

OF SUCH AS ARE OF RIPER YEARS? A NOTE ON AGE AT BAPTISM

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'How old be you, Christian?'

'Thirty-one last tatie-digging, Mister Fairway!'

'Not a boy — not a boy. Still there's hope yet.'

'That's my age by baptism, because that's put down in the great book of the Judgement that they keep in church vestry; but mother told me I was born some time afore I was christened.'

'Ah!'

'But she couldn't tell when, to save her life, except that there was no moon.'¹

Dr Woodward's recent article on the Commonwealth Act and Yorkshire parish registers reopens some interesting questions about the age at baptism before the 19th century and thus, *inter alia*, about the reliability of Anglican registers as a record of fertility.²

I

One of the registers omitted by Berry and Schofield from their study of the birth/baptism interval³ is that of Liverpool Parish Church (St. Nicholas) which has been published up to 1725.⁴ This register would seem to have significance for two reasons. First, it is for a large, rapidly-growing, urban and industrial parish, and thus in its detail a comparative rarity among the records currently being used in studies of demographic history before 1801. Secondly, it records the dates of both birth and baptism for the whole of the eighteenth century. Indeed in common with much of Lancashire all Liverpool's Anglican parishes in the eighteenth century have baptismal registers following this format, the total number of baptisms reaching about 1000 *per annum* by 1750 and about 2000 *per annum* by 1780. Not only does this fill a gap in the evidence for birth/baptism intervals noted by Berry and Schofield⁵ but it also helps to overcome the problems of small samples which may be reflected in their results. It provides data comparable to Dr Woodward's splendid figures for Leeds.⁶

Prior to a fuller analysis Table 1 may make a small contribution to this topic. The same percentile divisions (plus the 90 per cent added by Woodward) have been used but the semi-inter-quartile range employed by Berry and Schofield has been omitted since the data are not highly skewed by a few very long intervals (the mean, it will be noticed, is not far from the 50 per cent median value in each period). IE denotes the number of incomplete entries.

Table 1 Interval in days (± 0.5) by which the stated percentile of births was baptized: four sample periods from Liverpool parish registers.

		25%	50%	75%	90%	N	IE	Mean
St. Nicholas	1697*	3	6	9	11	145	2	
	1698*	4	7	10	14	114	0	
	1699*	4	6	9	13	130	3	
	1700*	4	7	10	14	131	0	
		4	6	10	13	520	5	7.2
St. Nicholas	1720	5	8	12	16	206	25	
	1721	6	9	13	16	196	11	
	1722	6	9	12	17	213	27	
	1723	6	8	12	16	191	19	
		6	9	12	16	806	82	9.6
St. Nicholas	1743	13	17	23	28	268	16	
	1744	13	18	23	28	275	13	
		13	18	23	28	543	29	18.3
St. Nicholas	1765	15	21	27	35	592	5	
St. Peter	1765	14	20	25	29	304	7	
St. Thomas	1765-9	17	21	29	35	285	3	
		15	21	27	33	1181	15	22.3

*denotes old years

Several points can be drawn from this table:

1. The number of incomplete entries (in this case where the date of **birth** is omitted) is small, though higher in 1720 and 1722 than in most of the cases cited in previous studies. Unless one makes the assumption (quite unwarranted by the circumstantial evidence) that many of these were adult baptisms, they may be safely forgotten. In some cases the date was omitted but not the month.
2. Close clustering is clear from the 90 per cent values but is shown even more forcefully in Figure 1 which cumulates the entries up to the 98 per cent level. We would suggest that this kind of graph is the most effective way of describing these data in discrete form.
3. There is little here to support the notion that delayed baptisms were used to hide premarital pregnancies in the record.⁷ Possibly such social refinements were not regarded as important in a port city like Liverpool where a low bridal pregnancy rate seems very unlikely. Lack of strictly comparable figures however makes it difficult to tell whether the fear of eternal damnation was causing a mean birth/baptism interval smaller than in other parts of the country in the eighteenth century. The values for the 25 per cent, 50 per cent and

75 per cent divisions would seem to fit the general trends outlined by Berry and Schofield (who do not describe the intervals in the remaining 25 per cent of baptisms) and are noticeably similar to those for Culcheth, also in Lancashire.

4. Woodward notes the consistent behaviour of parents especially in Leeds.⁸ Our graph illustrates that in the aggregate the lack of random behaviour is also evident through time — in other words that the shape of the graph might reasonably be predicted.

