

1 Article

2 **'A Shocking State of Domestic Unhappiness': male victims of female violence and**
3 **the courts in late nineteenth century Stafford**

4

5 **Abstract:** Instances where men were the victims of female violence in the past are
6 very difficult to explore, especially when the violence took place in a domestic
7 setting. There is now a notable body of work on violence in the nineteenth century
8 but none that looks specifically at male victims of violence where there was a female
9 perpetrator, and their treatment by the courts. This article goes some way in filling
10 that gap by using data collected in researching female offenders at the end of the
11 nineteenth century in Stafford. It argues that, as with violence where there was a
12 female victim and female perpetrator, the courts and the press were similarly
13 unconcerned and somewhat dismissive of female violence towards men in a
14 domestic setting, thus being unsympathetic towards male victims of female
15 violence.

16 **Key words:** female violence; petty sessions; male victims; domestic violence

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18 'The complainant, whose head was almost concealed in bandages, went into the
19 witness box and declared that he was struck with something and found himself
20 outside the door of his house. He saw the blood-stained table knife [produced] on a
21 table in his house. He believed his wife struck him but was not certain. PC Moss said
22 the prisoner told him she had had a few words with her husband, and he had 'got
23 no more than he asked for' [1].

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26

27 On September 20th 1900, thirty-six year old Eliza Coulson was committed to Stafford
28 prison for two calendar months with hard labour by local magistrates for
29 aggravated assault on her husband. She had pleaded guilty to attacking her husband
30 with a knife [2]. Whilst in the witness box, Eliza 'told the court that her husband
31 locked her out and provoked a quarrel with her. He struck her, and she acted in self-
32 defence. Mr Averill [the magistrates' chairman] said the charge was a serious one of
33 unlawful wounding, which had now been reduced to aggravated assault, and it was
34 fortunate that the wounds inflicted had not proved fatal' [1]. Eliza served her two
35 months in Stafford prison [3], but whether she then went home to Thomas is not
36 clear [4]. Unfortunately, though, a year later, both Eliza and Thomas and their five
37 children were all living in Stafford workhouse [5]. It is difficult to be certain which
38 of the two was the aggressor when Eliza attacked Thomas with a knife, and the
39 police certainly did seem to accept that there was a degree of provocation in
40 reducing the charge. But they did not totally accept Eliza's claim of self-defence and
41 still charged her with aggravated assault; possibly because Eliza had a history of
42 violence whereas Thomas did not. Thomas Coulson never appeared before Stafford

43 magistrates accused of assaulting Eliza, or for any other offence involving violence
44 towards anyone else. From the lack of any prosecutions for violence, we cannot
45 however say he was not violent just that he was never charged. However, Eliza was
46 not a stranger to the court - she had been previously prosecuted for assault. The
47 preceding year Eliza had been twice prosecuted for assault of their neighbours
48 William Holden, the local chimney sweep, and his wife Hannah Holden, for which
49 she served twenty-seven days hard labour in Stafford prison [3].

50 The Coulson's background and circumstances were quite usual for people
51 living in provincial English towns during the late nineteenth century. They were
52 born and raised within a few streets of each other in Stafford and had married in
53 1884 when Eliza was twenty years old [6, 5]. Six months after the birth of their fifth
54 child and after sixteen years of marriage, the fighting between Eliza and Thomas
55 brought the couple to court with this prosecution in 1900. It is possible that this
56 event was a one-off outburst of violence, but it is more likely to have been the
57 culmination of years of discord. Other Stafford couples had similar stories. For
58 example, in February 1892, Alice Follows was sent to Stafford prison for twenty-one
59 days with hard labour for being drunk and disorderly and common assault.
60 However, the local newspaper, *The Staffordshire Advertiser*, revealed the assault was
61 on her husband Edwin Follows and stated that 'the evidence disclosed a shocking
62 state of domestic unhappiness' [7]. Even though Alice and Edwin had seven
63 children, all living with them, it was not the first, nor last, time Alice had been
64 summonsed for assaulting Edwin. Just one month earlier, Alice had been bound
65 over to keep the peace by Stafford magistrates for assaulting her husband.

