



Alumni Newsletter

Spring Term 2025-26

**Welcome, from Head of
Department, Professor Sara
Horrell**



A very warm welcome from Houghton Street, where Spring is occasionally trying to make an appearance.

In the last edition, I told you we were in the process of interviewing for a new Assistant Professor, we are delighted to have appointed two people to posts: Pamfili Antipa and Maanik Nath. We are looking forward to working with them and know that they will contribute immensely to life in the Department.

After a lot of hard work, it's a particular pleasure to let you know that a new

exhibition, based on the work of Neil Cummins and Cormac Ó Gráda, *No Irish Need Apply?* Opens at EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum in Dublin on 8th April. If you are in Dublin, I do encourage you to go along and see it!

Winter term saw us holding a full programme of events and Public Lectures. If you missed any of them, you can find links to the recordings [here](#), or you can take a look at our [YouTube channel](#).

In association with LSE's Global School of Sustainability, we hosted Spencer Banzhaf, North Carolina State University for a short visit. As part of this, he delivered a lecture *The economics of nature and the nature of economics*. The subject matter was both timely and intriguing, and it was great to chat at the reception afterwards. If you missed it, a recording is available [here](#).

This term, later than usual, we have our annual Epstein Lecture which will be delivered by Paula Gobbi, from Université Libre de Bruxelles (ECARES) and a CEPR Research Fellow. Her

research fields are Demographic Economics, Economic History, Development and Growth. Full information, including how to attend, can be found [here](#).

Congratulations are in order for Kami Hassan and Eric Schneider, who both welcomed new additions to their families. To Neil Cummins, who was elected as a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences, and to Jordan Claridge who passed Major Review. You can read more [here](#).

It was particularly pleasing to hear that Safeena Husain (BSc EH, 1995) has been named Time Woman of the Year for her work helping girls in remote villages in India get back in the classroom.

You can read LSE's announcement [here](#).

We are also sad to announce the retirement of Mary Morgan after many fruitful years' association with the Department. It's not really a farewell and we are planning both a Workshop and a reception in her honour and you can find out more later in this newsletter.

Please do stay in touch, we love to hear from you!

Sara Horrell

Welcome

To [Pamfili Antipa](#), currently an LSE Fellow within the Department. Her research interests include how monetary and fiscal policies interacted and evolved over time in order to cope with extreme events, such as world wars or major financial crises.

And [Maanik Nath](#), currently at Utrecht University. Maanik's expertise lies in Asian Economic History, and his book *Capital Shortage*, won the Lindert-Williamson Prize for an outstanding book in Global Economic History, and the Economic History Society Book Prize in 2024.

Not Farewell

To [Mary Morgan](#), who has a long association with the Department having gained her BSc here in 1978.

During her time with us, she has widely published, been awarded several large grants and prestigious prizes, and held high office in society's such as the Royal Economics Society and the British Academy.

If you would like to attend the workshop and/or the reception, you can find full details [here](#).

Congratulations

To Kami Hassan and Eric Schneider, who both welcomed new additions to their families – we are building up quite a supply of future economic historians!

To Neil Cummins on his election as [Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences](#). Fellows to the Society are elected for their significant contributions to social science, which

highlight the relevance of the social sciences in understanding, and addressing, the many varied societal challenges facing the UK and the world today.

And to Jordan Claridge, who passed Major Review.

Events

No Irish Need Apply? The Economic History of the Irish in England
EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum,
Dublin. 8th April – 30th June 2026



Cartoon from The Daily Express, 22 March 1971.
Copyright Mirrorpix.

This new exhibition asks how the millions of Irish people in England have fared over the past 200 years. Based on landmark economic history research using new big data analysis, it tracks the wealth, health, and living standards of Irish migrants and families of Irish descent, showing that the Irish were substantially poorer than their English neighbours for generations.

Exhibition Curator, Chris Kissane, says “Almost every family in Ireland has relatives living in England, and emigration across the Irish Sea has been an experience for every generation over the last two centuries. But the stories of the millions of Irish people in England have often been ignored or

forgotten. Our new exhibition shows how economic history can answer difficult questions and offer important lessons about both the past and present of migration, integration, and inequality”

Full information can be found [here](#).

