

NOTES AND QUERIES

“Crisis” Mortality in Nine Sussex Parishes

In *LPS* 9 Dr. Schofield suggested a quick method of discovering something about “crisis” mortality from parish registers. This note describes the result of applying his method to nine Sussex parishes and makes some suggestions for extending it to provide a slightly different viewpoint of crisis mortality. The nine parishes were chosen for no better reasons than that the registers were available in print and that aggregative analysis had already been undertaken. The distribution of the parishes within Sussex is shown in the accompanying map.

In the first analysis Dr. Schofield’s definition of a crisis mortality year was used, that is a year in which the number of burials was double or more than double the average number of burials per year averaged over twenty years. Table 1 shows the number of crisis years so defined and also the size of the parish. Because of the wide variation in the period of years covered in the registers, the number of crisis years is not strictly comparable, but the figures do tend to support Dr. Schofield’s view that the smaller parishes experienced more crises than the larger ones. Dr. Schofield has however suggested that some of the apparent crises might in the smaller parishes be due to random fluctuations in yearly burials. My subjective impression in studying the figures suggested however a different hypothesis to explain the difference between larger and smaller parishes, namely that the crises indicated in the smaller parishes were genuine but that genuine crises of roughly the same order of magnitude in the larger parishes were not being picked out because in years of unusually high mortality the number of burials often just fell short of twice the normal average. I therefore undertook a second analysis, using as my definition of crisis a figure of one and a half times the normal average. Also, to make the figures for each parish roughly comparable, I produced sets of figures for two different periods and excluded Angmering altogether. For the sake of convenience I called years with double the normal average ‘major crises’ and those with one and a half times the average ‘minor crises’. These terms should not be taken too literally. The difference in the proportion of the population dying in ‘major’ and ‘minor’ crises might not be more than 2%. The results of my second analysis are set out in table 2.

This produced some interesting results. For the later sixteenth century the smaller parishes had about five major crises but virtually no minor crises; in the larger parishes the situation was more or less reversed. The total number of crises was much the same for both larger and smaller parishes. For the seventeenth and eighteenth century the situation was rather different. The smaller parishes still had noticeably more major crises and they also had slightly more minor crises, so that overall Dr. Schofield’s findings were confirmed though the difference between larger and smaller parishes was not as marked as it would have been if only major crises had been recorded.

Dr. Schofield’s national sample also showed that the number of (major) crises decreased as time went on. Using his crisis definition, the Sussex parishes showed a similar pattern. Analysis of the minor crises however produced a strikingly different pattern, as table 3 shows. Certainly overall the number of crisis years tended to fall but this reduction was entirely brought about by the decrease in major crises. In fact there were actually more minor crises in the eighteenth century than in earlier centuries.

It must be emphasised that these Sussex parishes do not constitute a proper random sample nor are there enough of them for the statistics to be more than suggestive. Nevertheless this

brief analysis does seem to support Dr. Schofield's findings part of the way. However, in case any reader of his article should have rashly inferred that the decline in crisis mortality years provided a convincing explanation for the rapid population growth of the late eighteenth century, the evidence of the minor crises in Sussex shows that the answer is not quite so simple.

One final point is worth making. On only nine occasions did any parish record the deaths of three times the normal average and six of these occasions occurred in 1558/9. Even in these years the proportion of the population wiped out probably did not greatly exceed ten per cent. Crises there may have been but in a quarter of a millenium in Sussex, none of the parishes analysed suffered a demographic catastrophe. If these parishes are typical of the region it does seem that it was a downward drift of the general level of mortality rather than any dramatic disappearance of the killer epidemics that had a significant effect on population trends, yet this may well not be true of other areas of the country. It would be interesting to know how the pattern in other regions compares with Sussex and Dr. Schofield's national sample.

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TABLE 1

Number of Crisis Years and Size of Parishes

Parish	Acreage**	Baptisms 1601-20*	No. of Crisis Years	Register Coverage
Angmering	4,200	301	5	1593-1687
Ardingly	3,817	170	12	1558-1810 (less 1650-1663)
Balcombe	4,786	193	18	1558-1810 (less 1646-1707)
Bolney	3,546	156	14	1541-1810
Cowfold	4,458	219	8	1558-1810 (less 1643-1649)
Cuckfield	11,167	816	1	1597-1810 (less 1674-1677)
East Grinstead	15,071	1051	1	1575-1810 (less 1639-1653)
Horsham	10,770	1257	2	1541-1635
Worth	13,400	497	6	1558-1810

*Though birth rates would have differed from parish to parish, these figures give a rough idea of comparative population size. **Source: Lower, *History of Sussex*, 1870.