66 At that latter hearing, Edwin Follows had asked the magistrates if they would
67 grant him a separation order; the magistrates agreed to Edwin's request [8]. Under
68 the 1878 Matrimonial Causes Act, women who were the victims of male violence in
69 marriage were able to seek a protection order from a magistrates' court. It was in
70 effect a judicial separation and gave them custody of their children. Though not a
71 divorce as such, as divorce was almost impossible for working-class couples to
72 secure, it was not costly and so was ostensibly available to working class women.
73 Although the court could technically only agree to a woman's request for a
74 separation order, Stafford magistrates seemingly considered Alice's violence
75 towards Edwin serious enough to use their discretion and grant Edwin a separation
76 order. It seems though that the couple continued to live together as two years later,
77 when Alice was (again) fined for being drunk and disorderly, the police testified that
78 she also 'was very violent, assaulted her husband and threw the furniture into the
79 street' [9]. Similar to Thomas Coulson, Edwin Follows never appeared in court on a
80 charge of assaulting Alice but, unlike Thomas Coulson, by 1899 Edwin had left the
81 matrimonial home due to Alice's 'intemperate conduct' [10].

82 Female violence is one of the hardest crimes to trace in the historical records
83 due to the hidden nature of violence in the home, further complicated by male

84 victims' reticence to report assaults by women and a lack of detail in the records as
85 court registers provide the bare facts of the cases heard, with usually just date of the
86 offence, name of defendant and complainant, and adjudication listed [12]. Examples
87 of violent women though are not unusual - there were several violent women living
88 in Stafford at this time who came before the magistrates accused of assault [13].
89 What was unusual was the clear case of a wife assaulting her husband being
90 prosecuted in court as seen in the case of Eliza Coulson. Undoubtedly, women were
91 prosecuted for violence towards their partners. However, evidence of female
92 violence towards men was more often obtained through detail reported when a
93 woman was prosecuted for a different offence. Drawing on data relating to all events
94 for which women were brought as defendants before the Stafford Borough Petty
95 Sessions, including those subsequently committed to the Quarter Sessions and
96 Assizes, from 1 January 1880 to 31 December 1905 [13], this article discusses cases of
97 violence where there was an adult male victim and a female perpetrator in Stafford,
98 a mid-sized market town in and the county town of Staffordshire, during the last
99 two decades of the nineteenth century and examines how the courts viewed and
100 dealt with such cases. In so doing, this article also discusses general societal and
101 judicial attitudes towards violent women and discusses their male victims' access to
102 justice.

103 Cases of violence, whether committed in the domestic sphere or not and
104 whether perpetrated by men or women, were usually dealt with by magistrates in
105 the Petty Sessions [14] and only serious cases of violence, such as murder and rape
106 for example, were committed to the Quarter Sessions [15] or Assizes [16, 17].
107 Although the data from which this article draws collated the details of all cases
108 where there was a female perpetrator in Stafford, *all* the cases of female violence
109 where there was a male victim that was committed in a domestic context were heard
110 and dealt with by Stafford magistrates; none were committed to the higher court. As
111 with the rest of the country outside London, Assizes courts came to Stafford twice a
112 year, and Quarter Sessions were held four times a year, but Stafford Petty Sessions
113 were normally held each Monday, Wednesday and Friday and were normally
114 chaired by the Mayor of the town [13]. During the nineteenth century, court registers
115 were routinely kept, and the Quarter Sessions and Assizes records have survived in
116 many jurisdictions, although these are registers rather than verbatim reports. Under
117 the 1879 Summary Jurisdiction Act, summary courts were also legally required to
118 keep a register that recorded all convictions and court orders [12], very few of these
119 Petty Sessions records have survived, which makes research on prosecutions in
120 these lower courts very difficult. In Staffordshire, however, the late nineteenth
121 century police records have survived in their entirety and are in good condition [2].
122 As well as being a period that can be researched because the police records have
123 survived, the late Victorian and early Edwardian years make a good time to study
124 female violence towards men as the rate of female offending was statistically
125 declining [18, 19]. Also, despite the low numbers, female offending was a prominent

126 source of anxiety for contemporaries. Such concerns though were mainly related to
127 women committing serious and gendered offences such as for example baby
128 farming and infanticide [20, 21, 22] rather than violent offences [19].

