Dr Joan Rapaport summarises the reflections of Mike Burt, of the University of Chester, and Dr Gary Clapton, University of Edinburgh, in presentations on the origins of social work presented to a meeting of the Social Work History Network at King’s College London. Mr Burt charted the development of social work occupations in England and Wales from the late 19th century, before Mr Clapton described the role and work of the Inspectors of the Royal Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children from 1888 to 1968.

Poor Law Relieving Officers, the Friendly Visitors of the Charity Organisation Society, the settlement workers of the Settlement Movement, the School Attendance Officers under the Education Act and the Inspectors of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) were identified as the main roles from which social work evolved during the latter part of the 19th century.

The first hospital almoner was appointed in 1895, with legislation following in the early 1900s that paved the way for the introduction of midwives, probation officers and care committee organisers. In 1929 the first mental health course was established to train Psychiatric Social Workers. A year later the Duly Authorised Officer, a forerunner of the new Approved Mental Health Professional, was introduced under the Mental Treatment Act 1930.

The Social Work History Network event heard how the term ‘social work’ first appeared in 1886 in the context of a Charity Organisation Review and gradually took root as the accepted generic term to describe a plethora of allied roles. Some roles were salaried and others voluntary. As now, there were pressing concerns about the need for training, the reliability of services, geographical inconsistencies and funding difficulties. Equally challenging were the rivalries between the different societies, squabbling that hampered the co-ordination of social efforts.

However, by 1935 membership of the British Federation of Social Workers included the main children’s, nursing, public health, mental health and probation associations. A huge social work conference held in Paris in 1928, which lasted for three weeks, offers evidence that by this time social work had achieved considerable international standing.
Social work roles were to undergo further changes as the century progressed in the aftermath of World War II, particularly from the 1950s with the advent of the UK welfare state. Attitudes had shifted markedly during social work’s formative years, so that work with families had moved from the provision of conditional help – sometimes based on religious motives – to meeting needs according to a perception of rights. There was an emerging focus on helping people in practical ways, such as finding accommodation and work, and offering material relief as part of social ‘casework’.

Study
A significant study of records in 1939 (The study of Society, Methods and Problems – Clement Brown, S) found that social workers offered an analytic approach and an increasing range and variety of resources. The author also discerned distinctions between social workers who were organisers and sought to modify society, and those who helped people to adapt to it. Further differentiations were made between social workers who made a ‘social diagnosis’ based on facts and those who helped people to adapt through the professional relationship.

In Scotland, similar trends regarding the evolution of roles and tasks are apparent in the records of the ‘cruelty men’ who were employed by the Royal Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (RSSPCC). The society operated under a management committee that was required to oversee the work of its inspectors and to produce an annual report. From the 1880s to the 1960s it was the only family welfare society in Scotland and was often better resourced than the local children’s departments.

The inspectors were often former soldiers or policemen. They had to be free from debt, an ‘abstainer’ and able to ride a bicycle. Zeal was a qualifying requirement too. To illustrate this point, one candidate was asked: “Are you fond of children? Can you see through a brick wall?”

Access
The inspectors had all-encompassing access to the family home. If parents were found to be in financial difficulties, defaulting on their rent for example, the inspectors could provide counsel and advice. Yet they also had powers to remove children to a ‘children’s shelter’ and to return them home once the problems had been remedied. Detailed records of files and prosecutions reveal interesting insights regarding the use of these powers. These include one account where children were removed and returned the next morning at a 7am inspection, after the parents had worked all night to clean the house – under the watchful gaze of a police officer who visited the house on an hourly basis.

There are examples of mothers being warned about the dirty appearance of children and their untidy homes, as well as evidence of abusive clients. Neighbours and relatives wrote to the cruelty men and clearly felt able to alert them to concerns. There was a strong emphasis on ‘vermin’, especially head lice, with any evidence of this offering a major justification for intervention – perhaps because of the association between cleanliness and Godliness.

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Significantly, the RSSPCC’s historical dilemma of rationalising the public image of its work, with accountability and access to resources for appropriate services is arguably still relevant to social work today. It illustrates well the continuing tensions in balancing the care and control ethos, and the impression that money should be more readily available if we are tough on children and families.

Such attitudes are deep in British culture, in contrast to many other parts of Europe. Selling the caring side of social work to the general public today remains as important a political conundrum for BASW and the profession to overcome, as ever before.

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