In case you were unable to join us for our Winter Term events, you can catch up with the recordings below, or visit our [YouTube](#) channel.

Malika Zeghal [The Making of the Modern Muslim State: Islam and Governance in the Middle East and North Africa](#) (28 January 2026, joint with LSE’s Middle East Centre)

Joan Roses, Alexandra de Pleijt, Alessandro Nuvolar, and Patrick Wallis: [What Made Innovation Possible? Insights from the Industrial Revolution](#) (11 March 2026)

Jane Humphries: [Who cares? Towards an economic history of caring labour](#) (18 March 2026, STICERD Atkinson Lecture)

Spencer Banzhaf: [The economics of nature and the nature of economics](#) (19 March 2026, joint with LSE’s Global School of Sustainability)

Sven Beckert: [Capitalism, a global history](#) (25 March 2026, joint with LSE’s Ralph Miliband Programme)

Forthcoming events in Spring Term
Keep an eye on our Department Events page: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Economic-History/Events> as full information will be posted here when finalised:

2026 Epstein Lecture
21 May 2026, 6.30pm Old Theatre, Old Building

Inheritance, demographics, and economic development

Inheritance institutions shape family structures and demographic decisions, with enduring implications for economic development. This lecture describes how inheritance rules affect fertility, marriage, and migration decisions in historical and development contexts.



Speaker: Paula Gobbi, Université Libre de Bruxelles (ECARES)

Chair: Sara Horrell

Full information, including how to attend, can be found [here](#).

Student Research

Income volatility in 20th century Netherlands: lessons from a day labourer's household accounts

With the advent of the modern gig economy, income volatility is receiving greater attention. However, income volatility is not a new phenomenon. In the early twentieth century incomes in agriculture were unstable across seasons, months, even weeks. Matthias van Laer's study of day labourers in this period shed light on the emergence of modern wage security and the risks some face in today's gig economy.

Today, most workers in Western Europe receive regular pay, whether weekly or monthly. But stable paychecks haven't always been the norm. For a long time, especially in agriculture, incomes were unstable. They varied not just by year or season, but from one week or month to the next. What changed?

In the early twentieth century, Dutch day labourers in agriculture faced extreme income volatility. These 'gig workers of the past' were hired and fired by the day, facing deprivation on many fronts at once. Their work was tied to the seasons, the weather, and a wage system that paid by task as well as time. And yet, shortly after World War II, incomes appear more stable in our collective memory of the period. This transformation has gone largely unrecognised in labour history. Yet, understanding volatility as an outcome of this system sheds light on the roots of modern wage security, changing consumer patterns, and the risks some face in today's gig economy.

At the heart of this story is Gabriel de Boer, a Dutch agricultural labourer who meticulously recorded his earnings from 1910 to 1949 in a series of household account books (Figure 1). These daily records, over 10,000 entries in total, offer a window into the workings of precarious employment.

Gabriel's yearly income averaged around seven hundred guilders, low enough to exempt his family from income tax. His income was not only low, it was also highly variable. In some years, a third of his earnings came from just one season. Winter months, especially January and February, were often nearly income-free.

This was not explained fully by a seasonal pattern. Day-to-day variation was staggering. Weekly and monthly earnings fluctuated by nearly fifty per cent on average as a result. That volatility was driven by two key forces: irregular work availability due to weather and demand, and a wage system that paid differently for each task.

Figure 1 Pages from one of Gabriel Boer's account books

Why Was Income So Unstable?

Gabriel's records show that on many days he didn't work because of rain, frost, or simply a lack of tasks. Sickiness also caused long interruptions. He recorded the reasons for missed work, for example, illness, bad weather, lack of demand, giving us insight into the causes of income gaps. About a third of his income variance was due to these involuntary factors.

On top of this came a complex pay system. Agricultural workers were paid by the task as well as by the hour, and these tasks changed often. In some months, Gabriel switched jobs more than a dozen times. Pay varied widely depending on the task and the season. Some work paid more but wasn't always available. Others were poorly paid but more consistent. Unlike salaried workers, no week was quite the same. Gabriel's case likely reflected the broader experience of Dutch casual agricultural labourers: they were widely

recognised as a group that faced insecure tenure, minimal social protection, and late access to state benefits.