129 From the late twentieth century onwards, violence that occurs in a domestic
130 setting, usually between people living together, is generally included under the
131 umbrella term 'domestic abuse' and includes all such violence where the
132 relationship is between married or co-habiting couple, siblings, father or mother and
133 offspring – generally people living together with a familial bond [23]. From the first
134 twentieth century attempts to implement specific legislation on domestic violence in
135 the United Kingdom starting with the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial
136 Proceedings Act 1976 to the most recent Crime and Security Act 2010 which
137 introduced Domestic Violence Protection Notices and Domestic Violence Protection
138 Orders, the term 'domestic violence' was gradually replaced, in most instances, by
139 'domestic abuse' to better reflect the insidious, controlling and coercive nature of this
140 type of behaviour. Before then, and certainly in the late nineteenth and early
141 twentieth centuries, violence between people with a familial bond was essentially
142 considered a private affair with which others outside the family, including the
143 police, should not be concerned [24]. This did not make such behaviour legal. For
144 example, until the advent of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to
145 Children (NSPCC), poor treatment of children by their parents or guardians was
146 usually dealt with under the ambit of neglect rather than violence or abuse. Indeed,
147 even when the NSPCC was established in 1889, most cases brought by them in the
148 first few decades of their existence continued to be neglect cases [13]. Regarding
149 adults, it was only when serious violence occurred in a domestic context between a
150 man and woman who lived together whether formally married or not that the
151 incident would come to court, and then it was referred to as 'marital violence' [25].

152 When violence between men and women in a domestic relationship occurs, it
153 is usually the case of a man attacking his female partner or ex-partner – at present, in
154 the twenty-first century, around seventy percent of the cases that come to court in
155 England and Wales involve a female victim and a male perpetrator [23]. Although it
156 is difficult to arrive at an accurate figure, similar is roughly true of the late
157 nineteenth century as the majority of female violence cases that came to court
158 involved a male perpetrator and female victim [26, 27]. When such cases were heard,
159 they would often be the end result of severe or prolonged instances of violence as
160 many preceding instances of violence may have been resolved informally, with
161 neighbours and family providing refuge and support, rather than in court, and
162 almost certainly the tip of the iceberg [24].

163 There is now a notable body of work on interpersonal violence in the
164 nineteenth century. Wood [28] has written about changing attitudes towards
165 violence generally in the nineteenth century and Wiener [29] argues that courts came
166 to view serious violence by men against women more and more seriously over the
167 nineteenth century arguing that 'men's violence, particularly against women...was

168 viewed with ever-greater disapproval and treated with ever-greater severity' (p. xii).
169 Similarly, Godfrey, Farrall and Karstedt [30] have written about how late nineteenth
170 century courts viewed and dealt with violent men and women who engaged in
171 interpersonal violence, suggesting that magistrates handed down more convictions
172 and harsher penalties to men involved in 'male' contexts of violence than they did to
173 women involved in 'female' contexts indicating that magistrates aimed their efforts
174 of civilizing lower-class communities at what they considered 'dangerous
175 masculinities'. This, they argue, demonstrates that magistrates considered assaults
176 committed by women as less important and 'seems to reflect a more "dismissive"
177 and perhaps "contemptuous" attitude toward women' [30] (p. 717). There is also
178 notable work, for example that by Palk [31], that provides useful insights on gender
179 and sentencing more broadly. Godfrey [32] has written about early twentieth
180 century young violent women and Davies [33] discusses girl's violence in relation to
181 gang culture in the late nineteenth century. Godfrey's work [34] on public attitudes
182 towards non-lethal violence at this time, particularly men's violence, suggests that
183 levels of violence had not necessarily declined to the extent judicial statistics show,
184 and he argues that the scale of violence never reported belies changes in public
185 sensibilities towards violence in general. Crone's [35] perceptive analysis of a
186 Victorian Punch and Judy show provides an excellent succinct overview of
187 contemporary views of both violence against women and violence by women. Frost
188 [27] has analysed the interpersonal violence between married and co-habiting
189 couples perpetrated by both the male and the female partner and suggests that co-
190 habiting couples had different stressors than married couples. Turner [19] has
191 written specifically about women and their violence towards other women, mainly
192 during neighbourhood disputes, during the late nineteenth century suggesting that
193 it was the proximity to one's neighbours, rather than abject squalor and
194 overcrowding, which was the preamble to quarrels, conflict and violence that
195 simmered and flared intermittently. There is also notable work that concentrates on
196 women as victims of violence. D'Cruze [26] and Savage [36] have written about
197 female victims of domestic violence and Stevenson [37] has written about female
198 victims of sexual assault. Least documented in the academic literature is how the
199 courts viewed and dealt with violence in the past when there was a male victim and
200 female perpetrator, a gap that this article begins to address.

