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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, GENDERED EXPECTATIONS AND RESPECTABILITY IN INTERWAR BRITAIN: REVISITING THE 1922 UXORICIDE ON BRANDIFORTH STREET IN BAMBER BRIDGE

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On a late spring morning in 1922, officials at Strangeways Prison in Manchester hanged a farm labourer, Hiram Thompson, convicted of kicking his wife to death and slitting her throat in their kitchen. Drawing on contemporaneous press reports, this article reconstructs the Bamber Bridge uxoricide as a case study and employs a selective comparison with other domestic homicides to examine how domestic violence was interpreted differently in working- and middle-class contexts in interwar Britain. It argues that the circumstances of the Thompson murder reveal the persistence of Victorian and Edwardian moral codes into the interwar period, and that structural conditions, including economic dependence, legal barriers and social expectations, enabled domestic violence to persist. The article emphasises that press narratives foregrounding alcohol and irregular employment as the catalysts of the murder displaced attention from the prevailing norms of respectability and the ineffectiveness of separation orders in protecting abused wives. With its regional distinctiveness in Lancashire, the Thompson case shows how close-knit, industrial communities interpreted violent behaviour by husbands as an individual aberration from the economic and social order rather than as a product of structurally embedded inequality and gendered power.

Keywords: domestic homicide; domestic violence; gender; capital punishment; interwar Britain; respectability

Introduction

When Hiram Thompson, a farm labourer from Bamber Bridge, murdered his wife Ellen in their kitchen in April 1922, it shocked local communities in Lancashire and the wider British public. What began as a minor quarrel over who should cook

dinner quickly turned into a brutal murder that led to Mr Thompson's arrest the same day.¹ Less than a month after the authorities charged him with murdering his wife, Mr Thompson's trial resulted in his execution, one of approximately 865 to take place in Britain in the twentieth century.² The murder of Ellen Thompson was the culmination of an unhappy married life spoiled by alcoholism, irregular employment and domestic abuse inflicted by Mr Thompson, which became public knowledge in 1916. Once the investigating authorities verified that years of violence preceded Mrs Thompson's murder, which was widely publicised in newspapers across Britain between April and June 1922, the grand jury was unanimous in its verdict of finding Mr Thompson guilty of wilful murder.³

This article revisits as a case study the uxoricide ('the killing of one's wife') Mr Thompson committed in April 1922 and situates it within the broader context of domestic violence and gendered expectations in Britain from 1918 to 1939. It examines how three factors—alcoholism, domestic abuse (physical and emotional) and irregular employment—contributed to the circumstances of the murder and shaped how the press and courts interpreted the crime, especially given the prevalence of these issues in British society during the period.⁴ Although centred in Lancashire, the Thompson murder illuminates broader interwar anxieties in Britain about female roles in the public and private spheres, male domestic authority and social respectability. Studying how the press framed the murder will offer a window into how interwar northern communities made sense of domestic violence through a moral vocabulary of labour, respectability and provocation inherited from the Victorian and Edwardian periods.⁵ This article therefore uses a regional case to explore national tensions between modernising gender norms and enduring patriarchal structures. It shows how acts of domestic brutality turned into public lessons about gender, class and respectability, leaving the death of the female victim in this case as the collateral damage of a legal and social system that women often found unworkable.⁶ The circumstances of the murder and subsequent inquest, trial and execution of Mr Thompson raise implications for how historians understand domestic homicide as a cultural phenomenon. It highlights enduring the stereotypes of masculinity, domestic abuse and class, and the value of case studies as sources to improve historiographical framing, especially because of the lack of attention historians have given to violence against wives in Britain during the interwar period.⁷ Historians have established in the historiography an association of domestic violence with the working class.

¹ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 13 May 1922.

² Gary Dobbs, *A Date with the Hangman: A History of Capital Punishment in Britain* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2019), pp. 1–2.

³ *Dundee Courier*, 15 May 1922.

⁴ Alan E. Booth and Sean Glynn, 'Unemployment in the Interwar Period: A Multiple Problem', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 10 (1975), pp. 611–636; Louise Jackson, 'Women professionals and the regulation of violence in interwar Britain', in *Everyday Violence in Britain, 1850–1950* (London, 2000), pp. 118–135.

⁵ Shani D'Cruze, *Crimes Of Outrage: Sex, Violence, and Victorian Working Women* (London, 1998), pp. 112–120.

⁶ Pat Thane, 'The Impact of World War I on Marriage, Divorce and Gender Relations in Britain', in *The Impact of World War I on Marriages, Divorces, and Gender Relations in Europe* (London, 2019), pp. 46–65.

⁷ Rebecca Crites, *Husbands' Violence against Wives in England and Wales, 1914–1939: A Review of Contemporary Understandings of and Responses to Men's Marital Violence* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2016), p. 7.

However, using a case study from Lancashire will show how that discourse was locally mediated in an industrial-northern setting through local press moralisation, an emphasis on respectability in close-knit communities, and the correlation between the precarity of labour and abuse of alcohol which shaped the vocabulary of blame to explain the violence while avoiding critique of broader social structures.

To show how the case study based in Lancashire adds these nuances to the broader historiography, the article draws primarily from contemporaneous newspaper articles obtained through the British Newspaper Archive to reconstruct the events leading up to, during and following Mrs Thompson's murder. Three of the newspaper articles—published in the *Lancashire Daily Post* (LDP) dated 27 April, 3 May and 13 May—are the most detailed and include accounts written by correspondents who were on the scene shortly after the murder, and present at Mr Thompson's inquest and trial. They contain verbatim statements and firsthand testimony of the dramatic exchanges that took place inside the assizes, revealing more about the dysfunctional Thompson household before the murder.⁸ The other articles appeared in newspapers beyond Lancashire, with some featuring contradictions between the accounts. Adrian Bingham highlights in his work that newspapers are not neutral mirrors of events and that crime reporting in particular blends facts with moral instruction, entertainment and often a neatly packaged story arc.⁹ Newspapers may be primary sources, but equally they are structured, selective and morally purposeful, with an agenda to shock, thrill and satisfy their readership. Bingham showed how the interwar popular press played an active role in shaping moral understandings of private life, particularly in cases involving domestic violence, sexuality and family breakdown.¹⁰ With this contextualisation, while newspapers can show the language used in court, the evidence emphasised, how prosecutors characterised the defendants and victims, and the legal narratives invoked (e.g. provocation, respectability etc.), they cannot say what actually happened in full, any private emotions, or experiences and voices excluded from the courtroom. Editorial commentary reflects moral judgments, social norms and the newspaper's didactic role, but it cannot convey lived experience or represent public opinion. This article acknowledges those limits and reads the newspaper articles covering the Thompson case through this lens.

Uxoricide at 11 Brandiforth Street

On the afternoon of 25 April 1922, Ellen Thompson conducted her usual chores in the kitchen of her house at 11 Brandiforth Street in Bamber Bridge (see [Figures 1 and 2](#)). She was alone except for a baby aged nine months she was nursing for her neighbour.¹¹ Her seventeen-year-old daughter, Ellen May, left at one o'clock to work a brief shift in the local mill. However, when she returned home at 5:45 that evening, Ellen May heard the baby crying in the kitchen. When she walked in, she

⁸ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 3 May 1922.

⁹ Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers?: Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918–1978* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 25–30, 115–118.

¹⁰ Bingham, *Family Newspapers?*, pp. 52–57, 72–77.

¹¹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 26 April 1922.



FIGURE 1. The kitchen of 11 Brandiforth Street, shortly after Ellen Thompson was murdered, late April 1922. Image included with permission of Lancashire Archives and Lancashire Red Rose Collections.

saw her mother's mutilated body lying in a pool of blood, with her head almost decapitated. She ran out of the house and screamed on the street for help, but one question remained: who committed the murder?

