

CHECKING RICKMAN

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When Rickman was appointed to direct the taking of the first census in 1801, he took charge of an inquiry of unusual scope, for not only was the census intended to count all those then living, but also to provide the material from which the population history of England and Wales over the previous century could be reconstructed. He asked the incumbent of each parish to count the number of baptisms, burials and marriages recorded in his register for certain years during the century. The results of this inquiry were published in the census and have been a source both of information and controversy ever since. They have incomparably the fullest coverage of any parish register survey. Returns from more than ten thousand parishes were obtained, comprising over 95 per cent of all registering units (parishes and chapelries which kept registers). No other survey includes returns from more than a few hundred parishes and most are based on a score or fewer. But equally no other body of register information is so difficult to assess, the product of the work of many thousands of hands and the victim of striking administrative ineptitude.

No-one was more alive to the defects of the returns than Rickman himself, and he made strenuous efforts ten years later in 1811 to remedy the defects of which he was aware, but it is not difficult to show that many defects remain, both because of the method he adopted to estimate the numbers of events in registers for which no return was obtained, and because there are frequent arithmetic errors in the successive aggregations within the published census — the county totals do not always equal the sum of the totals of its constituent hundreds, nor do the national totals always agree with the sum of the county totals.¹ Errors of this sort can be detected and in most cases put right without recourse to the base upon which the whole edifice stands — the returns made to Rickman by individual incumbents. No exercise of ingenuity on these matters, however, can compensate for defects in the basic data, and these are much more difficult to gauge.

The original returns sent to Rickman no longer exist, nor does the census contain the annual totals for individual parishes. The smallest unit used in the *Parish Register Abstract* was the hundred. All that is possible, therefore, is to compare the printed hundred totals with the totals registered in the constituent parishes of the hundred in question.

Where the totals disagree this may be due either to inaccuracy on the part of one or more of the incumbents making returns in 1801; or to inaccurate arithmetic on the part of the census clerks; or to a printing error; or, of course, to inaccuracy on the part of whoever is carrying out the check. There are also reasons why discrepancies may occur without any careless inaccuracy being involved. For example, since Rickman's instructions were very brief and uninformative², some incumbents are believed to have decided to exclude from their returns of burials those cases where the dead man or woman came from another parish.

A certain amount of work has already been done to try to discover the nature and extent of disagreements between the published totals for hundreds and the 'true' figure derived from the original registers but this has been on too small a scale to determine whether, for example, there was a tendency to undercount the entries generally; whether there were differences between the three series in the accuracy of the published figures (marriages were easier to count because of the use of printed marriage registers after Hardwicke's Act; baptisms are easily undercounted if entries regarding twins are read hastily as a single baptism; and so on); and whether any undercounting grew more pronounced for the earlier years, less familiar to the incumbent in 1801. The Cambridge Group has recently done a little work on this subject but this has been confined to a small number of cases where a single parish constituted a hundred in its own right, and where therefore the published totals could be compared with the totals in an aggregative tabulation done for the Group by a local historian.³

Recently, through the kindness of Dr. R. R. Sellman, I have had an opportunity to compare the published hundred totals with the 'true' totals for a hundred consisting of a number of parishes, and in this article I wish both to describe the results of this exercise and to make an appeal for further similar exercises to be carried out so that a reliable picture of the general accuracy of the 1801 returns can be built up.⁴

Cliston Hundred lies in east Devon and consists of five parishes, Broadclyst, Butterleigh, Clyst Hydon, Clyst St. Lawrence and Whimble. Butterleigh is detached, lying a few miles to the north of the other four parishes which form a compact group. The 1801 census records a population of 2561 for the hundred. Broadclyst, five miles north-east of Exeter, was much the largest parish, both in area and population. In 1801 its population was 1540. Next followed Whimble with 483, Clyst Hydon 257, Clyst St. Lawrence 156, and Butterleigh 125.