201 There are several factors that contribute to the gap in knowledge about adult
202 male victims of female violence. Largely it is due to the paucity of such cases; for
203 men, the ignominy of publicly admitting their inability to control their wives and the
204 embarrassment of admitting their victimhood prevented them, and still prevents
205 many from, coming forward. Although this situation may be changing in the
206 twenty-first century, with more and more men coming forward, it was certainly a
207 factor in the nineteenth century [38]. Another contributing factor is the resultant lack
208 of empirical evidence to draw on. As discussed above, interpersonal violence
209 between couples, in the rare situation that such a case did come to court, unless

210 serious, was usually dealt with in the petty sessions - and it is difficult to gather
211 detail about the cases that came to the petty sessions. Few records from the petty
212 sessions have survived and when they do survive, they contain scant detail with just
213 name of defendant, name of complainant, offence, adjudication and sentence
214 recorded [12]. These court records provide no detail as to the circumstances of the
215 case, the relationship between the defendant and complainant, the home
216 circumstances of the couple. For that, newspapers and police custody books fill in
217 some gaps.

218 There was negligible crime reporting from the Petty Sessions as provincial
219 newspapers (such as *The Staffordshire Advertiser*) tended to provide quite matter-of-
220 fact information about cases with the occasional snippet of detail or quoted
221 statements made by defendants or magistrates. That said, the importance of the
222 provincial press for historians of crime is now widely recognized, and crime reports
223 have informed the work of several studies, for example, D’Cruze [26] and Davies
224 [33]. In the occasional case that where there is detailed reporting or even quality
225 snippets from cases, attitudinal perceptions of crime and offending albeit
226 predominately male, and until well into the twentieth century also anonymous,
227 perceptions can occasionally be appreciated [39]. Some reports can give a distinct
228 impression of opinion, whether as to the motivation and justification for certain
229 offences or reaction to the law, revealing the attitudes of the police, magistrates and,
230 of course, the opinion of the journalist who wrote those reports. For these reasons,
231 and despite the deficiencies, newspaper reports can be useful.

232 Police custody books kept by Staffordshire Police have survived in their
233 entirety for the second half of the nineteenth century and contain a wealth of detail,
234 including the particulars of people and arrests that did not subsequently go to court,
235 the circumstances of the person arrested when apprehended, and sometimes the
236 words spoken by the person arrested on being brought to the police station [2].
237 Rather than triangulating these records to create a snapshot of that offence, at that
238 time, in that place, the data from which this article was drawn collated court, prison
239 and newspaper data for which a woman was brought to court, used Birth, Death
240 and Marriage records, and the censuses to produce a life grid for recidivist women
241 in Stafford [13]. This longitudinal, life course approach [40, 41, 42, 43, 44] essentially
242 builds a picture of people’s lives in the past, from cradle-to-grave, juxtaposing
243 significant life events such as for example employment, forming meaningful
244 relationships, having children, against such events for example as being arrested,
245 convicted and imprisoned. Watkins [43] (p. 127) argues that ‘it is not possible to
246 uncover internal decision-making, but the paths individuals forged for themselves
247 can still be uncovered – through an investigation of potential turning points’. As
248 such this approach is a perspective in which Watkins goes on to argue ‘offending is
249 seen as it was: unusual and secondary in the lives of most offenders’.

250 There were 2,869 events in which women were defendants before Stafford
251 magistrates between 1880 and 1905, with 176 recidivist offenders committing nearly
252 half of those offences. Not all 176 recidivist offenders could be traced through the

253 records to produce complete or even near complete life grids, largely because they
254 were itinerant or gave many iterations of their names, places of birth, or family
255 members and so forth. However, life grids were compiled for 110 recidivist women.
256 These women tended to be locally born and fairly static; they often had families and
257 employment, and their partners were similarly unvarying. Included in the 110
258 women who whom life grids were constructed [13], are recidivist women who were
259 violent towards their partner. There were just eighteen of these 110 women who
260 were brought to court for violence towards a man, invariably a man they were in a
261 relationship with. As such, a crime that was barely visible in court and newspaper
262 reports can now be seen. Significantly, drawing on the data regarding female
263 defendants in Stafford, this article can also offer a more nuanced picture of domestic
264 'unhappiness'. It does this by adding to those cases where women were found guilty
265 of violence toward men, those cases of female violence that came to court but were
266 dismissed and cases where couples appeared in court on other charges but where
267 the evidence revealed a situation of women's violence towards her partner.