One minor point about the measurement of intervals is worth illustrating by a single example from the Liverpool, St. Nicholas' register: the left side of Table 2 is a transcription of the date columns of part of the register for 1743 in which it seems distinctly possible that there should be five entries for September in the birth column, not one.

Table 2 An extract from the register of St. Nicholas', Liverpool, 1743.

Born	Register	Baptised	Recorded interval	Probable interval
August 23		September 4	12 days	12 days
22		5	14	14
18		8	21	21
9		16	38	7
4		18	45	14
7		20	44	13
2		22	51	20
August 30		25	26	26
September 15		September 25	10	10

Such occurrences are not infrequent and might well be edited out in some printed registers where ditto is used indiscriminately.

II

The need to examine baptismal habits geographically has already been implied by Hair and by Berry and Schofield⁹ but may be re-emphasized by the following picture being revealed by work in South-west England by one of us (Jackson). It contrasts markedly with what has been described for Liverpool.

Of particular interest in some East Somerset and West Wiltshire parishes is the occurrence of frequent register entries giving the age at baptism of children aged 'one year' or over and adults. Table 3 summarizes the statistics from three Anglican registers in this area. It is noticeable that in all three parishes the proportion of baptisms with a birth/baptism interval exceeding one year (one cannot strictly say 365 days — see note at the bottom of the table) is of the order of 5 per cent or more. This might suggest that baptism as soon as possible after birth was considered to be less important than in most areas for which figures have been published. Indeed it **may** suggest that baptism in general was marginally less universal. In this example the birth/baptism interval is arrived at for children and adults only, not infants which are taken here to be those under 'one year' old: the actual date of birth is rarely stated in this part of the country.

Table 3 Baptisms in Frome, North Bradley and Rode Parishes, 1701-1800.

	AGE GROUP (years)													Total	>1
	<1	1-3	4-6	7-9	-12	-15	-18	-21	-24	-27	-30	<30	IE		
Frome (Soms.)	16234	436	176	95	56	58	47	55	28	21	15	29	1	17255	1017
	% 94.1	2.5	1.0	.6	.3	.3	.3	.3	.2	.1	.1	.2	+	100.0	5.9
N. Bradley (Wilts.)	2964	72	37	26	15	12	17	15	7	3	2	8	34	3212	248
	% 92.3	2.2	1.2	.8	.5	.4	.5	.4	.2	.1	.1	.2	1.0	100.0	7.7
Rode (Soms.)	3054	64	19	10	6	8	10	5	8	2	1	7	8	3202	148
	% 95.4	2.0	.6	.3	.2	.2	.3	.2	.2	.1	+	.2	.2	100.0	4.6
	22256	572	232	131	77	83	69	75	43	26	18	44	43	23669	1413
	% 94.0	2.4	1.0	.6	.3	.4	.3	.3	.2	.1	.1	.2	.2	100.0	6.0

IE = Adults and children over one-year-old but whose precise age is unspecified.

+ = <0.5 per cent.

Note: The division between <1 and 1-3 years (infants and children) is imprecise, depending as it does on a description in the register such as 'one year old'. This further blurs any distinction between the small number of delayed infant baptisms and the even smaller number of child and adult baptisms.

The reasons for delaying baptism in this area are not entirely clear. Table 3 (covering, it should be emphasized, a whole century) describes, as one might expect, a rapid tail-off with over 40 per cent of the non-infant baptisms being of children less than four years. However there is a levelling out of the numbers in the teenage and early 20s groups.

The explanation of these patterns can only be tentative at this stage but four suggestions might be made:

1. A certain degree of laxity on the part of parents bringing infants to be baptized may have been encouraged by remoteness from the parish church, a hypothesis which Woodward was not able to confirm.¹⁰ Frome was an extensive parish without chapelries, but remoteness would certainly not apply to Rode which was small in both area and population.
2. The number of baptisms of young adults may be accounted for by the need for baptism as a prior condition for marriage. This could be verified by simple cross checking with the marriage registers.
3. A number of baptisms, particularly of older persons, may have taken place immediately prior to death. This, incidentally, raises the little explored question of the number of persons who were never baptised at all.¹¹
4. The baptism of a child might have led to the baptism of all other eligible members of a family. As in several other districts, instances of whole families being baptized on one day are not uncommonly recorded in the registers of this area, and such cases like all delayed baptisms present problems for aggregative analysis.
5. The probability that a person was born in the parish of his or her baptism must decrease as the birth/baptism interval is enlarged. Family entries, of the kind just referred to, can give interesting

information, in the manner of census enumerators' books, on such movements. The following example from the baptism register of Rode, 1730, will suffice to illustrate this:

