

Dr. Giles Howson

The death occurred, on 25 February 1973, of W. Giles Howson, M.B., Ch.B., a pioneer in local and north-western population studies.

Giles Howson, who was educated at Lancaster Royal Grammar School and Manchester University, was a native of Lancaster, and practised there as a doctor for many years. He was a dedicated local historian who found his own way to the meticulous but imaginative study of parish registers and population records, doing this before the Cambridge Group succeeded in guiding the enthusiasm of many local workers. During the 1950s, accordingly, he made aggregations of a succession of north-western parish registers, and used his own medical experience in studying the effects of the plague and other epidemic diseases. He was indeed the first worker to draw attention to general regional fluctuations in baptisms and burials between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, and concluded that the plague, up to the mid-seventeenth century, acted as a population stimulator by its effect on subsequent marriage rates. His general argument here followed a Malthusian line in treating the social and demographic effect of rigid poverty as a check which brought about later equilibrium.

Had his argument rested here, it might hardly have been regarded as noteworthy. He was, however, enabled to draw a contrast with the second half of the seventeenth century, where he adduced evidence from registers of Lancashire, Cumberland and Westmorland, that this was one of small families, adding that 'I here is evidence that a certain rudimentary form of family planning was understood in these times'. He suggested that 'prolonged lactation was deliberately practised'. The paper in which this was published, 'Plague, Poverty and Population in Parts of North-West England, 1580–1720', appeared in the *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* for 1961, but was first read to the Lonsdale Historical Society as early as 1956.

Peter Laslett comments that 'this early paper of Howson's was part of the inspiration for a particular chapter of *The World We Have Lost* . . . at the time I regarded this exercise as the most successful and important by an amateur on this theme'. Giles Howson himself had little interest in claims to eminence in scholarship, but was the best type of local amateur, using his professional knowledge to excellent effect and never losing sight of the background themes and ideas which give real shape to local history. A few years before his death he was turning his attention to the movement of surnames over time as a means of tracing population mobility at the regional level; in this field, too, his remarkable pioneering knack may yet be vindicated.

A member of the Society of Friends, he inherited William Stout's office as Treasurer of the Lancaster Monthly Meeting, and helped the present writer, through the furnishing of many insights and items of guidance, to edit the new edition of Stout's *Autobiography* (1967). Thanks to Giles, this has some interesting demographic commentaries also.

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