Mrs Thompson's husband, Hiram, aged fifty-two, returned home at 3:30 that same afternoon after drinking four pints of beer at the Hospital Inn. As he entered the house, petting his little dog, he called to his wife in a broad Lancashire dialect: "Mak' us some tommy¹² ready." From the kitchen, Mrs Thompson replied: "That mun¹³ mek it ready thissel if tha wants any." Mr Thompson said to his wife that she would have done it if it was anybody else that asked her and according to him, Mrs Thompson replied: "I can lick¹⁴ thee anytime." Mr Thompson claimed that his wife then hit him and he retaliated: "I lashed her on t' floor and set me feet into her. That made me worse mad, and I kicked her some more."¹⁵ Mrs Thompson then tried to

¹² The term 'tommy' is obsolete British slang for bread, especially brown bread or rations.

¹³ In Northern English dialect, the term 'mun' means must.

¹⁴ In this context, 'lick' refers to beating someone.

¹⁵ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 13 May 1922.



FIGURE 2. Brandiforth Street in Bamber Bridge, shortly after the murder of Ellen Thompson, with a policeman stationed outside the house on the left, late April 1922. Image included with permission of Lancashire Archives and Lancashire Red Rose Collections.

get to her feet, but once she had, Mr Thompson knocked her down again, grabbed a nearby razor beside the sink and used it to slit her throat.

Two hours later, when their daughter alerted the authorities that she discovered her mother dead in the kitchen, PC Nuttall entered the house, followed by Dr Lever, finding the neighbour's baby crying in the cot. The LDP article that made the story public went into detail about the horrific scene that the officer and doctor faced. It describes how blood covered both Mrs Thompson's body and the walls of the kitchen, even the wall ten feet away from where she was lying. Mrs Thompson had been brutally murdered: her throat had been cut so deeply that it severed her windpipe and arteries, with the reporter clarifying how "the instrument had only been checked by the bones of the spine at the back of the neck."¹⁶ In her blood-covered hands, Mrs Thompson clenched tufts of hair. Mr Thompson had almost torn his wife's left ear to pieces and fractured both the left side of her skull and her left thumb.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 13 May 1922.

¹⁷ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 2 May 1922.

Once PC Nuttall established these facts, along with his colleague PS O'Toole, they set out on a manhunt. A witness last saw Mr Thompson borrowing two shillings from Mr Sumner at Lane Ends Farm just before four o'clock. By 6:20 that evening, Mr Thompson was sitting in the Mackenzie's Arms when a man walked in and asked the licensee, Mr Alfred Greenhalgh: "What do you think about Yutick¹⁸ now? He has cut his wife's throat, or else she has cut it herself."¹⁹ Although he overheard the conversation, Mr Thompson did not reply, instead he drank the rest of his beer and walked out. While walking through Bamber Bridge, Mr Thompson came across Henry Wilson, an acquaintance who was working in his garden. Mr Thompson spoke to him about gardening but also mentioned his wife's death: "I have done it this time. I have finished her at home. I've made a bloody good job of it."²⁰ Mr Wilson described Mr Thompson as "not drunk, but not quite sober."²¹

While Mr Thompson spoke with Mr Wilson, PS O'Toole appeared to arrest him. The police had to wait until nine o'clock for Mr Thompson to sober up before formally charging him with the murder. The officers found blood on practically every article of clothing he was wearing, with the iron at the toe of his left clog blood-stained and tufts of hair stuck to it. In the kitchen of 11 Brandiforth Street, officers found the iron heater of a smoothing iron covered with hair and clotted blood. After searching the house the next day, the police found in the ashes of the oven grate (see [Figure 3](#)) the charred blade of a razor, the hasp of which had burned away. Mr Thompson used that razor to kill his wife, and it belonged to his son-in-law, Thomas Warbrick, the husband of Mr and Mrs Thompson's eldest daughter Priscilla, both of whom were living with the Thompsons at the time of the murder.

Separation Orders and Cycles of Abuse: Insights from Before Mrs Thompson's Murder

Mr and Mrs Thompson's three eldest children, Priscilla (26), John (24) and Ellen May (17), testified against their father. Priscilla and John's testimony confirmed that domestic violence had occurred in the Thompson household for many years, with John claiming, "father had ill-used mother ever since I could remember, striking and kicking her and using all sorts of threats. He had said more than once that he would swing for her."²² Their testimony asserted that Mrs Thompson suffered beatings and verbal abuse whenever Mr Thompson was drunk or short of money. However, the testimony also revealed that several family members and neighbours were aware of the abuse, signalling that domestic violence was visible, normalised and largely tolerated in the local community, especially whenever the husband framed it as chastisement.

¹⁸ 'Yutick' is a colloquial term that was used in Lancashire to refer to a drawer-in, a type of textile worker in a mill, which had become Mr Thompson's nickname.

¹⁹ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 13 May 1922.

²⁰ *Halifax Evening Courier*, 3 May 1922.

²¹ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 13 May 1922.

²² *Lancashire Daily Post*, 13 May 1922.



FIGURE 3. The kitchen of 11 Brandiforth Street, shortly after Ellen Thompson was murdered, showing the oven grate where Thomas Warbrick's razor was found by police officers, late April 1922. Image included with permission of Lancashire Archives and Lancashire Red Rose Collections.

Mr Thompson justified his behaviour by stating that his wife provoked him to violence: "She banged at me, and I lashed her on the floor. She hit me first. I got a bit mad, and when I lashed on the floor I sent my foot into her. I did not intend to kill her. I let her get up once, and then I downed her again."²³ Mr Thompson's words draw on a widely understood moral vocabulary of the period that normalised male anger, making it partially excusable based on the cultural assumption that rage mitigated culpability. Mr Thompson quickly clarified that he did not intend to kill his wife, but it is noteworthy that no one asked him what his intention was in beating her. Nobody asked that question because the prevailing belief (known as the 'unwritten law') was that a husband could rightly chastise his wife into submission for perceived disrespect or infidelity, with no sinister intention of causing her long-term harm.²⁴ Following the First World War, the 'unwritten law' resurfaced as a

²³ *Nottingham Journal*, 7 June 1922.

²⁴ Anna Clark, 'Domesticity and the problem of wifebeating in nineteenth-century Britain: working-class culture, law and politics', in *Everyday Violence in Britain, 1850–1950* (London, 2000), pp. 26–40.

concept in court proceedings and newspaper articles, perhaps to re-establish pre-war gender roles and to distinguish the public sphere from untouchable private life. This explains why family members, neighbours and local police officers tolerated the domestic violence they witnessed until it turned fatal. Mr Thompson's framing of the murder shifted blame to his wife as the provoker, attempting to erase years of prior abuse by recasting himself as provoked beyond reasonableness.²⁵

It is significant that Mrs Thompson twice previously applied for a separation order from her husband. However, both times she relented and took him back based on "his promise to be better."²⁶ Not only does this contextualise the emotional abuse within the Thompson marriage, but it also highlights the legal limits and broader ineffectiveness of separation orders during the period. Working-class women could apply to magistrates under the Summary Jurisdiction (Married Women) Acts of 1895 and 1908, which allowed for limited maintenance and protection orders against abusive husbands.²⁷ However, five factors stifled their effectiveness: (1) legal limitations; (2) economic dependency; (3) minimal enforceability; (4) intimidation and lack of awareness among women of their rights; and (5) social and moral emphasis on reconciliation.²⁸ A 1916 *Preston Herald* article (see [Figure 4](#)) confirms that Mr Thompson's treatment of his wife was public knowledge, proving that the local authorities failed to prevent further violence.²⁹ That year, Mrs Thompson alleged "persistent cruelty" by her husband, largely fuelled by his abuse of alcohol. The article reveals more about the couple's background: although they conceived 11 children, only 5 survived beyond infancy, with most dying from illnesses common during the period like bronchitis, measles and pneumonia according to their death certificates. Although infant deaths were common, to lose more than half of their offspring was above the national average of 25%.³⁰ According to his birth certificate, Mr Thompson was born in 1871 at 16 Lansdowne Street in the industrial Witton area of Blackburn, as the eldest of four children, to a carter named John Thompson. His father died of pneumonia when he was 19 years old, leaving Hiram the head of the household. There is no information available about the Thompson family dynamics, preventing any inference about whether Thompson witnessed his father abuse his mother that might have exposed him to violent behaviour from a young age. While the name Hiram was uncommon for a working-class child, it was not inexplicable, as it is an Old Testament name that disproportionately appeared among nonconformists, although evidence suggests the Thompsons were Anglicans. According to her birth certificate, Mrs Thompson was born Ellen Mary Fellows into a Catholic family in Bamber Bridge in 1873 as the daughter of a cotton spinner named Joseph Fellows. It is unclear how Fellows and Thompson met, but they were married in Preston by

²⁵ *Edinburgh Evening News*, 15 May 1922.