Table 1 compares the totals from the *Parish Register Abstract* of the 1801 census with the totals derived from Dr. Sellman's work on the five registers. Rickman asked for totals for each year from 1754 onwards in the marriage register. It is clear from the national totals for the year 1754 itself that the returns for this year were frequently incomplete, and I have therefore excluded this year from the table. There remains 46 annual totals 1755-1800. The baptism and burial series comprise 29 annual totals, 1700, 1710 and every tenth year till 1780 and thereafter each year till 1800.

Table 1. Clifton Hundred: baptisms, burials and marriages

	BAPTISMS					BURIALS				
	A	B ₁	B ₂	B ₁ -A	B ₂ -A	A	B ₁	B ₂	B ₁ -A	B ₂ -A
1700	94	79	83	-15	-11	51	47	51	-4	0
1710	78	68	68	-10	-10	53	59	74	+6	+21
1720	82	91	84	+9	+2	53	50	51	-3	-2
1730	65	60	58	-5	-7	112	133	114	+21	+2
1740	89	81	78	-8	-11	49	49	59	0	+10
1750	87	80	90	-7	+3	57	61	59	+4	+2

	BAPTISMS			BURIALS		
	A	B ₁	B ₁ -A	A	B ₁	B ₁ -A
1760	73	76	+3	33	32	-1
1770	76	86	+10	32	38	+6
1780	72	76	+4	38	47	+9
1781	71	72	+1	39	44	+5
1782	64	67	+3	33	39	+6
1783	67	68	+1	51	53	+2
1784	67	66	-1	41	48	+7
1785	72	70	-2	60	61	+1
1786	86	78	-8	52	55	+3
1787	83	84	+1	32	36	+4
1788	72	72	0	43	47	+4
1789	88	88	0	37	50	+13
1790	72	74	+2	37	42	+5
1791	61	64	+3	28	36	+8
1792	90	92	+2	33	34	+1
1793	80	81	+1	30	35	+5
1794	77	77	0	30	35	+5
1795	92	92	0	49	58	+9
1796	74	75	+1	55	59	+4
1797	67	66	-1	50	56	+6
1798	72	72	0	42	45	+3
1799	86	84	-2	41	46	+5
1800	77	81	+4	48	51	+3

	MARRIAGES				MARRIAGES		
	A	B ₁	B ₁ -A		A	B ₁	B ₁ -A
1755	21	21	0	1778	12	12	0
1756	20	20	0	1779	23	21	-2
1757	17	18	+1	1780	10	10	0
1758	20	20	0	1781	12	22	+10
1759	14	14	0	1782	18	18	0
1760	19	19	0	1783	15	14	-1
1761	14	14	0	1784	20	19	-1
1762	19	19	0	1785	15	15	0
1763	18	18	0	1786	23	22	-1
1764	15	14	-1	1787	14	14	0
1765	19	17	-2	1788	21	20	-1
1766	10	9	-1	1789	21	21	0
1767	10	8	-2	1790	12	12	0
1768	19	19	0	1791	15	13	-2
1769	21	20	-1	1792	15	15	0
1770	21	21	0	1793	11	11	0
1771	20	18	-2	1794	15	15	0
1772	16	16	0	1795	13	13	0
1773	13	12	-1	1796	10	10	0
1774	20	20	0	1797	10	10	0
1775	23	23	0	1798	13	12	-1
1776	20	20	0	1799	11	11	0
1777	18	15	-3	1800	19	19	0

A: Rickman
 B₁: Cambridge Group tabulations by New Style calendar
 B₂: Same, by Old Style calendar