- September 2 Samuel Withy. Born in the Parish of Westbury 1694
- September 21 Mary, d. of Samuel Withy. Born at Rudge in Beckington Parish 1718
- September 21 Ann, d. of Samuel Withy. Born at Rudge in Beckington Parish 1722
- September 21 Alexander, s. of Samuel Withy. Born in Rode 1725
- September 21 Samuel, s. of Samuel Withy. Born in Rode 1730

Obviously where age is known it is necessary to correct entries retrospectively especially where the analysis has a monthly as well as an annual basis, yet it is interesting to note the scanty attention that points 4 and 5 just listed are given in the standard literature on aggregative analysis even where it recognises that these correction procedures may be necessary.¹² A more detailed analysis currently being undertaken of the Bishop's transcripts for the parish of Westbury, Wiltshire, (where either date of birth or age at baptism is recorded in nearly all cases from 1785 till the end of the century) has so far revealed that of the 309 baptisms performed in the years 1785-9 only 80.6 per cent took place within a year of birth, 73.8 per cent within six months, and 60.8 per cent within three months. Nearly 10 per cent of all baptisms were of persons aged three years and over. The ages of those baptized were greater still in the 1790s reducing even further the chances that those being baptized in Westbury were born there, as would normally have to be assumed for most practical analytical work in aggregative studies.

A related feature of the registers of this Somerset/Wiltshire area is a concentration of baptisms on particular days and years which cannot result from real trends in fertility: several baptisms on a single day seem to have taken place at a single ceremony. Examples can be found at Frome in 1711 and 1809, with high proportions of non-infant baptisms (37 per cent in 1711). In 1779 when North Bradley experienced a threefold increase in the number of baptisms over the previous five years' average, 56 per cent of the candidates were baptized on two consecutive Sundays — May 30th and June 6th (twenty-nine and thirty-one respectively out of an annual total of 107 of which forty-four were over one year old). Similarly in Bradford on Avon in 1754 the register records that thirteen children were baptized together on Shrove Tuesday. This phenomenon is not quite the same as that observed by Krause in Bedfordshire, where baptisms were postponed until the saint's day of the particular church:¹³ in the Somerset/Wiltshire area it was not generally an annual event (though in Bradford on Avon there was a concentration of baptisms on Christmas Day in many years) and, in addition, large numbers of children and adults were involved as well as infants. The character of these 'mass baptisms' is more suggestive of zealous activity on the part of the incumbent possibly following a period of relative neglect of infant baptisms. No certain connection with the influence of John and Charles Wesley in this district, especially in the 1750s and 1760s, can be established.

III

We are well aware that none of this is very conclusive: it does no more than suggest (and not for the first time) that regional variations in baptismal habits may be important. Several questions remain, for example:

1. was the normal practice in a given locality sufficiently consistent to allow us to talk of 'late baptism' and 'early baptism' regions?
2. if so how large were these regions?
3. do they coincide with dioceses or archdeaconries, or are we simply dealing with the relative activity of parochial clergy as Hair has suggested?¹⁴
4. what part did the growing strength of nonconformist allegiances play where these are known to have varied from region to region?
5. is there a regular continuum between late baptism of infants, child baptism and adult baptism?
6. what overall effect will delayed baptism have on aggregative analysis in any region, or if considered seasonally?¹⁵

So far the birth/baptism interval has been studied chiefly from printed registers with a consequent lack of evidence for the crucial period of the eighteenth century. Answers to questions such as those posed here will be partly answered only through further research with unpublished registers. Before this is undertaken could we make a plea for standardization of statistical procedures and graphical presentation. For example it is important when using discrete scales (as with the percentiles in our tables or graph) to have standard procedures to deal with real numbers since x per cent of a sample will usually possess a decimal point: where, let us say, 40 per cent of a sample of 523 baptisms equals 209.2, then this must be taken as **more than** 209 so that if the total number of baptisms completed within, say eight days is 209, the 40 per cent level falls at nine days **not** eight days. Not only will attention to such details allow for a more precise description of the data so that the true importance of a few long intervals may be more clearly seen, but it will also permit sensible comparative use of statistical significance tests both for sample and non-sample data.