²⁶ *Liverpool Evening Express*, 13 May 1922.

²⁷ George Behlmer, 'Summary Justice and Working-Class Marriage in England, 1870–1940', *Law and History Review*, 12.2 (1994), pp. 229–275.

²⁸ Oliver Anderson, 'State, Civil Society and Separation in Victorian Marriage', *Past & Present*, 163 (1999), pp. 171–173, 178–179.

²⁹ *Preston Herald*, 12 February 1916.

³⁰ Carol Dyhouse, 'Working-Class Mothers and Infant Mortality In England, 1895–1914', *Journal of Social History*, 12.2 (1978), pp. 248–267.

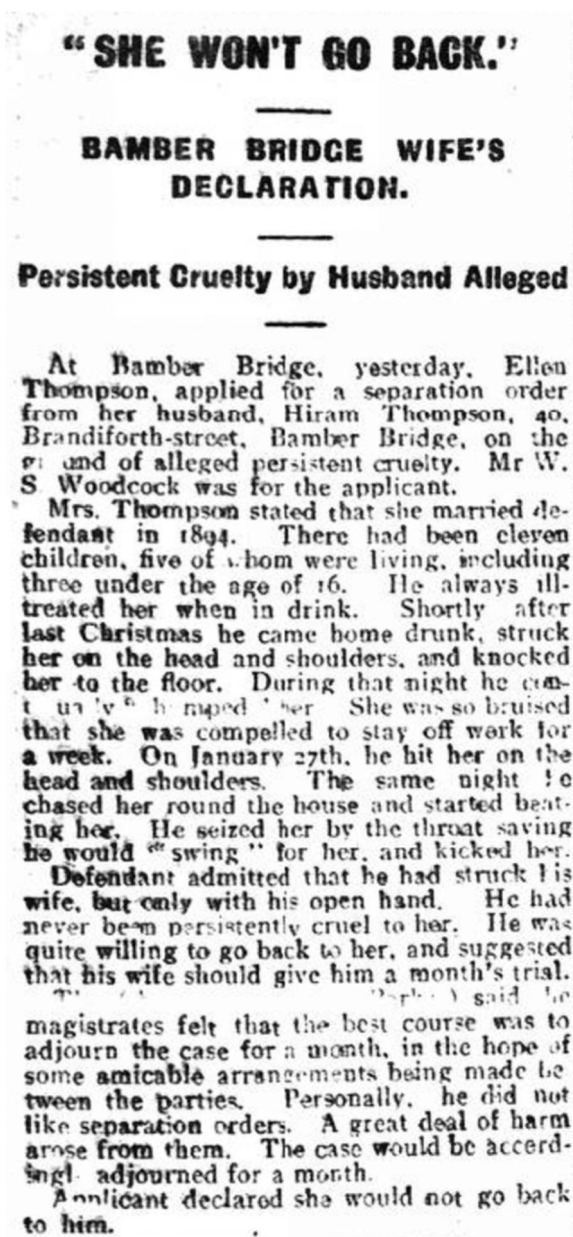


FIGURE 4. Newspaper article detailing Mrs Thompson's separation order from her husband, *Preston Herald*, 12 February 1916.

1894 and baptised all of their children as Catholics according to local parish registers. The 1916 newspaper article confirms that the violence Mr Thompson perpetrated on the day he murdered his wife was neither a one-off nor accidental but the result of years-long abuse that the local authorities failed to prevent from becoming

fatal. Mrs Thompson attempted to protect herself by invoking the legal mechanism of a separation order, but it failed as a practical intervention.

Separation orders for the working class neither dissolved the marriage nor made much practical difference in reducing contact because husbands could still approach their wives unless the order specifically included a non-molestation clause, but these were rare during the period. Women almost always relied on male wages or community goodwill to survive. For example, during the inquest into Mrs Thompson's death, her son John claimed that his father "used to carry on" because his mother could not pay her way and that his father "wanted to keep all his wages."³¹ John recalled that when his father was last employed in August 1921, he earned £6 a week but only gave Mrs Thompson 28 shillings of it, which was the biggest amount he had ever handed to her. John also recalled that some weeks his father paid his mother 17 shillings, and some weeks nothing, creating unstable financial circumstances for the family.³² Mrs Thompson ran the household and occasionally nursed a neighbour's baby for income, but as late as the beginning of April 1922, John recalled giving his father a "thrashing" because he witnessed him swearing at his mother because of her inability to get work.³³ With children to feed and little alternative support, women following through with a separation order risked destitution, especially given that local poor relief authorities sometimes viewed a woman who left her husband as undeserving if a man was alive and technically responsible.

The 1916 article provides further insight on judicial attitudes towards separation orders during the period. During the inquest regarding the allegations of abuse, Mr Thompson suggested that Mrs Thompson "should give him a month's trial" and that "he was quite willing to go back to her."³⁴ Despite Mrs Thompson asserting that "she would not go back to him", the magistrates accepted Mr Thompson's suggestion and adjourned the case for a month, "in the hope of some amicable arrangements being made."³⁵ The reporter recalled the magistrate announcing that "personally, he did not like separation orders" as "a great deal of harm arose from them."³⁶ Despite Mrs Thompson's insistence that she wished not to continue living with her husband because of the abuse he inflicted, the magistrate dismissed her experiences in favour of maintaining marital unity, with no explanation in the article of exactly what "harm" separation orders caused. Situating the 1916 article within the context of the subsequent murder reveals a significant insight into the period as it confirms a pervasive normalisation of domestic violence and an ongoing resistance to separation orders as temporary measures to prevent further abuse. This judicial resistance acted in the Thompson case as a barrier to Mrs Thompson gaining relief from the violence. By succumbing to Mr Thompson's suggestion by adjourning the case, the magistrate effectively enabled the violence to continue, which culminated in Mrs Thompson's murder six years later.

Limitations in enforceability also stifled separation orders by relying on local police and magistrates. In a context where men overwhelmingly occupied these roles,

³¹ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 3 May 1922.

³² *Lancashire Daily Post*, 2 May 1922.

³³ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 3 May 1922.

³⁴ *Preston Herald*, 12 February 1916.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

women had fewer sympathetic ears who could relate to the impact of domestic abuse. Carrying over from the Victorian period, law enforcement often sympathised with the notion of the ‘temperamental working man’ whose irregular employment causing financial worries or long hours labouring drove him to drink.³⁷ Police officers and wider society frequently interpreted domestic violence during the period as a private matter unless it produced visible injury or scandal. The Thompson case exemplifies this mentality: not until Mr Thompson’s abuse caused his wife’s death did law enforcement and wider society take serious notice of his abuse. Yet, under these circumstances, Mrs Thompson had already paid the ultimate price of hopeless endurance based on the false promise that her husband would change. Courts and communities thus normalised low-level domestic abuse, intervening only when it became sensational, with no recognition of the emotional abuse that often coexists with the physical. These cultural, emotional and legal entrapments resonate strongly with the words of scholars like Louise Jackson and Elizabeth Foyster on the historical manifestation of coercive control: domination sustained through fear, guilt and obligation rather than constant physical force.³⁸

Women’s lack of awareness of their rights and the intimidation many felt in approaching an unreceptive system cemented the ineffectiveness of separation orders during the period. Historians, including Jackson, have shown that early twentieth-century women often had no clear understanding of what protection the law theoretically offered them. Before legislative changes, the process for obtaining a separation order was bureaucratic and intimidating, requiring women to appear before a bench of male magistrates, often in public, with no state-funded legal advisers or social workers to explain the process.³⁹ While local newspapers occasionally reported on separation cases, they rarely explained the rights behind them. The lack of schooling beyond elementary level combined with the authority of male-dominated institutions meant that women’s voices carried little legal weight. Instead, separations often remained informal. Many wives simply left the marital home for some time, staying with relatives or friends until their husbands or family persuaded them to return. Mr Thompson’s success in persuading Mrs Thompson to return exemplifies a familiar cycle of emotional abuse alongside physical violence.