268 Zedner [45] argues that the behaviour of women during the late nineteenth
269 century was set against Victorian constructions of femininity and womanhood;
270 women were wives and mothers, they were to be pure, submissive and modest,
271 caring for their families and children and managing the home. She argues that
272 women who broke the law were judged against these values as well as against the
273 law; they were considered 'doubly-deviant'. However, this seems not to have been
274 the case especially where assault by working-class women in Stafford at least were
275 concerned [13]. Often, rather than romantic unions, working-class marriages,
276 including relationships which were not formally legalised, of which there seemed to
277 be many in Stafford as elsewhere in England [27], in the past tended to be
278 dispassionate affairs based upon mutual expectations of economic advantage and
279 broadly accepted, if regionally diverse, ideas of domains and responsibilities within
280 marriage [27, 46]. However, latent tensions could erupt if role assumptions were
281 transgressed [47]. Some women might initiate violence particularly if their husbands
282 stayed out too late drinking or questioned their fidelity. Conversely, women's
283 command over the domestic space might conflict with the patriarchal assumptions
284 of an authoritarian man. As D'Cruze [26] suggests, wives who failed to provide
285 expected domestic services, having a meal ready when their husbands returned
286 from work, for example, might be met with serious assault and Frost [27] suggests
287 that arguments over scant resources often led to violence. Although it would be
288 wrong to suggest that such violence perpetrated by either partner was universal, a
289 degree of 'rough usage' was often seen as an acceptable feature of working-class
290 marriage. As Hammerton [48] (p. 43) argues, 'a level of community tolerance of
291 domestic violence was shared by both men and women, up to a certain threshold
292 short of severe injury or murder'.

293 Alongside that the community tolerance, judicial tolerance was evident. It
294 seems that some magistrates accepted domestic tension would, occasionally, come to

295 violence [49], including tension between co-habiting couples [27], and Stafford
296 magistrates did not always respond to severe injury with harsh sanction. For
297 example, in 1894 Margaret Gavin, an Irish woman living in Stafford at the end of the
298 nineteenth century, 'struck her husband [John] on the head with a quart measure, an
299 injury which necessitated detention in the infirmary' [50]. Although she had caused
300 a 'depressed fracture of her husband's skull', she was discharged from court with a
301 caution as the magistrates considered she had been 'greatly provoked' [51]. The
302 cause of the provocation is not clear from the newspaper report or the police records
303 but was obviously explained to the magistrates. Neither John nor Margaret Gavin
304 came before Stafford magistrates either before or after this appearance although
305 both continued to live together in Stafford. It is therefore difficult to decipher the
306 extent of the female tension or comment on Margaret's violence. What is clear is that
307 Stafford magistrates were willing to caution a woman who had fractured her
308 husband's skull, possibly accepting that there had been some happening in their
309 relationship to induce her to such action. It is also clear that Stafford magistrates
310 sometimes considered both the man and woman to be as bad as each other. In 1881,
311 Sergeant Hackney testified that since their marriage Mary and Joseph Cooper had
312 'led a cat and dog life' when they were in court for fighting. He continued by
313 testifying that he saw 'the woman throwing paving stones at her husband in Gaol
314 Square, and pulling him by the hair', although 'Cooper struck her in return, and
315 knocked her over' [52]. *Both* were bound over to keep the peace by Stafford
316 magistrates.

317 Cases of interpersonal, domestic violence that resulted in prosecution were
318 either extreme or part of a long-term catalogue of assaults. Davis [53] and
319 Hammerton [48] have suggested the humiliation and loss of self-esteem, and
320 publicly acknowledging that their marriages were a failure, prevented many men
321 and women seeking legal redress in the first place. For women, the courts were the
322 last resort in a desperate bid to put an end to a husband's excessive violence [54].
323 The possibility of reprisal from convicted husbands upon release from prison would
324 have loomed large in the decision of some women not to prosecute. Wives that did
325 prosecute husbands faced several dilemmas once the case reached court. Custodial
326 sentences for the male breadwinner, for instance, resulted in financial hardship for
327 wives battling to make ends meet. Such problems troubled middle-class reformers
328 and the notion of a man's 'reasonable' chastisement of his wife began to disappear
329 towards the end of the nineteenth century, resulting in a number of legislative
330 measures to protect married women. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878 gave
331 magistrates the power to grant quick separation orders to women in the case of
332 aggravated physical assault and the 1895 Summary Jurisdiction Act allowed wives
333 cheap separation orders if their husbands were imprisoned for at least two months
334 [55, 56]. However, Gleadle [57] argues that many of the matrimonial law reforms of
335 this period were insensitive to the real needs of working-class women, and merely
336 exacerbated their vulnerability. Moreover, she argues, separation orders often

337 proved temporary, as destitute women felt compelled to return to abusive husbands
338 for financial reasons, mainly because local authorities would not provide outdoor
339 relief to deserted wives for the first twelve months – a policy Gleadle [57] argues,
340 that led to desperate poverty. For men, having a wife prosecuted for assault would
341 probably mean no caregiver for the children and no-one to look after the home
342 rather than financial hardship, although many working-class wives did work to
343 supplement the family income [13]. Some men might have also feared reprisals from
344 their violent wives.