For the first six annual totals of baptisms and burials in the years 1700 to 1750 two figures are given, one based on the New Style calendar 1 January — 31 December, the other on the Old Style year 25 March — 24 March. Rickman did not indicate which time unit was to be used for the period before the introduction of the New Style calendar in 1752, but the evidence of the six single parish hundreds analysed so far strongly suggests that most incumbents used the Old Style calendar for the early years. For hundreds consisting of several parishes, it may prove harder to establish what was normal practice since there may well have been inconsistency within the hundred but it is very important in any checking exercise to record totals in a manner which permits both totals to be calculated. The evidence of Cliston Hundred is indecisive about whether the Old or New Style was used. The agreement between Rickman and Group tabulations is poor in both cases. The close agreement of the Old Style burial total for 1730 with Rickman's figure in a year of swingeing mortality suggests that this was the year used by Cliston incumbents when making their returns, since the New Style total is far too high in that year. Just the opposite is true of 1710, however, when the comparative discrepancies point to the conclusion that the New Style calendar was followed.

The marriage data present least problems of interpretation. The two series are closely similar. In 1781 the large discrepancy is probably a printing error in the census or an arithmetic error on the part of a census clerk. Elsewhere where the totals in the two series differ, Rickman is almost invariably slightly the higher. This is almost certainly due to the very unsatisfactory state of the surviving marriage register of Clyst St. Lawrence. In years where marriages are recorded there is always agreement between the two series. In other years the series totals frequently differ. Clyst St. Lawrence was a small parish and the scale and timing of the shortfall in the Group totals compared with Rickman's is similar to the pattern of marriages in the parish in the years where they are recorded. In 1801 the incumbent may have possessed a full record and have been able to make a complete return. There is no reference in the *Parish Register Abstract* to any defectiveness in this register.

The discrepancies between the two series for baptisms are modest in general, apart from the early years where the Group series totals are usually well short of Rickman's figures whichever calendar is used. From 1760 onwards the Group figure tends to be slightly the higher but the differences are normally small. They are smaller than the totals even for the smallest parish. They may possibly reflect a tendency to miss twins if both are recorded at a single entry. This would cause about one child in eighty to be missed.

Burials are more puzzling. In the 23 years from 1760 onwards there is a higher figure in the Group series in every year except the first. Over these years as a whole the Group total of events is 113 higher than Rickman's figure. Given the consistent pattern of differences the most likely explanation is that all the returns for one of the parishes were missing in Rickman's returns. There are two parishes which appear *prima facie* to be of the right size to make good the deficiency. Over the period 1760 to 1800 the totals burials registered in Butterleigh for the years

for which Rickman collected information was 114; in Clyst Hydon the comparable figure is 121. The other three parishes are much too big or too small to produce similar totals. Table 2 shows the effect of assuming that either Butterleigh or Clyst Hydon was excluded from the Rickman totals.

Table 2. Cliston Hundred burials

	No. of Annual totals	Discrepancy between comparable totals											Mean difference
		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10...13	
A	23	0	3	1	3	3	5	3	1	1	2	0... 1	5.0
B	23	1	3	4	6	2	2	1	3	0	0	1... 0	3.7
C	23	5	10	2	1	1	2	0	1	0	1	0... 0	2.0

- A. Group totals compared with Rickman's (table 1)
- B. As A but adding Clyst Hydon totals to Rickman's figures.
- C. As A but adding Butterleigh totals to Rickman's figures.

The table constitutes a strong case for supposing that the burials for Butterleigh are missing from Rickman's totals. When they are added to his totals 15 of the 23 annual burial totals for the hundred either agree exactly in the two series or differ by only one. If Butterleigh burial totals are also added to Rickman's figures for the first half of the century they leave the discrepancies between the two series almost exactly the same on balance, exaggerating the differences in some years but reducing them in others. The most reasonable assumption to make is probably that Rickman's series excluded Butterleigh burials throughout. It is conceivable that the Butterleigh totals were entered in error in another hundred. Butterleigh lies at a distance from the other parishes in the hundred. Its location suggests strong links with the hundred of Hayridge and this is reflected in its registers, especially in the early decades of the century.