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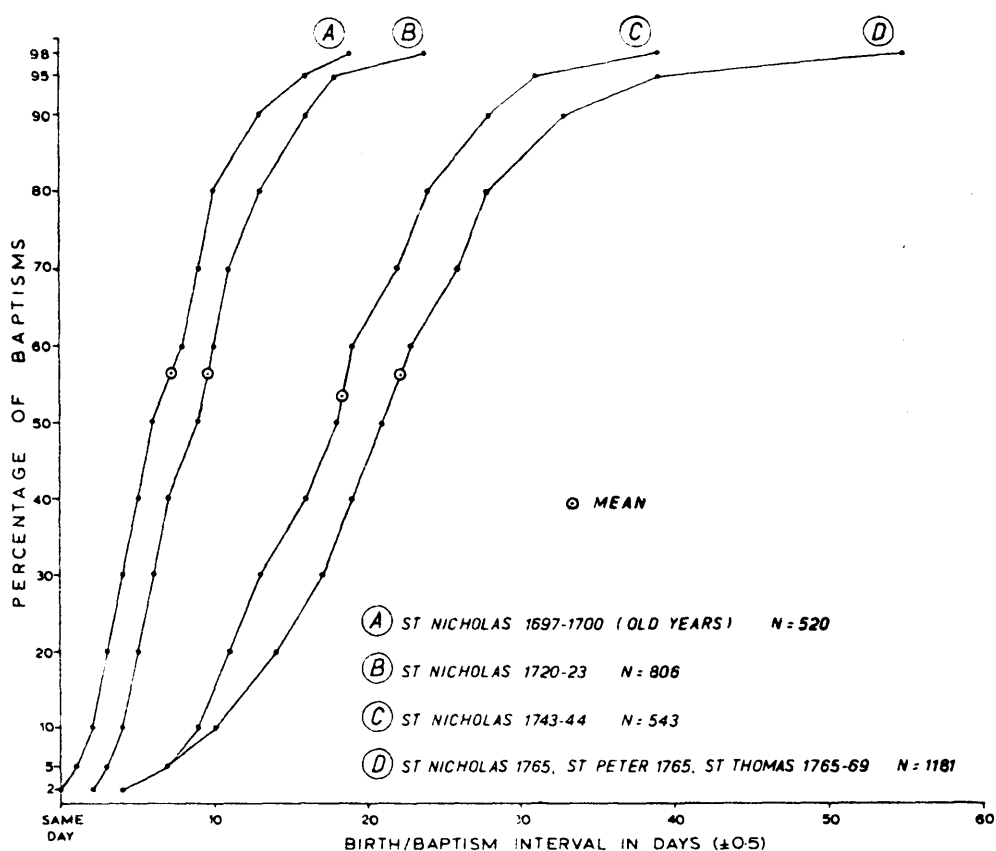


Fig 1 — Birth/baptism intervals in Liverpool, St. Nicholas' Parish for 4 selected periods with additional data from Liverpool St. Peter in 1765 and Liverpool St. Thomas 1765-1769, showing the cumulative proportion of baptisms achieved by a given interval in days.

NOTES

1. A conversation between the ineligible bachelor Christian Cantle and Timothy Fairway, the turf cutter, in Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, 1878, New Wessex edition 1974, p.53.
2. D. Woodward, 'The impact of the Commonwealth Act on Yorkshire parish registers,' *Local Population Studies*, 14, 1975, pp. 15-31.
3. B. Midi Berry and R. S. Schofield, 'Age at baptism in pre-industrial England,' *Population Studies*, 25, 1971, pp. 453-63.
4. *Lancashire Parish Register Society*, 35, 1909 and 101, 1963.
5. Berry and Schofield, p. 455.
6. Woodward, p.20.
7. P. E. H. Hair, 'Bridal pregnancy in rural England in earlier centuries,' *Population Studies*, 20, 1966, pp.234-5.
8. Woodward, p.20.
9. Hair, pp.235-6; Berry and Schofield, p.460.
10. Woodward, p.22.
11. Hair, p.236.
12. E. A. Wrigley (ed.), *An Introduction to English Historical Demography*, 1966, p.62.
13. J. T. Krause, 'The changing adequacy of English registration,' in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (eds.), *Population in History*, 1965, pp.384-5.
14. Hair, p.236.
15. Since this note was written R. E. Jones has estimated that, since christian burial was denied to the unbaptized, delayed baptism caused the 'loss of between one-third and one-half of all infant deaths from English demographic records before 1837.' 'Infant mortality in rural North Shropshire, 1561-1810,' *Population Studies*, 30, 1976, p.316.