345 Even if couples did prosecute each other or report the violence to the police,
346 magistrates frequently encouraged couples to settle their differences and try to live
347 together, regardless of which partner committed the violence [48]. For example,
348 when William Perkin was summonsed in 1895 for punching his wife in the face, ‘the
349 Major asked if there was any chance of the case being settled out of court.’ However,
350 although William was willing to do this, his wife Sarah remained adamant that ‘she
351 would not live with her husband again if anyone gave her a thousand pounds to do
352 so’ [58]. Sarah Perkin was obviously not concerned about any financial hardship a
353 separation would bring. Neither was Jane Higginson. In 1894, when Jane was in
354 court for attempting to commit suicide, the magistrates dismissed the case but Jane
355 insisted ‘she would rather go back to gaol than live with her husband’ (Jane had
356 been held on remand after her suicide attempt) [59]. The magistrates did not send
357 Jane back to prison, instead she went back to live with her husband (maybe because
358 she had nowhere else to go) but she started to appear in court regularly on
359 summonses for theft and drunkenness which indicate a continued unhappiness.
360 Some women used the magistrates’ court to discipline and warn off abusive
361 husbands rather than wanting a separation. For example, when William Carless was
362 prosecuted in 1903 for assaulting his wife Eliza, the magistrates wanted to adjourn
363 the case for two months as he promised to sign the pledge after she had testified that
364 he ‘was alright when sober’ [60].

365 Virtually all the 110 women for whom a life grid was constructed formed a
366 significant relationship and lived with a man for a considerable period of time
367 whether they formally married or not [13, 61]. For many of these women, there were
368 indications of female strife. These indications included separations, prosecutions for
369 female assault, prosecutions for disturbing the peace by fighting with each other,
370 shouting or using obscene language towards each other in the street, and references
371 to an unhappy home life made in other cases. Sometimes, in prosecutions for
372 disturbing the peace, rather than a neighbourhood row or a woman causing a
373 nuisance, in several cases it was couples fighting. For example, when Harriet
374 Falkner and her husband assaulted Mary Raferty in 1887, it was because Mary had
375 ‘intervened to make the peace’ during the course of the Faulkner’s ‘quarrel’ out in
376 the street where they all lived [62]. Such cases as this would not have come to court
377 had it not been for the police arresting the Faulkners for assault on Mary Raferty. It

378 was then the testimony given in the hearing that revealed the fighting in the street
379 between the Faulkners.

380 Husbands also testified against their wives when jointly summonsed for
381 neglecting their children. In all the cases of neglect brought by the NSPCC Inspector
382 in Stafford at the end of the nineteenth century, under cross-examination, each man
383 was able to prove he provided financially for the family. As far as Stafford
384 magistrates were concerned, if a man could demonstrate that he provided
385 financially for any children, he was considered to have fulfilled his responsibility for
386 their care. However, each husband placed the blame for the children's neglect on his
387 respective wife's alcohol (mis)use. For example, in 1892 James Plimner, husband of
388 Emily Plimner, 'attributed the state of the house and children to the drunken habits
389 of his wife' [63]. John Carless, husband of Mary Jane Carless, testified in 1904, 'she
390 has a drop of beer, I give her my wages. It is no fault of mine. She has been drinking
391 week after week, and she was drunk last night. A lot of things have gone out of the
392 house. She has pawned them' [64]. On their second joint appearance before Stafford
393 magistrates on a charge of neglect of children, Charles Simpson, husband of Beatrice
394 Simpson, testified in 1899 that 'his wife was of drunken habits and had even sold the
395 food he had provided for the children in order to get drink' [65]. Beatrice Simpson
396 took umbrage at her husband's testimony against her and lashed out at him,

397 'The Mayor said the Bench considered it was the worst case that had come
398 before the court, and they had decided to send her to prison for six months
399 with hard labour. The husband asked if he could have a separation order, but
400 the magistrate's clerk [Mr H. H. Jordan] said the court had no power to grant
401 him one. The defendant, who had behaved in a very disorderly manner
402 during the hearing of the case, made a rush at her husband as the police were
403 leading her from the court and struck him on the back of the head. The Bench
404 ordered her to be brought back, and she was charged with the assault and
405 sentenced to another month's imprisonment, the Mayor observing that the
406 defendant had committed gross contempt of court' [66].