Table 3. Cliston Hundred baptisms, burials and marriages

	No. of annual totals	Discrepancy between comparable totals											Mean difference
		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10...13	
Baptisms	23 (1760-1800)	5	7	4	3	2	0	0	0	1	0	1... 0	2.2
Burials	23 (1760-1800)	0	3	1	3	3	5	3	1	1	2	0... 0	5.0
Marriages	46 (1755-1800)	29	10	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1... 0	0.7

Overall totals of events

	Rickman Total	Mean	Group Total	Group Mean
Baptisms	1739	75.6	1761	76.6
Burials	934	40.6	1047	45.5
Marriages	755	16.4	744	16.2

Table 3 uses the same format as table 2 to show the overall pattern of agreement between the two series for baptisms, burials and marriages. It provides a recapitulation of the data in table 1 in a form which makes it easier to judge the general accuracy of the Rickman series. I have already discussed the probable reasons for the differences between the parallel series. It is perhaps interesting to note that the distribution of discrepancies in the burial series is very similar to that in the baptism series if Butterleigh burial totals are added to the Rickman series (compare line C of table 2 and the top line of table 3); and that the mean differences are then closely similar.

The early years in the baptism and burial series remain a problem. The discrepancies are large and patternless. There is no reason to suppose that they arise because a whole parish was missed by Rickman (in general his totals are the larger). Nor does the answer appear to lie in uncertainty about whether the New or Old Style calendar was to be used. Other possibilities were considered, for example that the incumbent of the largest parish, Broadclyst, where about half of all the events were recorded, might have sent in totals for the wrong year during the currency of the Old Style calendar (1699/1700 instead of 1700/1 and so on). If this had been the case it might have accounted both for the size of the discrepancies and the fact that they occurred in both directions. Tabulating the totals in this way, however, produced still larger discrepancies. No straightforward explanation appears to square with the data.

Even a comparison between the *Parish Register Abstract* totals for one hundred and an independent aggregation based on the surviving registers reveals some points of interest. But it will only be possible to make a general assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the *Abstract* totals when similar comparisons can be made for a score or more of hundreds, preferably widely scattered and representing areas of differing economic and social type. Since the number of years for which totals have to be abstracted is relatively small, it is not a very time-consuming enterprise to tackle even a hundred consisting of a dozen or more parishes. The monthly totals of events can be recorded conveniently on the standard Cambridge Group aggregative tabulation forms (P.E.F. I, II and III). The Group can also provide lists of the parishes in any hundred for which Rickman supposed he had obtained returns in 1801. If any reader of *LPS* is willing to collaborate in a joint effort to discover whether there is any general pattern in the discrepancies between *Abstract* totals and aggregations made for comparison with them, I shall be very happy to hear from him.

NOTES

1. I hope to deal with this question at length in a forthcoming publication.
2. Rickman addressed two questions regarding parish register totals to each incumbent, the fourth and fifth in the schedule of questions which was annexed to the Census Act (41 Geo. III, cap. 15). They ran as follows: 'What was the number of baptisms and burials in your parish, township, or place, in the several years 1700, 1710, 1720, 1730, 1740, 1750, 1760, 1770, 1780 and each subsequent year, to the 31st day of December, 1800, distinguishing males from females? What was the number of marriages in your parish, township, or place, in each year, from the year 1754 inclusive to the end of the year 1800?'
In addition incumbents were invited to refer to any matters 'which you think it necessary to remark in explanation of your answers to any of the preceding questions.' It is worth noting that Rickman printed an Observation in the form of a footnote to the list of census questions which was republished in the **Parish Register Abstract** volume remarking that 'In cases where the returns are stated to be in some years "defective", such defects have been supplied, in every instance, by an average number of baptisms, burials, and marriages (or of either) taken from the returns of the same parish, in such of the years specified in the respective tables as are immediately preceding and subsequent to such defect.'
3. This work will be described in the publication referred to in note 1.
4. Dr. Sellman has been kind enough to look through the text of the article and has made valuable suggestions about the inclusion of additional details. He also carried out supplementary checks on the registers.