Besides the legal and practical reasons for the ineffectiveness of separation orders, there was a definitive emphasis during the period on married couples reconciling, positioning the loss of respectability as a consequence of separation and divorce. Principles such as ‘keeping the home together’ were inseparable from respectability. All levels of society—from religious institutions to family and neighbours to courts—urged reconciliation, echoing the pervasive belief that a woman’s duty was to make the best of a bad husband.⁴⁰ The press framed returning to the husband as the

³⁷ A. James Hammerton, ‘The Targets of ‘Rough Music’: Respectability and Domestic Violence in Victorian England’, *Gender and History*, 3.1 (1991), pp. 23–44.

³⁸ Louise Jackson, ‘Women professionals and the regulation of violence in interwar Britain’, in *Everyday Violence in Britain, 1850–1950* (London, 2000), pp. 118–135; Elizabeth Foyster, ‘At the limits of liberty: married women and confinement in eighteenth-century England’, *Continuity and Change*, 17.1 (2002), pp. 39–62.

³⁹ Thane, *History and Family Policy*, p.44.

⁴⁰ Pat Thane, ‘Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England’, *Women’s History Review*, 20.1 (2011), pp. 11–29.

woman's 'right' and 'forgiving' choice to uphold family respectability and community stability, with the LDP reporter reflecting this belief in how they described Mrs Thompson as "a good, hard-working woman" and treated Mr Thompson's drinking problem as a moral weakness that his wife learned to endure throughout their 27-year marriage.⁴¹ Mrs Thompson's inability to secure permanent separation was likely not only a matter of the law's weakness but of women's limited awareness of, and faith in, the law's protection. Working-class wives during the interwar period occupied a world where legal rights existed in theory, but economic dependence, patriarchal authority and communal codes of respectability obscured them. In this moral economy, to seek justice was to risk shame, and ignorance of rights itself became a mechanism of control. The Thompson case exemplifies an entrenched pattern of coercive control, typical of working-class domestic violence scenarios where the wife's economic dependence on the husband, community pressure and moral expectations of female endurance made leaving a marriage almost impossible. Reflecting this attitude, the press framed the killing as the result of long, simmering domestic tensions that drew in multiple family members but failed to acknowledge the structural conditions that enabled the violence to continue.⁴²

Alcoholism and Irregular Employment: Insights from the Inquest

Lieutenant Colonel Harold Parker opened the inquest into Mrs Thompson's death on 26 April, which was briefly postponed before being resumed on 2 May.⁴³ The inquest proved true several circulating rumours, turning a private family tragedy into a public moral event. Held at Bamber Bridge Police Station, the inquest exposed behaviour that occurred in a household for public consumption, with the suffering of the Thompson children becoming a civic spectacle.

On the first day, Ellen May, burst into tears after realising her father was present and refused his attempt to shake her hand: "She made no effort to reach her father, and said, 'No. What did you do, father?'"⁴⁴ The coroner's language and the reporter's narration invited readers to experience this as an emotional confrontation rather than just testimony. The inquest became a stage for familial judgement—the children enacted moral outrage and grief on the community's behalf. After the inquest resumed, the judgement intensified when the two eldest Thompson children gave their testimonies. John leaned forwards and yelled at his father: "Let me get at you coward, you, sitting there grinning like that. You won't sit there grinning at me like that if I can get at you. I will give you something! You ought to have been hung up by the neck long before this came off."⁴⁵ Highlighting the role of alcohol in the domestic violence Mr Thompson committed, Priscilla recalled her father "was frequently the worse for drink, and had never followed any regular employment."⁴⁶

⁴¹ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 2 May 1922.

⁴² *Liverpool Echo*, 13 May 1922.

⁴³ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 2 May 1922.

⁴⁴ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 27 April 1922.

⁴⁵ *Halifax Evening Courier*, 3 May 1922.

⁴⁶ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 2 May 1922.

While abstinence organisations like the Band of Hope were still active, by the interwar period, the temperance movement had lost much of its political strength.⁴⁷ Instead, the apparent success of First World War restrictions on alcohol drove ‘new moderationism’, with medical experts and new policy approaches emphasising moderate drinking as the solution rather than total abstinence.⁴⁸ In Lancashire specifically, while the temperance movement maintained a strong influence, with its origins tied to Preston, pubs remained important social spaces. Looking at the Thompson case, two local pubs—the Mackenzie Arms and the Hospital Inn—featured heavily in the account as places that Mr Thompson frequented as refuges.⁴⁹ Even shortly after murdering his wife, Mr Thompson went to the Mackenzie Arms for what he described as “the last pint I shall ever have in Bamber Bridge.”⁵⁰ Drunkenness and its impact on families continued to be prevalent concerns in Lancashire and wider British society during the period. In the LDP reports, alcohol appears repeatedly as the socially intelligible cause of the Thompson murder—the reason that makes sense of an otherwise unbelievable act. This allowed the wider community to situate violence within a moral narrative of loss of self-control, rather than structural conditions that normalised or enabled domestic abuse. Alcohol functioned as a culturally accepted idiom for explaining male violence—both condemning and excusing it. It rendered domestic brutality morally comprehensible within existing gender norms, reflected in linking drink to irregular employment. An article in *The People* dated 7 May focusing on the inquest reported John said that his mother “had put them out to nurse while she went to work” as his father “would lie in bed for days at a time”, with memories of his father “thrashing and kicking” his mother “when he wanted all his money for himself.”⁵¹

This dual condition—idleness and intoxication—violated the core ideals of respectable working-class masculinity: steady work, provision for the family and self-discipline. In interwar industrial Lancashire, masculinity was built around the rhythm of labour and the local pub as a controlled site of male sociability. Thompson’s unregulated drinking, outside that pattern, symbolised social decay. Despite the waning of the temperance movement by the interwar period, the LDP drew upon residual temperance vocabulary by emphasising Thompson’s drinking, offering readers a familiar moral script in which they could understand violence as the tragic consequence of male intemperance rather than the more unusual notions of systemic inequality and the coercive control of his wife that are less likely to have resonated with readers.

Domestic Violence and Gendered Expectations in Britain, 1918–1939

Domestic violence was an underlying issue in British society during the interwar period, with social stigma, limited legal recourse for victims and discriminatory laws

⁴⁷ Susannah Mary Bailey, ‘*Teetotal and Proud*’: *Preston and the Band of Hope Movement, 1847–1939* (unpublished MA thesis, University of Central Lancashire, 2019).

⁴⁸ Ryosuke Yokoe, ‘New moderationism: medical discourses on alcohol and the decline of drunkenness in interwar Britain’, *Modern British History*, 36 (2025), pp. 1–17.

⁴⁹ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 2 May 1922.

⁵⁰ *Sunday Express*, 14 May 1922.