Strategies for Coping

Gabriel and his family did not passively endure this uncertainty. They developed strategies to cope. His wife engaged in market agricultural work during the harvest season, boosting summer income. Throughout the year they grew food on a small plot, sometimes sacrificing paid labour to tend it. Gabriel also joined a small local union, which began offering modest sickness and unemployment benefits in the 1930s. These payments reduced income volatility by about ten per cent, but, by design, could not eliminate it.

Ultimately, individual strategies had limits. Structural change would come not through personal effort, but through crisis and a little bit of collective action.

Collective Bargaining in times of crisis

While Gabriel's records show little improvement in income stability across his working life, it does appear the broader picture in Dutch agriculture was changing. Behind the scenes, unions were pushing for more secure wages. Collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) became increasingly common in the 1920s and 1930s, especially in agriculture.

These agreements did not eliminate seasonality or unemployment. But they slowly began to flatten the wage differences between tasks and reduce the complexity of pay structures. Hourly wages began to replace task-based rates, and employers faced growing pressure to provide more predictable work.

We lack a representative sample of household accounts to measure the impact of this shift. To understand the effect of these changes, I pioneered a novel approach; historical microsimulations based on collective bargaining agreements' wage data. By modelling hypothetical workers in various regions under different work regimes (e.g., switching tasks daily versus doing one task continuously), I can estimate volatility across the sector.

Simulations of baseline wages from 1920–1921 and 1939–1940 show an unexpected trend. While average wages declined during this period, income volatility, measured as average monthly change, of this baseline wage fell. Monthly wage variation decreased by about thirty per cent and weekly volatility by over fifty per cent by some metrics.

This was not because conditions became more generous. In fact, workers lost bargaining power during the Depression: unemployment spiked, and average incomes fell. But as piecework and task-based pay declined, so did the instability of income. Performing general labour at a fixed rate no longer led to a major financial penalty compared to performing higher-paid tasks, whereas there used to be an income stability-income level trade-off. Wages became flatter but also more stable.

Lessons for Today

Gabriel de Boer's life captures a segment of the labour market in which income wasn't just low, it was deeply unstable. He and his peers lived on the edge, with little protection against

missed work or illness, and little certainty about their livelihood.

Their experience also shows that income stability is not a given, but instead negotiated. Through a combination of union pressure, policy change, and shifts in employer practice, agricultural incomes in the Netherlands became more stable between the wars. This evolution happened before most of the Dutch modern welfare state came into full swing. While beyond the scope of this exploration, this change may have influenced the evolutions we observe in the post-war period. Consumer and financial behaviour were likely not a function of income level, but also of income stability.

It is, in any case, a historical lesson worth remembering. Today's gig workers, zero-hours contractors, and casual freelancers face many of the same challenges as Gabriel once more: irregular hours, volatile pay, and limited protection, albeit in a very different personal and global context. The twentieth century offers a reminder that such instability is not a given. While it might be pushed to the fringes of the waged labour experience by internal negotiations, it can just so easily reappear when structural changes occur in employment relationships.

Matthias Van Laer De Gezelle was a Visiting PhD student at LSE. He is a PhD candidate in the Social History of Finance project at the University of Antwerp. His current research focuses estimating income volatility, as well as on how stable versus volatile incomes shaped financial decision-making of Dutch households in the twentieth century.

Faculty Research

Professor Eric Schneider writes on his research team's [recently published work](#) in *BMJ Global Health* on child stunting: how lessons from the past can challenge current understandings of the issue, and thereby accelerate our progress in improving child health globally.

Child stunting, a measure of child malnutrition, is often framed as a problem of today's poorer countries. More than [152 million children worldwide](#) are still affected, and the burden is concentrated in low- and middle-income countries. But this framing can obscure an important fact: child stunting was once widespread in many countries that are wealthy today.