407 Following their respective appearances, not surprisingly, Beatrice and Charles
408 Simpson separated although this time, the magistrates had not exercised discretion
409 to grant a separation order, but Mary Jane Carless and Emily Plimner remained
410 living in Stafford with their children and husbands.

411 Jealousy could drive women to assault their male partner. Throwing vitriol
412 (otherwise known as oil of vitriol or sulphuric acid), was a particular late nineteenth
413 and early twentieth century crime, although it has had a twenty-first century
414 resurgence [67]. Although stereotypically seen as a female crime, Watson [68, 69]
415 argues that it was as likely to be perpetrated by men as women and in industrial
416 disputes as well as in interpersonal attacks. Of all the cases involving female
417 violence in Stafford during the late nineteenth century, it was Mary Pearson, 'the
418 widow of a cheese factory' [70] (presumably Mary had inherited a cheese factory
419 from her late husband), who appeared in Stafford magistrates court on the 'Serious

420 Charge' of throwing vitriol at Joseph Cooper with intent to do him grievous bodily
421 harm [71]. Mary and Joseph had been living together as man and wife for various
422 periods during the preceding two or three years. One Saturday evening in 1880,
423 Joseph, a local farmer, was at a house in Newport Road, when Mary went to him
424 and asked him to come out, saying that if he did not, she would cut her throat. He
425 came out and spoke to her, but refused to go with her, and went to the Lichfield
426 Arms Inn instead. Mary followed him to the inn but was barred from entering.
427 About an hour later, she returned to the Lichfield Arms and went to the room where
428 Joseph was sitting with several other people. Mary said she wanted to speak to
429 Joseph, and that if he did not come out, she would destroy both herself and him the
430 next morning. Joseph refused at which point Mary threw the vitriol onto his head,
431 face and neck, which 'caused him extreme pain' [71]. Inspector Chaplain arrested
432 Mary at the Lichfield Arms, where she had been detained, and on Sunday morning
433 he charged her, to which she replied 'I didn't intend to injure anyone but Cooper I
434 did intend to injure him and myself also. I told him I would do so. I asked him not to
435 drive me to destruction. I have sent him letters from time to time, and they are now
436 in his possession, in which I told him I should destroy myself, and a telegram to the
437 same effect. He has exposed it to bad women in the streets' [71]. Mary was bailed
438 and committed for trial at the next assizes.

439 However, in October 1880 just seven months after the throwing of the vitriol,
440 Mary and Joseph married. When the case came before the Assizes in January 1881,
441 the 'bill was not preferred' and the case was not pressed. For the judge, the marriage
442 '*was the best thing that could have could have happened*' and '*although a very serious class*
443 '*of offence, it was a very light case*' (italics added) [72]. Similar to the overarching view
444 that 'settling the case out of court' would be best expressed by magistrates in
445 William and Sarah Perkin mentioned above, the Judge in Mary and Joseph's case
446 also thought it best not to press for prosecution as the couple had married, and
447 presumably any further violence could be contained in the home. Although vitriol
448 throwing was a serious offence, it was often treated sympathetically [68]. Victims of
449 vitriol throwing however could suffer serious physical, emotional and economic
450 consequences, especially if the injuries were permanent. Being 'the widow of a
451 cheese factory' [70], it may have been that Joseph married Mary despite the vitriol
452 throwing for financial reasons although unlikely it will never be known whether
453 they simply settled their differences. Their marriage, however, was not the end to
454 the friction between them. A few months later, in March 1881, both Mary Cooper (as
455 she was now named), and Joseph were imprisoned for one month, in default of
456 finding sureties for their good behaviour, for fighting in the Market Square [2]. Mary
457 and Joseph did finally separate, and Mary spent her remaining years living in
458 Stafford workhouse.