⁵¹ *The People*, 7 May 1922.

concealing its true scale.⁵² While extreme cases of cruelty and homicide received widespread public attention, the true extent of the violence went unreported, leaving female victims to endure abusive marriages and the reality of the problem concealed.⁵³ This was because of a combination of socio-legal reasons that carried over from attitudes to violence by men against women in the nineteenth century: (1) the lack of independent employment and property rights for women; (2) unsympathetic social attitudes towards claims of abuse; (3) the emphasis on reconciliation from religious and communal structures; and (4) the social perception of divorce as a scandalous last resort that was otherwise difficult to secure legally because of the expense.⁵⁴

In her 2015 work, Julie-Marie Strange argues that for the late Victorian and Edwardian working class, fatherhood was central to masculine respectability—not only as economic provision, but as moral authority, care and emotional self-restraint.⁵⁵ British society measured this emotional discipline—controlling anger, the compulsion to drink alcohol and sexual impulse—through how a man handled emotion within the home. Strange shows that working-class men located their dignity in the domestic sphere, not only through labour.⁵⁶ The home was where they exercised moral stewardship and expressed affection. These expectations persisted into the interwar period, positioning respectable masculinity as both economic and emotional discipline.⁵⁷ She explicitly notes how anger and violence within the home marked a failure of masculine self-discipline and thus of moral respectability, arguing also that the breadwinner ideal which underpinned male respectability was aspirational rather than universal.⁵⁸ Mr Thompson juxtaposes Strange's framing by representing the antithesis of the period's masculine ideals. Scholarship on interwar Britain has repeatedly highlighted how older Victorian and Edwardian moral codes continued to shape classed and gendered perceptions of domestic violence.⁵⁹ The Thompson case, though local, illuminates these wider cultural continuities.

Although domestic violence was visible in courts and newspapers, mainstream political debates rarely framed it as a systemic social problem until the resurgence of feminist activism in the 1970s.⁶⁰ Despite women's rights progressing because of the recognition they received for their contributions during the First World War,

⁵² Annmarie Hughes, 'Working class culture, family life and domestic violence on Clydeside, c1918–1939: a view from below', *Scottish Tradition*, 27 (2002), pp. 60–61, 65, 67.

⁵³ Jan Lambert and Pat Ayers, 'Marriage Relations, Money, and Domestic Violence in Working-Class Liverpool, 1919–1939', in *Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850–1940* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 195–219.

⁵⁴ Martin J. Wiener, *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 9–39, 289–292.

⁵⁵ Julie-Marie Strange, *Fatherhood and the British Working Class, 1865–1914* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 3–6, 38–42.

⁵⁶ Strange, *Fatherhood and the British Working Class*, pp. 34–37.

⁵⁷ Julie-Marie Strange, 'Fathers at Home: Life Writing and Late-Victorian and Edwardian Plebeian Domestic Masculinities', *Gender & History*, 27 (2015), pp. 703–717.

⁵⁸ Strange, *Fatherhood and the British Working Class*, pp. 5, 118–121.

⁵⁹ Clive Emsley, 'Violent crime in England in 1919: post-war anxieties and press narratives', *Continuity and Change*, 23 (2008), pp. 173–195; Lizzie Seal and Alexa Neale, '“In His Passionate Way”: Emotion, Race and Gender in Cases of Partner Murder in England and Wales, 1900–39', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 60 (2020), pp. 811–829.

⁶⁰ Leigh Goodmark, 'The Anti-Rape and Battered Women's Movements of the 1970s and 1980s', in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminism and Law in the United States* (Oxford, 2021), pp. 220–239.

attitudes from the Victorian period—such as male authority within the home, female submission and obedience, and domestic violence stereotyped as a problem endemic to the lower classes—persisted well into the twentieth century.⁶¹ Unless it turned fatal, domestic violence went unreported and unpunished, with the authorities seeing it as a private dispute between a couple in which they could not intervene because of the prevailing mentality of male autonomy in the management of his household and marriage.⁶² However, newly enfranchised women took up domestic violence as a persistent issue, including feminists and suffragists, who saw securing the right of women above the age of 30 to vote as an essential step in reducing abuse, thus removing the sexual double standard and campaigning for equal divorce rights.⁶³ However, issues related to domestic violence often remained secondary points in suffrage campaigns compared to poor maternity care and unequal access to employment, pay and education because these affected the mass of women. While this might suggest that domestic violence was uncommon, Carolyn Conley has shown that it was endemic in Britain, pointing instead to it becoming normalised and socially embedded to such a degree that it went mostly unreported.⁶⁴

The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 allowed women to become solicitors and to be appointed as magistrates and to juries, but the act's purpose was not just to open up employment opportunities.⁶⁵ Influenced by years of campaigning by women's rights advocates and organisations, the British government designed the act to ensure that women involved in marital or family cases were no longer sitting alone in courts otherwise wholly populated by men.⁶⁶ It is noteworthy that the Thompson murder took place during a period of legislative reform. In 1922, the level of maintenance under a separation order increased from just two pounds per week (which many husbands evaded paying). Three years later, the British government expanded the grounds on which a woman could secure a separation order to include cruelty and habitual drunkenness, with women also no longer required to leave the marital home to secure an order.⁶⁷ In the same year, more legislative changes enabled women to apply for a court order, giving them custody over their children, provided they were legally married.⁶⁸ Widespread press coverage of not only the extremity of the violence wives faced but, crucially, how this was often the culmination of years of abuse no doubt fuelled the legislative changes and the shift in public attitudes. The legislative reforms shaped Mr Thompson's trial given that three women were present

⁶¹ Rebecca Crites, *Husbands' Violence against Wives in England and Wales, 1914–1939: A Review of Contemporary Understandings of and Responses to Men's Marital Violence* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2016), p. 6.

⁶² Shani D'Cruze and Louise A. Jackson, *Women, Crime and Justice in England Since 1660* (London, 2009), p. 11.

⁶³ Pat Thane, *Happy families? History and Family Policy* (London, 2010), p. 43.

⁶⁴ Carolyn Conley, *Certain Other Countries: Homicide, Gender, and National Identity in Late Nineteenth-Century England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales* (Columbus, Ohio, 2007), pp. 78–90, 197–201.

⁶⁵ Mari Takayanagi, 'Sacred year or broken reed? The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919', *Women's History Review*, 29 (2020), pp. 563–582.

⁶⁶ Audrey Cartron, *Women in the Police Forces in Britain: 1880–1931* (Université Paris Diderot, 2015), pp. 46–64.

⁶⁷ Thane, *History and Family Policy*, p. 43.

⁶⁸ Thane, *History and Family Policy*, p. 44.

on the jury, which is legally, socially and symbolically significant.⁶⁹ Given that most counties often selected all-male panels out of habit or prejudice, to have three women among the twelve jurors at a provincial assizes murder trial was novel. Their presence symbolised the tentative entry of women into the machinery of justice—a domain that had long excluded them even during judgements on crimes against women. Their inclusion carried symbolic weight because it subtly challenged the male monopoly on defining justice in the home, even if verdicts still reflected prevailing patriarchal assumptions. The courts expected female jurors to bring moral sympathy and domestic insight—qualities seen as appropriate for judging ‘women’s cases.’⁷⁰ Their presence reassured readers that justice would include compassion and authority. Yet, this is not to say that even with legislative reform that violence against women disappeared.

Initially considering the Ruxton murders of 1935 as a comparative case to the Thompson murder will illustrate gendered expectations, as well as class and race distinctions in the public discourse on domestic violence during the period. Dr Buck Ruxton (1899–1936), a Parsee and general practitioner living in Lancaster, murdered his common-law wife Isabella Ruxton and their maid Mary Rogerson, dismembered their bodies and discarded them in Moffat, Dumfriesshire, in September 1935.⁷¹ The Ruxton murders became one of the most sensational British murder trials in the interwar period because it was the first case in Britain to use a wide range of forensic techniques to identify the victims. Ruxton’s identity as a respectable professional heavily juxtaposed the violence he committed.⁷² Like the Thompson case, the Ruxton murders exposed the assumptions of respectability and the fragility of patriarchal self-control within a northern English domestic sphere. However, this is not a straightforward comparison. While the press and courts explained Mr Thompson’s violence as working-class disorder resulting from irregular employment and alcohol abuse, Ruxton’s was the shocking collapse of a fragile, racialised respectability. Any comparison must acknowledge that class and profession, but also race, shaped Ruxton’s public identity. As a man of colour occupying a medical role during interwar Britain, Ruxton’s respectability was always contingent and precarious. Contemporary fascination with the case stemmed less from Ruxton embodying unimpeachable middle-class respectability than from the dramatic unravelling of a carefully maintained social persona that unsettled racialised and classed assumptions.