In our [recent study](#) in *BMJ Global Health*, we looked back over more than a century of child growth data to understand how stunting rates, the share of children too short for their age, have changed over time. The findings challenge the idea that today's low-stunting countries were always healthier or better nourished than those still struggling with the problem. Instead, they show that high levels of stunting were once common across much of the world — *and that dramatic reductions are possible*.

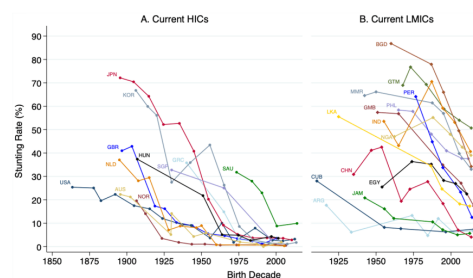
Looking beyond the recent past

Most global statistics on child stunting begin in the 1980s. While these data have been invaluable for tracking recent progress, they provide only a partial picture. Without a longer historical perspective, it is easy to assume that current patterns reflect deep and persistent differences between countries.

To address this gap, we conducted a systematic review of historical child growth studies. Drawing on more than 1,000 studies, we assembled 2,443 estimates of stunting across 122 countries, covering more than 129 million children. This allowed us to reconstruct long-run trends in child growth from the late nineteenth century to the present.

Many rich countries once had high stunting

The historical record reveals a striking pattern: levels of child stunting that would today be considered extremely high were once common in several countries that now have some of the lowest rates in the world.



Country-level trends in child stunting rates in select high-income countries (HIC) and low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs) since the late nineteenth century. Countries are denoted with standard three-letter codes.

In the early twentieth century, stunting was widespread across much of Western and Southern Europe. Japan and South Korea also had very high levels. At the same time, some regions—including Scandinavia and parts of the Caribbean—experienced relatively low levels.

In other words, the historical geography of stunting looked very different from today's global map.

Rapid change is possible — but not inevitable

History shows that stunting rates can decline rapidly. Countries such as Japan and South Korea saw dramatic improvements during the twentieth century, moving from very high levels to near elimination by the 1980s. Thailand and Bangladesh have also achieved substantial progress, experiencing major declines in child stunting from the mid-twentieth century onward.

Yet progress is not always uniform. In some countries – including Nigeria and the Philippines – declines have been much slower. This suggests that reductions in stunting do not simply occur in tandem with a country's development. Progress depends on how economic, social and public health changes interact within specific national contexts.

What history tells us about policy

While prior research has emphasised nutrition or water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions, the historical evidence also challenges the idea that there is a single solution to child stunting.

Different countries have reduced stunting through different combinations of factors, including economic development, improved diets, better disease control, public health programmes and changes in behaviour.

Sanitation provides a useful illustration. In England, the introduction of piped water and sewerage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries played a major role in reducing mortality from typhoid and cholera. However, historical evidence suggests that these infrastructure

improvements alone [did not eliminate diarrhoeal disease](#). Thus, child growth remained poor for decades even as mortality from other waterborne diseases declined.

In Jamaica, by contrast, [efforts to tackle hookworm infection](#) in the early twentieth century appear to have had clearer effects on child growth. Campaigns combined mass treatment with the construction of latrines and extensive public education about sanitation and hygiene. The programme addressed both infrastructure and behaviour, thereby reducing open defecation and children's exposure to parasitic infection that can impair growth.

The contrast between these cases highlights an important point: improving sanitation infrastructure is crucial, but it may not be sufficient on its own. Reducing the repeated infections that contribute to child stunting often requires changes in everyday practices as well as to physical infrastructure.

Rethinking how we frame child stunting

Perhaps the most important implication of this historical perspective is that it challenges fatalism.

Countries that are wealthy today once faced levels of child stunting comparable to those seen in many current low- and middle-income countries. Over time, those levels declined dramatically.

This does not mean that the same pathways will work everywhere. But it does show that high stunting rates are not a fixed feature of national development. They can change – sometimes quickly.

Looking at the past therefore expands our understanding of what is possible. It reminds us that the global decline in child stunting is part of a much longer narrative of improvements in child health, nutrition and living conditions.

The challenge for global health policy today is to accelerate that progress, learning from both historical experience and contemporary evidence to identify the combinations of interventions that work best in different contexts.