459 Many of the cases for assault that came to court where there was a male
460 victim and a female perpetrator were treated very leniently by Stafford magistrates
461 [2, 12]. In cases of cross-summons, where both parties prosecuted each other for a

462 similar offence, the magistrates dismissed the case against the female partner and
463 upheld that against the man. For example, William Green took out a summons to
464 prosecute his wife Hannah for assault in 1892. Stafford magistrates dismissed this
465 case but upheld Hannah's cross-prosecution of William for assault - he was fined
466 five shillings plus court costs (of another five shillings) and the magistrates granted a
467 separation order. In 1905, Eliza Butler was prosecuted for assault by her husband
468 Thomas. The magistrates dismissed this case but upheld the cross-prosecution
469 bought by Eliza against her husband. In 1889, Annie Wardle and her husband James
470 similarly took out summonses for assault against each other. Stafford magistrates
471 found both guilty but ordered each to pay the court costs only. Even when the case
472 did not involve a cross-prosecution, the magistrates often dismissed a case of
473 violence by the female partner or the police reduced the charge. For example, in
474 1903, Sarah Leadbetter was prosecuted for assault by Thomas Coleman, her partner,
475 but Stafford magistrates dismissed the case. In 1895, Eliza Walker was prosecuted for
476 unlawfully wounding James Nash, her partner. The offence was reduced to common
477 assault and Eliza was bound over for five pounds and one surety of five pounds for
478 six months. Eliza had originally been prosecuted for unlawful wounding as she had
479 stabbed James during a quarrel over the evening meal. As James was getting up
480 from the table, Eliza insisted that she thought he was going to hit her. She stabbed
481 him with the bread knife she was already holding. Presumably it was her mitigation,
482 that led to the police reducing the charge to common assault [73].

483 Even when the woman was found guilty of the assault, the sentence would be
484 lenient. When Harriet Hanlon was found guilty in 1892 of assaulting husband
485 Albert, Stafford magistrates committed Harriet to Stafford prison for just one day. In
486 1896, when Mary Hawkins was found guilty of assaulting her husband, she was
487 ordered to pay the court costs only. Ann Fisher fared a little worse. When found
488 guilty of 'being drunk and disorderly, using very bad language and threatening to
489 strike her husband with a jug' in Queen Street in 1886 [74], Stafford magistrates fined
490 her two shillings and six pence and ordered her to pay the court's costs of five
491 shillings and Ann Birkbeck, the landlady of the Plume and Feathers Public House in
492 Stafford, was fined ten shillings and ordered to pay the court's costs when she was
493 found guilty of assaulting her husband in 1880. Ann spent fourteen days in Stafford
494 prison in default of payment of the fine.

495 The eighteen women mentioned in this article are *all* those prosecuted for
496 assaulting their male partners in Stafford between 1880 and 1905 – relatively few
497 considering there were 2,869 events in which women were defendants before
498 Stafford magistrates between those dates. Women were much more likely to come to
499 court accused of assaulting another woman than they were her male partner. This is
500 likely to be because violence where there was a female perpetrator and female victim
501 was more likely to take place in the public sphere rather than in the home so was
502 more visible and more likely to disturb the peace. Violence between a man and
503 woman was more likely to take place in the home and was thus less visible, and less

504 likely to attract attention. It is only by looking in depth at female offending, which
505 this article has done, that instances of domestic violence by women against men can
506 be seen. Although there were only a few cases where women were prosecuted for
507 assaulting a man, it is clear that *some* women were violent and were violent toward
508 their menfolk. However, even if the accusation of assault by women was upheld by
509 the court, it is also clear that in none of the cases discussed above were women
510 punished harshly. In fact, the contrary can be claimed – Stafford magistrates were
511 not overly concerned with female violence in any form towards the end of the
512 nineteenth century. As with cases in which women assaulted other women [19],
513 neither Stafford magistrates or the press were overly concerned with women who
514 assaulted their menfolk. However, in cases of violence in a female context, where the
515 victim and the perpetrator were both female, it could be assumed that the
516 magistrates were not unduly bothered precisely *because of* the female nature of the
517 offence. But it seems that similar is also true where there was a male victim. In none
518 of the cases was there any indication that the magistrates or the press were
519 concerned about the male victim and sought to stamp out such offences. Although
520 an absence does not necessarily prove the contrary, there seemed to be no severe
521 punishments handed down by the magistrates and no harsh words quoted in the
522 press to indicate that either were unduly troubled by such situations. The police did
523 arrest and prosecute some of the eighteen women and some of the male victims did
524 also take out summonses against their attacker and occasionally ask in court for a
525 separation – men did have recourse to the courts, and they did very occasionally use
526 it. Given the number of violent women living in Stafford at this time, it is surprising
527 that there were not more prosecutions of women for assaulting their male partners
528 or more male victims taking out their own summonses. The incidence of female
529 violence against male partners in a domestic context in the late nineteenth and early
530 twentieth century in Stafford is likely to have been much higher than the police,
531 court and press records show.

532

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536

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