Another difference between the cases is that the Thompson murder took place in a working-class environment, while the Ruxton case was middle-class. Nevertheless, habitual domestic abuse—featuring wives undecided over whether to stay because of the complexity of the decision or who found leaving an abusive husband difficult because of structural constraints—appeared in both cases, highlighting that domestic violence transcends class. It is also noteworthy that alcohol played a more prominent

⁶⁹ *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, 15 May 1922.

⁷⁰ Judith Bourne, ‘Great expectations and hard times: the advent of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 and women’s entry to the legal profession’, *Women’s History Review*, 32 (2023), pp. 793–808.

⁷¹ Jeremy Craddock, *The Jigsaw Murders: The True Story of the Ruxton Killings and the Birth of Modern Forensics* (Cheltenham, 2021), pp. 2–10.

⁷² Shani D’Cruze, ‘Intimacy, Professionalism and Domestic Homicide in Interwar Britain: the Case of Buck Ruxton’, *Women’s History Review*, 16 (2007), pp. 701–722.

role in the Thompson case, especially in how the media portrayed it. While witnesses described Mr Thompson's abuse as fuelled by alcohol, a rabid need for control over his wife motivated Dr Ruxton.⁷³ The Thompson case exemplifies male failure—unemployment, alcoholism, devoid of respectability—while the Ruxton case reflects male over-control—jealousy, status anxiety and paranoia. However, what links the cases is the 'loss of self-control' framing: violence occurred whenever Mr Thompson was "worse for drink"⁷⁴ while jealousy and rage caused momentary madness in Dr Ruxton.⁷⁵ Through this framing, male 'loss of self-control' remained in both cases the accepted explanation for the homicides. However, where the cases depart is in how Dr Ruxton went to great lengths to conceal his crime while Mr Thompson made almost no attempt and, on the contrary, admitted to Inspector Blenkinson, who took him into custody: "Mr Inspector, I am not sorry. She deserved all she's got."⁷⁶

While at trial the defence for Dr Ruxton insisted that his wife and housemaid were still alive and that he was being framed—an argument that relied on the perceived absurdity that a well-educated medical professional could commit such crimes—Mr Thompson's defence rested on the more familiar claim of provocation. Both men were nonetheless sentenced to death, with the sentences carried out at Strangeways Prison in Manchester, after Ruxton's appeal was unsuccessful.⁷⁷ Ruxton's insistence that the victims were still alive, rather than representing a privileged legal strategy, underscores the absence of culturally available explanations that might render his violence intelligible. Unlike Thompson, whose actions were explained through drink, temper and unemployment, Ruxton's violence resisted familiar moral narratives and, given the precariousness of his professional respectability as a man of colour, was framed as pathological and aberrant. Thus, the value of the Ruxton comparison lies not in opposing working-class degeneracy to middle-class privilege, but in highlighting how domestic homicides were interpreted differently depending on whether violence was understood as socially familiar or socially unthinkable. The Bamber Bridge uxoricide forms part of a longer interwar narrative in which domestic violence repeatedly challenged the moral certainties of respectability. Thirteen years later, the Ruxton murders rehearsed many of the same cultural anxieties—the collapse of masculine self-control, the violation of domestic sanctity and the press's transformation of private tragedy into moral spectacle—while also exposing how gendered, classed and racialised moral codes shaped the interpretation of violence.

To illustrate how respectability functioned in cases less racially layered, it is useful to consider an additional comparative example such as Crippen (1910). The Crippen case provides an early example of the unravelling of respectable, professional masculinity: Hawley Harvey Crippen, an American homeopathic practitioner living in London, poisoned and dismembered his wife before concealing her remains in their

⁷³ S.M. Rabson, 'The Ruxton Case Revisited', *Laboratory Medicine*, 1 (1970), pp. 21–23.

⁷⁴ *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 13 May 1922.

⁷⁵ Shani D'Cruze, 'Intimacy, Professionalism and Domestic Homicide in Interwar Britain: the case of Buck Ruxton', *Women's History Review*, 16 (2007), pp. 701–722.

⁷⁶ *The People*, 7 May 1922.

⁷⁷ Robertson Crichton, 'Rex v. Buck Ruxton Manchester Winter Assizes, 1936', *Medico-Legal Journal*, 4 (1936), pp. 144–158.

cellar.⁷⁸ Early press coverage framed the case through curiosity and initial assumptions of Crippen's respectability, but when he fled Britain to the U.S. with his lover, the narrative shifted, recasting his violence as aberrant and pathological rather than socially explicable through alcohol, unemployment or poverty.⁷⁹ What this additional comparative case reiterates is that the press and courts framed middle-class violence by white males who appeared respectable as morally unintelligible and therefore detached it from social explanation while the press and courts could explain Mr Thompson's working-class violence through alcohol abuse and unemployment.

Using the Thompson murder as a case study from Lancashire highlights a regional distinctiveness that contributes to the national historiography. Unlike national newspapers, the LDP wrote for local readers who might have known the Thompsons or were embedded in the same northern, industrial communities. This produces in the account of the Thompson murder an emphasis on moral closure that portrayed Mr Thompson as an outlier among otherwise respectable households, and used unemployment and alcohol to explain his behaviour in a way that dismissed domestic violence as socially embedded. Coupling this with the existing historiography that industrial-northern working-class communities commonly articulated masculinity through labour, pub culture and respectable self-control presents the North of England as regionally distinctive in this context. The work of David Gutzke, Sonya Rose and Camilla Schofield solidifies this. In his 1994 work, Gutzke treats pubs as classed and gendered spaces in the early twentieth century, positioning drinking culture as a lens through which communities explained disorder, morality and respectability.⁸⁰ While Rose's work focuses on Lancashire in the late Victorian period, her efforts show how communities integrated masculinity with respectability. Not only does this highlight the persistent influence of Victorian and Edwardian moral codes into the interwar period, but it strongly suggests that the regional working-class discourse framed masculinity through discipline, moral judgement and regular employment, manifesting in narratives such as the breadwinner ideal.⁸¹ Layering this with Schofield's more recent research on working men's clubs and "muscular masculinity", in which she uses communities in Lancashire and Yorkshire as examples, shows that local masculine identity had already become tied to male-only sociability, respectability and emotional independence by the mid-twentieth century.⁸² Taken together, this scholarship helps explain why the LDP framed Mr Thompson's violence as a deviation from respectability—made legible through alcohol abuse and irregular work—and why reporters sought closure rather than confronting domestic abuse as a deeply embedded social issue.

⁷⁸ Julie English Early, 'A New Man for a New Century: Dr. Crippen and the Principles of Masculinity', in *Disorder in the Court: Trials and Sexual Conflict at the Turn of the Century* (London, 1999), pp. 209–230.

⁷⁹ Mark S. Connelly, *Crime News in Modern Britain: Press Reporting and Responsibility, 1820–2010* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 85–112.

⁸⁰ David W. Gutzke, 'Gender, Class, and Public Drinking in Britain During the First World War', *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 27 (1994), pp. 367–391.

⁸¹ Sonya O. Rose, 'Respectable Men, Disorderly Others: The Language of Gender and the Lancashire Weavers' Strike of 1878 in Britain', *Gender & History*, 5 (1993), pp. 382–397.

⁸² Camilla Schofield, 'In Defence of White Freedom: Working Men's Clubs and the Politics of Sociability in Late Industrial England', *Twentieth Century British History*, 34 (2023), pp. 515–551.