TABLE 2

Number of 'Major' and 'Minor' Crises per Parish

Parish (in order of size)	No. of Crises, 1559-1597			No. of Crises 1598-1810		
	Major	Minor	Total	Major	Minor	Total
Horsham	2	4	6			
East Grinstead	0	2	2	1	6	7
Cuckfield				1	11	12
Worth	1	4	5	6	8	14
Cowfold	2	1	3	5	18	23
Balcombe	5	1	6	13	12	25
Ardingly	6	0	6	6	12	18
Bolney	5	1	6	9	15	24

TABLE 3

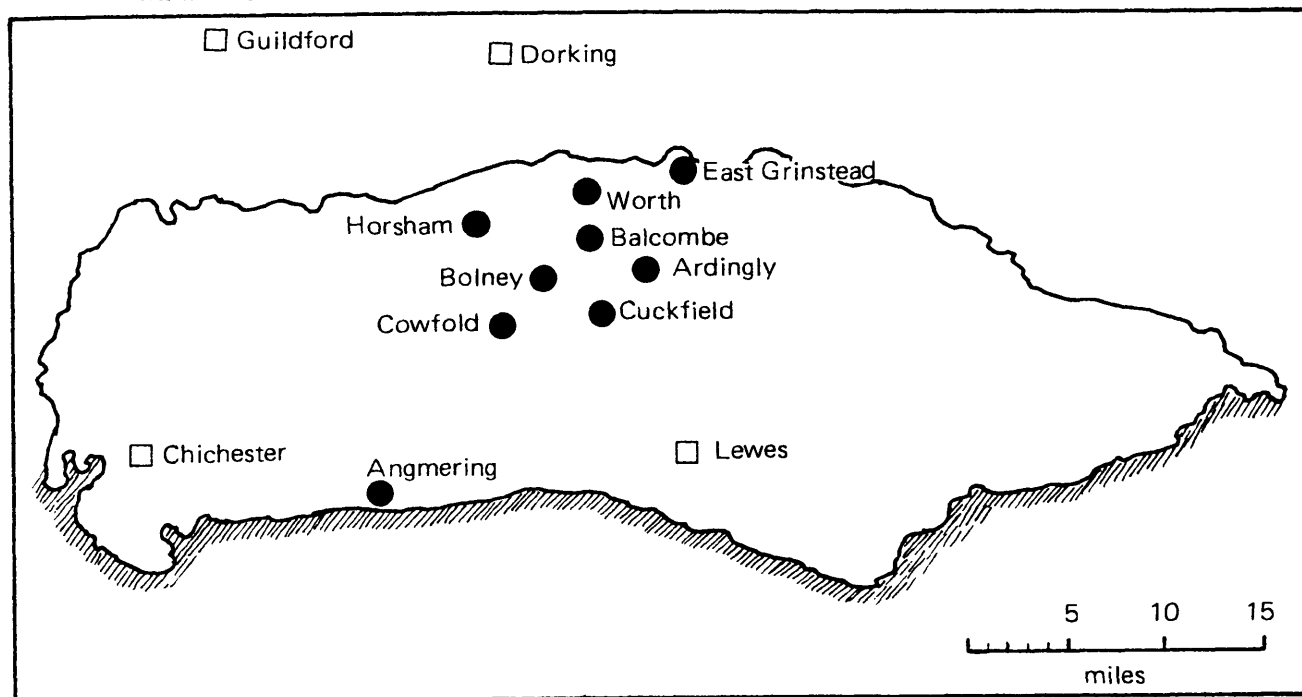
Number of 'Major' and 'Minor' Crises per half century

Period	E. Grinstead	Cuckfield	Worth	Cowfold	Ardingly	Balcombe	Bolney	Total Crises		Combined
								Minor	Major	
1550-99	2	? ¹	7	11	7	5	7	12+	27+	39+
1600-49	2	4	6	3	4	8	6	15	18	33
1650-99	3	3	0	5	5	? ²	6	10+	12+	22+
1700-49	1	3	2	7	5	6	6	21	9	30
1750-99	1	2	1	6	3	8	2	15	8	23

Notes (1) If Cuckfield behaved consistently it probably had about 1 major and 4 minor crises 1550-99 bringing the period total up to 44.

(2) If Balcombe behaved consistently it probably had about 4 major and 4 minor crises 1650-99 bringing the period total up to 30.

MAP OF MID-SUSSEX SHOWING POSITION OF PARISHES ANALYSED



Common Law Marriage : a possible cause of under-registration

In the course of work on the parish registers of Eyam, Derbyshire, I have come across a number of cases which may have some relevance to Dr. Wrigley's very interesting article in *LPS* No. 10 on clandestine marriage.

In the aggregative survey, I noticed very high baptism/marriage ratios in the decades 1641-50, and 1651-60, but thought at first that they were probably due to errors in registration. Later, in the reconstitution, I found that there were fewer baptisms recorded of illegitimate children than one would expect. Moreover, I found a number of cases in which a succession of children were baptised to, say, Christopher and Sarah Smith, followed after a brief interval by a succession of baptisms to Christopher and Mary Smith. In other words, all the appearance of a remarriage except that there was no record of the marriages or of the burial of Sarah. There were, in my opinion, too many such cases to be due to under-registration. One possibility, of course, was that the marriages and the burial of Sarah took place in neighbouring parishes. I carefully examined the printed register of a large neighbouring parish with which Eyam had close connections, but was unable to trace any of the missing marriages or burials, though other marriages, burials and baptisms of Eyam residents were recorded. At this stage I began to wonder whether there might have been, in Eyam at this period, a considerable degree of common-law marriage, with an incumbent prepared to baptise the offspring.

I understand that Mr. E.P. Thompson has been investigating cases of "wife-selling" and has concluded that in many, if not most, cases the selling was not a commercial proposition but a sort of formal act of divorce. Could it, I wonder, have been related to common-law marriage?