Focus

As LSE and the Department of Economic History celebrate 130 years of cutting-edge research, we thought it might be nice to share our origin story

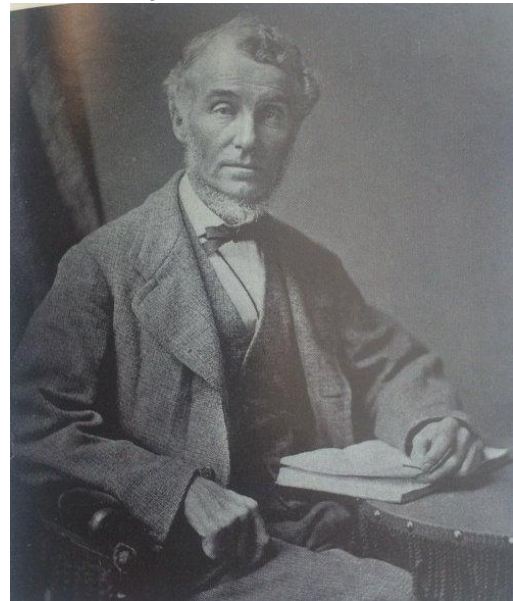
Borough Farm 4 August 1894: the idea for LSE

The story goes that the idea for LSE was born on 4 August 1894 at a breakfast meeting at Borough Farm. The four founders of LSE were Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Graham Wallas and George Bernard Shaw. They decided to use a bequest to create a new institution for social research and education; “a London School of Economics and Political Science”.

On 2 August 1894 a Derby attorney, William Harvey Whiston, wrote to [Sidney Webb](#). The letter enclosed the will of Derby lawyer [Henry Hutchinson](#), who had taken his own life after a long illness. Sidney Webb, a fellow member of the left-wing [Fabian Society](#), was named as executor of the will.

After some bequests to his family Hutchinson left his money not to the Fabian Society, but to a group of trustees, including his daughter

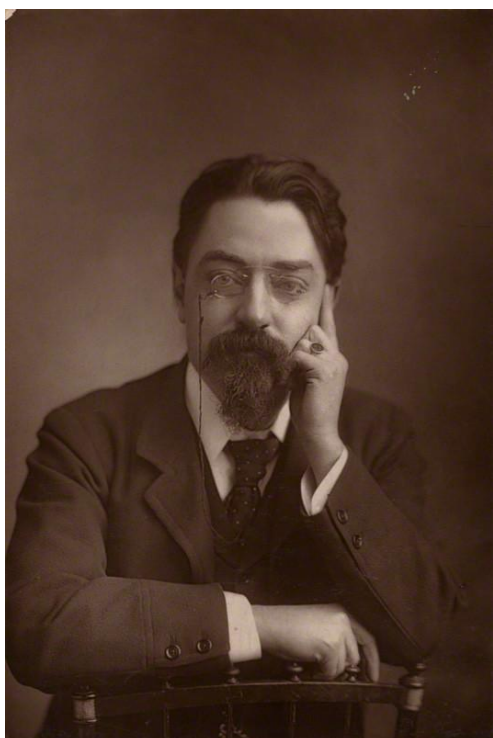
Constance Hutchinson and Fabian Society secretary Edward Pease. Sidney Webb was to be President for the first year and to have a casting vote on any of its decisions. Sidney entrusted Edward Pease with ensuring that the Fabian Executive Committee understood that the bequest was to the Trustees and not the Society.



Henry Hunt Hutchinson. LSE



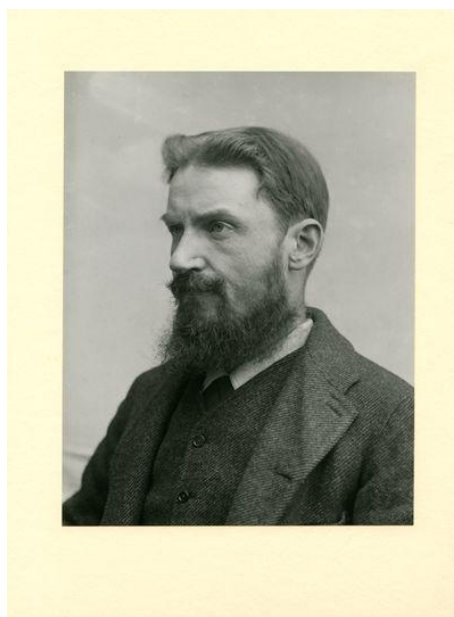
Beatrice Webb c1883. IMAGELIBRARY/71. LSE