Class, Gender and Shame: Insights from the Trial, Sentencing and Execution

The trial of Mr Thompson for the wilful murder of his wife took place on 13 May, and it ended with a unanimous guilty verdict from the jury and capital sentencing. However, the dramatic events of the trial and how a journalist portrayed them provide several additional insights about how class, gendered expectations and respectability intersected in this case. An LDP reporter observed the trial and made verbatim notes on the proceedings, titling his article published the same evening, “Doom of the Bamber Bridge Murderer.”⁸³

The reporter began the article by describing Mr Thompson in the dock, wearing “his working clothes and neither collar, tie, nor muffler, his cotton shirt being unbuttoned at the neck.”⁸⁴ By describing his clothing, the reporter immediately contrasts Mr Thompson with the formal setting of the courtroom. He is visibly working-class and socially out of place. In early twentieth-century Britain, dress was a language of class identity; to appear in “working clothes” in court suggested not simply poverty but impropriety and lack of self-discipline. The reporter used attire as a moral shorthand—equating outward appearance with inner character, reinforcing the link between social class, poverty and criminality. Describing Mr Thompson’s clothing encoded the social and moral hierarchies that structured the trial, with the absence of a collar marking him as a man outside respectability. For the prosecution, Mr Wooll described the setup of the Thompson household, who was present in the house on the day of the murder, who discovered the dead body and the injuries inflicted. The counsel then described the scene of the murder, giving some brief comments on Mr and Mrs Thompson’s “unhappy married life”, before retracing Mr Thompson’s movements on the day, including his arrest by PS O’Toole in the evening.⁸⁵ Afterwards, the trial focused on testimony from several individuals: Mr and Mrs Thompson’s eldest daughter, Priscilla, and eldest son, John; Mr and Mrs Thompson’s neighbour, Elizabeth Darwin, who saw Mrs Thompson in her backyard minutes before the murder; PC Nuttall, the first officer to arrive at the murder scene; Dr Lever, who examined Mrs Thompson’s body shortly after her death; Alfred Greenhalgh, the licensee of the Mackenzie’s Arms; and Henry Wilson, a friend and in whose garden Mr Thompson was arrested.

The most striking feature of the 13 May article is the correspondent’s decision to quote Mr Thompson in his vernacular, situating him in a Lancashire working-class identity but also marginalising him as below the threshold of respectability. The reporter’s choice not to paraphrase the dialect shows that this is not a polished redaction but a more authentic portrayal of the events that took place at the assizes. The judge requiring Mr Thompson to clarify what he meant by the word ‘tommy’ distanced him further from the others in the courtroom. However, the LDP correspondent’s choice to give attention to Mr Thompson’s dialect raises whether the reporter aimed to establish a class narrative. It appears as though including the dialect played into the long-embedded Victorian and Edwardian stereotype that

⁸³ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 13 May 1922.

⁸⁴ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 13 May 1922.

⁸⁵ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 13 May 1922.

domestic violence was a social issue confined to the working class.⁸⁶ In the mid-nineteenth century, middle-class reformers and social commentators (often male magistrates, clergy or philanthropists) began describing wife-beating as a symptom of working-class immorality, reinforced by poverty and pub culture. Even reformers like Josephine Butler and Frances Power Cobbe, who campaigned against cruelty to wives, described it as a vice of “the lower orders.”⁸⁷ This stereotype persisted into the interwar period, with the press often explaining domestic homicides among the working class as tragedies of alcoholism and poverty, whereas when men from higher-class backgrounds killed their wives, the explanation shifted to jealousy and that courts and the press later pathologised as insanity.⁸⁸

The Thompson case exemplifies a collapse of the breadwinner ideal, tying it to expectations of masculinity during the period. The breadwinner ideal crystallised in the mid-nineteenth century after industrialisation reorganised working and family life. It changed from men, women and children working together in cottage industries or on farms to separating men with waged labour in the public sphere and women with unpaid care roles in the private sphere.⁸⁹ The moral expectation became that a respectable man would earn enough to support his wife and children without her entering paid work, linking masculinity to provision, self-discipline and patriarchal authority.⁹⁰ Employers, unions and the state all supported this male breadwinner model, with social policy assuming that men should be the wage earners, supported by marriage and property laws that enshrined men as the head of the household. Despite social change after the First World War—recognition of women’s wartime work, partial suffrage, rising unemployment—the male breadwinner ideal persisted as a normative model of manhood.⁹¹ As John Tosh argues, the breadwinner ideal was not merely economic but moral—defining a man’s worth through steady labour and domestic responsibility.⁹² In the Thompson case, Mr Thompson represented the antithesis of the male breadwinner: his employment was irregular; he often withheld what money he made from his wife, failing to support the running of the household; used alcohol as a crutch; and both emotionally and physically abused his wife, including in front of their children.⁹³ Mr Thompson upended the breadwinner ideal, but he was not an outlier. Instead, he exposed the fragility of the ideal, its contradictions and the social structures that enabled it.

Judge George Branson issuing capital punishment (see [Figure 5](#)) against Mr Thompson is a significant outcome. After the Judgement of Death Act of 1823 made capital punishment discretionary for most felonies except treason and murder, and

⁸⁶ Anne-Marie Kilday, ‘Just Who Was Wearing the Trousers in Victorian Britain? Violent Wives and Violent Women’, *Cahiers Victoriens & Édouardiens*, 71 (2005), pp. 57–72.

⁸⁷ Frances Power Cobbe, ‘Wife-Torture in England’, *The Contemporary Review*, 32 (1878), pp. 55–87.

⁸⁸ Victoria Stewart, *Crime Writing in Interwar Britain: Fact and Fiction in the Golden Age* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 25–62.

⁸⁹ John Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven, CT, 1999), pp. 1–8.

⁹⁰ Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, ‘The Origins and Expansion of the Male Breadwinner Family: The Case of Nineteenth-Century Britain’, *International Review of Social History*, 42 (1997), pp. 25–64.

⁹¹ Michael Doolittle, *Fatherhood and Family Shame: Masculinity, Welfare and the British Labouring Poor, 1870–1939* (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2009), pp. 28–30.

⁹² John Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (1999), pp. 77–83.

⁹³ *Ormskirk Advertiser*, 18 May 1922.



FIGURE 5. Newspaper headline announcing Mr Thompson's sentencing, *Liverpool Evening Express*, 13 May 1922.

the Punishment of Death and related Acts of 1832 abolished execution for many property offences—including housebreaking, livestock theft and forgery—murder remained one of the few crimes for which death by hanging was still mandatory.⁹⁴ Mr Thompson's trial exemplified the trend during the period of the British press framing domestic homicides as 'morality plays.'⁹⁵ The death penalty represented the

⁹⁴ Rebecca M. Good, 'The Unwavering Movement: Integrating Reason into British Penal Code 1730–1823', *International ResearchScape Journal*, 6 (2019), pp. 17–18.

⁹⁵ Bingham, *Family Newspapers?*, pp. 25–30, 115–118.

ultimate form of justice in the ‘morality play’, but one that was often ‘too little, too late.’ If the local authorities had not prioritised Mr Thompson’s authority over Mrs Thompson’s safety in 1916, they might have prevented the violence from escalating. There was also a clear disparity in the law’s application along gender lines during the interwar period. Women found it more difficult to secure leniency through provocation, and their counsels often encouraged them to take pleas of insanity to avoid a murder conviction. The Infanticide Act 1922 created a distinct offence for mothers who killed their infants where “the balance of [the mother’s] mind was disturbed” because of childbirth or lactation, enabling courts to return verdicts equivalent to manslaughter rather than murder as it was only after the Homicide Act 1957 that diminished responsibility as a defence to murder became available.⁹⁶ This legislative development shows that the interwar period witnessed a significant change in how the law conceptualised gender, culpability and domestic homicide, even as the normalisation of domestic abuse persisted.

