previously some historians have considered men's roles in their studies of gender, home and family life more generally; very few have examined fathers as crucial family members and as emotional individuals.

Dr Laura King from The University of Leeds studied fatherhood across the last century. She said: "The history of fatherhood is extremely significant to contemporary debate: assumptions about fatherhood in the past are constantly used to support arguments about the state of fatherhood today and the need for change in the future.

"And yet fathers are often neglected in histories of [family life](#) in Britain. Fathers were more involved with their children in the past than we recognised."

Dr Julie-Marie Strange from The University of Manchester examined Victorian working-class fathers. She said: "the notion that fathers are redefined by the modern new man just isn't true. Since the Victorian era men seem to have been just as hands-on as they are today and equally as open and affectionate with their off-spring."

The Victorian Father - Dr Julie-Marie Strange from The University of Manchester

The researcher disproved the validity of the negative stereotypes closely linked with the Victorian working-class father like being absent, tyrannical, distant, drunk, violent and resentful of his children.

Dr Strange's research gleaned from the voices of working-class men and their children reveals that men were incredibly affectionate with their children, very involved and injected laughter and fun into the home.

She said: "The term 'Victorian father' has become shorthand for a man that is strict, distant and unaffectionate with his children. This shows how firmly the stereotype is imprinted in our culture. But I found little evidence of this austere, absent man in my research.'

Drawing on music hall songs, visual culture and fiction, Dr Strange's research followed the Victorian working man through the front door of his home to observe him at rest and at play with his children.

"I've discovered how important comedy is for dads from the Victorian era and how much it was used as a way for men to informally bond with their children. Comedy could be a kind of masculine 'baby talk' too," she said.

The 20th Century Father - Dr Laura King from The

University of Leeds

Using a wide range of sources, Dr King shed light on the role of fathers in the period from the First World War to the start of the Sixties – from newspapers, letters and autobiographies to individual testimonies gleaned through interviews.

By the 1940s and 1950s there was a new understanding emerging of the significance of the father-child relationship.

Dr King said: "The generalisation that fathers in the past were distant figures – as well as the idea that men have suddenly become much more involved in fatherhood in the last 10 or 20 years – don't really match up. Why does the 'new man' keep returning?"

She argues that looking back to the past only through the lens of our present values means fathers in previous generations have been seen as distant. Because they worked a lot, they were seen as uninvolved, and because kisses and cuddles were not as common or frequent, their relationships with their children were not seen as affectionate.

Dr King said: "Lots of men talked about how they worked hard and long hours specifically to give their family what they didn't have as children, and the love and affection between parents and children were simply taken for granted rather than constantly displayed."

The 1940s and 1950s also saw the birth of the modern celebrity dad, as newspapers regularly featured stories about famous [fathers](#) such as actors Errol Flynn and Burt Lancaster and singer Lonnie Donegan, as well as footballers and other sports stars.

Dr King said: "This flourishing of the celebrity father in the mid-twentieth century represents a new understanding of fatherhood. I've also

found quizzes asking readers how good a husband/father they were, as well as some very open emotional exchanges in letters between dads and their children during both world wars."

One father wrote how the coalminers in his native County Durham in the 1930s "loved and were loved – though [they] would laugh at the word."

More information: Family Men: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Britain, 1914-1960 (978-0-19-967490-9) is published on 15 January by Oxford University Press. For details, see ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199674909.do

Fatherhood and the British Working Class, 1865-1914 (Cambridge University Press, January 2015 ISBN 9781107084872) 240 pp. For details, see www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/...rking-class-18651914

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