Sidney Webb by W & D Downey, published by Cassell & Company, Ltd, 1893. NPG x197925. National Portrait Gallery



Graham Wallas c1920s. IMAGELIBRARY/272.LSE



George Bernard Shaw c1886 (Ref: Shaw Photographs/1/5/312)

The four LSE founders

Two days later on 4 August 1894 Sidney Webb, his wife the social investigator Beatrice Webb and two other members of the Fabian Society met at Borough Farm, near Godalming. [Beatrice and Sidney Webb](#) had met in 1890, marrying in 1892.

The other two LSE founders were close friends of the Webbs. [Graham Wallas](#), a teacher, was Sidney Webb's best man at their marriage and [George Bernard Shaw](#), who became a Nobel Prize winning playwright, first met Sidney Webb in 1879 at the Zetetical Society, a radical debating society.

The four founders of LSE all had in common a serious commitment to improving society. The founding and subsequent shape of LSE was informed by both Sidney and Beatrice Webb's experience of education and undertaking research.

The breakfast meeting

At breakfast on the morning of 4 August, Sidney Webb shared the letter he had

received with the news about Henry Hunt Hutchinson's will and bequest with Beatrice, Graham Wallas and George Bernard Shaw. The group calculated that of the £20,000, some would go to Hutchinson's family and so around half would be left for a new endeavour. Rather than funding existing Fabian Society initiatives, they agreed to create a new institution for research and education.

Sidney Webb may have the dream of creating a social and economic school in London for some time, having been impressed by international institutions like the Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques in Paris, Technische Hochschulen in Germany, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the USA. He was now in the right place at the right time to pursue it.



Drawing by Bertha Newcombe of the Borough Farm breakfast of 4 August 1894, as reproduced in The Sketch magazine, 17 July 1895
Wallas/15/2. LSE

[Beatrice Webb](#) reported in her diary in September 1894:

So Sidney has been planning to persuade the other trustees to devote the greater part of the money to

encouraging research and economic study. His vision is to found, slowly and quietly, a 'London School of Economics and Political Science' – a centre not only of lectures on special subjects but an association of students who would be directed and supported in doing original work.

After a year of preparation, LSE opened its doors to the very first students on 10 October 1895.

Centenary in 1994

In 1994 members of LSE returned to Borough Farm to celebrate the anniversary of the idea for LSE. Lord Dahrendorf recalled the occasion in his biography of LSE, published to mark the School's own centenary in 1995:

On 4 August 1994 a charabanc of LSE lovers, including founders' kin, the School's top officers, and some of those who helped with this History, journeyed to Borough Farm in Surrey, where the present owners, Tony and Margaret Herring, joined them to re-enact the famous breakfast and to toast the second centenary of LSE.



Borough Farm, 1993
Scene of the School's invention in 1894. Photo taken by Shirley Chapman (Information Officer).
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Borough Farm Centenary Breakfast, 4 August 1994

Back row left to right: Professor Harold Edey, G J Colenbrander, Dr John Ashworth, Shirley Chapman, Fiona Plowman, Lord Dahrendorf, Professor David Bartholomew, Mrs Lois Reynolds, Sir John Sparrow, (very back), Mr David Kingsley, Professor Norman MacKenzie, Dr Angela Rospin, John Pike, Professor Michael Leifer (Pro Director), Margery Herring (owner of Borough Farm)

Front row left to right: Dr John Hutchinson (grandson of H H Hutchinson), Mrs Valentine Colenbrander (great niece of Beatrice Webb), Dr Christine Challis, Lady Dahrendorf, Dr Anne Bohm, Professor Michael Wise, Mr Ted Brown, Professor Theo Barker, Mr Dan Sinclair, Sitting very front: Mr Tony Herring (owner of Borough Farm)

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