Executions were a symbolic restoration of the patriarchal order. While on the surface, the public might have perceived death sentences as achieving justice, they in fact reaffirmed the moral system that produced the violence.⁹⁷ Mr Thompson’s murder of his wife represented a collapse of male self-control, while his execution publicly reasserted patriarchal order but through the authority of the state. In effect, one form of male violence (domestic) was superseded in this case by another (judicial); Mr Thompson’s private power was replaced by the state’s sanctioned power. For a culture deeply invested in public morality, execution was also expiation, and the emotional and moral closure to the ‘morality play’ in the public imagination. The way the LDP reporter framed the law as having been “quick work by the hangman” evoked a sense of justice, albeit too late, a deterrent to other husbands treating their wives similarly and a reassurance to the community that such moral disorder will not be tolerated.⁹⁸ The moral lesson was that the law could reach into the private sphere of the home to discipline the boundaries of acceptable masculine behaviour.

About a minute or two before the clock struck eight on the morning of 30 May, the bell at Strangeways Prison tolled, signalling that Mr Thompson’s execution for the wilful murder of his wife had taken place. The LDP correspondent counted “about 100 people” gathered outside the prison to see the official notification that the executioner had carried out the death sentence, emphasising “a score of women and girls” present, juxtaposing Mr Thompson’s violence against his wife.⁹⁹ However, the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* correspondent counted a crowd of only “sixty or seventy” that was “mainly composed of men on their way to work.”¹⁰⁰ The *Yorkshire Evening Post* reported that “very little public interest was taken in the execution.”¹⁰¹ This variation in how different publications presented Mr

⁹⁶ Daniel J. R. Grey, ‘Women’s Policy Networks and the Infanticide Act 1922’, *Modern British History*, 21.4 (2010), pp. 441–463.

⁹⁷ Lizzie Seal, *Capital Punishment in Twentieth-Century Britain: Audience, Justice, Memory* (London, 2014), pp. 8–32, 77–98.

⁹⁸ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 30 May 1922.

⁹⁹ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 30 May 1922.

¹⁰⁰ *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 30 May 1922.

¹⁰¹ *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 30 May 1922.

Thompson's execution reflects the different moral geographies of the period. For the LDP, the execution represented justice for Mrs Thompson and the wider Thompson family, with the overarching narrative being that the law achieved justice for all women and girls facing violence. For newspapers beyond Lancashire, they almost dismissed the execution as an insignificant event, perhaps reflecting an example of moral distance for readers less impacted emotionally by the crime.¹⁰² Such discrepancies show that regional newspapers continued to stage executions as 'morality plays', while metropolitan outlets increasingly treated them as bureaucratic necessities of justice.

The 'morality play' in press reportage excluded how Mr and Mrs Thompson's children coped after the execution. The anxiety of the press to bring moral closure in their reporting omitted the ruined lives of the Thompson children—displaced, traumatised and three of them orphaned. The Thompson children complicated the moral closure assured through the act of capital punishment because it was difficult to assimilate their long-term trauma—loss of both parents, stigma and poverty—into the narrative arc that the courts served justice. The silence of the newspapers reflects a wider tendency in interwar crime reportage to contain emotion within the spectacle of the courtroom and to deny it beyond the verdict. Newspapers thrived on moral resolution, not on the open-ended suffering that followed. To acknowledge the children's suffering would have unsettled the redemptive logic of the law and the comforting fiction that justice restored order, as the newspapers invited the public to believe.

It is difficult to retrace the lives of the Thompson children immediately after their father's execution, but they appeared to have built comparatively stable households despite the trauma they endured. According to local parish records, the eldest son John married three months later, with his older sister Priscilla and her husband Thomas as witnesses. Whereas John gives his place of residence as School Lane at the time of his marriage near the murder scene, Priscilla and Thomas recorded their place of residence as Clayton Green, which is where Thomas was born. This confirms that the couple moved out of the house on Brandiforth Street during the aftermath of the murder to be closer to Thomas' family, which is where they remained until they died, bearing no offspring. The marriage and death records linked to the Thompsons' middle child, Ellen May, show that she married in 1926 at the Catholic church in Samlesbury and moved to Blackburn. It is likely that Priscilla and Thomas took on the role of looking after her younger siblings, Ellen May (17), Emily (13), and Albert (11). Records for Albert show he later married a woman from Clayton Green, which is also where they settled and raised their two children. The records connected to the Thompson children show they rebuilt their lives by mostly migrating away from Bamber Bridge and forming closer ties to Thomas Warbrick's family at Clayton Green. As a symbol of their attempt to have their family tragedy forgotten, the children buried their mother in an unmarked grave at the local Catholic church in Bamber Bridge.

¹⁰² Dean K. Chatterjee, 'Moral Distance: Introduction', *The Monist*, 86.3 (2003), pp. 327–332.

Conclusion

Analysing the murder of Ellen Thompson in a domestic setting in Bamber Bridge in April 1922 and her husband's subsequent arrest, trial and execution brings to attention several insights about attitudes towards domestic violence during Britain's interwar period, shaped by gendered expectations, respectability and class. Revisiting the case highlights that domestic violence remained an unreported crime that families and neighbours tolerated based on the prevailing belief that it was a husband's right to chastise his wife. The case also reveals that Victorian and Edwardian stereotypes linking domestic violence to the working class persisted into the interwar period despite legal reforms.

By comparing the press's portrayal of Mr Thompson—using broad Lancashire dialect and arriving to his trial wearing his working clothes—with the 1935 case of Dr Buck Ruxton who went to great lengths to conceal his crime and to maintain his fragile respectability as a highly educated and professional man of colour, the article shows how perceptions of class, gender and race in wider British society during the interwar period intersected with defence arguments. Mr Thompson relied on the provocation argument, while Dr Ruxton relied on the claim that the dismembered bodies found were not of his wife and their housemaid, but that he was being framed. Studying the Thompson case also brings to attention the ineffectiveness of separation orders for abused wives during the interwar period and how structural conditions like economic dependence, social stigma of refusing reconciliation and legal barriers enabled domestic violence, reflecting broader trends of the period. The analysis reveals how the press and courts relied on alcohol and the effects of unemployment to explain Mr Thompson's departure from the male breadwinner ideal. The case study therefore reveals the continuity of Victorian and Edwardian moral codes during the interwar period. By re-examining a case from Lancashire through the lens of gender and class, this article contributes to the national historiography by suggesting that regional case studies exhibit distinctiveness and can illuminate broader themes of gendered expectations, class distinctions and respectability, including how local communities experienced, contested and imposed them.

The Thompson uxoricide has some important implications for how historians understand domestic violence, not just in interwar Lancashire but in Britain in the early twentieth century. While close readings of murder cases are a familiar method in social and cultural history, they have often focused on exceptional or sensational crimes. This article examines an 'ordinary' domestic homicide that attracted limited national attention, demonstrating how everyday violence within the home was interpreted through entrenched ideas of class, gender and respectability. The analysis shows that domestic violence functioned not only as a legal or social-policy issue, but as a cultural phenomenon through which communities negotiated and reaffirmed the moralised socioeconomic order. In interwar Lancashire, as the Thompson case suggests, the public interpreted domestic violence through a regional moral culture in which gendered expectations influenced judicial responses, press reporting and local reaction—casting domestic homicides as individual aberrations from the socioeconomic order rather than as products of structural and socially embedded conditions. The LDP correspondent's observation that the law had "taken its dread course"

reinforces this by offering a comforting closure to the public, yet failing to capture the sociocultural undercurrents that often normalised—and could precipitate—domestic violence.

Acknowledgement

The author's family connection to an individual involved first drew his attention to this case. Five years ago, the author discovered that his great-great uncle was Thomas Warbrick, who was the son-in-law of Mr and Mrs Thompson, and whose razor Mr Thompson picked up from the sink and used to slit his wife's throat before throwing it onto the oven grate which the police later discovered. Mr Warbrick had been living with his in-laws at the time the murder occurred with his wife Priscilla, who was Mr and Mrs Thompson's eldest child.

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