

MARRIAGE SEASONALITY 1761-1810: AN ASSESSMENT OF PATTERNS IN SEVENTEEN SHROPSHIRE PARISHES

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In an earlier article Leslie Bradley has argued that marriage seasonality appears to reflect three factors — fundamental, local and accidental.¹ The first of these factors includes elements such as ecclesiastical discouragement of marriage in certain months or economic constraints and produces consistent regional or national patterns, while 'local' and 'accidental' factors introduce variations. Most of the published studies have emphasised the more 'fundamental' seasonal features arising from ecclesiastical and economic control, but obviously other factors, such as the size and social cohesiveness of the community concerned, or the level of extra parochial marriage, may modify the seasonal pattern. However, before these local factors can be assessed, more detailed studies of the extent to which periods of ecclesiastical prohibition were observed in all parts of the country are necessary.

The present study uses data drawn from seventeen published registers of parishes of different sizes in central Shropshire over the period 1761-1810.² The parishes lie in a discontinuous north-south belt, ranging from the market town of Wem on the north Shropshire plain, with a population of 3,121 in 1811 to a group of small parishes, all with populations below 300 in 1811, situated on the southern bank of the Severn floodplain south of Shrewsbury. To avoid the problem of small samples, the seventeen parishes have been divided into five groups, based on their population size in the 1811 census, as shown in Table 1. For each group of parishes the information on marriage seasonality is presented in the form of a standard index, in which the figure 100 represents the number of events that would occur in a month if the annual total of marriages occurred evenly taking account of the different number of days in each month.³

Table 1. Parishes grouped by size of population in 1811.

Size-group	Parish	1811 Population	Size-group	Parish	1811 Population
2000+	Wem	3121	300-599	Berrington	575
				Stokesay	489
1000-1999	Condover	1289		Hopesay	484
	Bitterley	1083		Onibury	415
	Stanton Lacy	1026		Smethcote	359
600-999	Stretton	944	200-299	Acton Burnell	290
	Wistanstow	659		Pitchford	255
	Bromfield	610		Stapleton	234
				Longnor	231
				Leebotwood	208

Source: Population Enumeration Census Volume 1811.

The first panel of Table 2 presents a seasonal marriage index for each parish size group over the whole period, while the second panel combines the parishes and presents a seasonal index for individual decades. The immediate impression gained from the aggregate figures is the similarity in patterns of marriage seasonality between these Shropshire examples and those presented in **LPS** for other areas. This reinforces the idea of fundamental ecclesiastical constraints having a national impact.

The church discouraged marriage during three periods of the year. The first of these from Septuagesima to Low Sunday, covering three weeks of February, the whole of March and two weeks in April, is clearly evident in these data. March is consistently the lowest month in all parish size-groups and for the bulk of the period; only ceasing to be so from 1801-10 when August replaces it. There is some indication that marriages were also infrequent in April and February in certain decades, but the levels of marriage in February vary in parishes of different size. It appears that the main impact of ecclesiastical prohibition is concentrated in March, but its impact is noticeably weaker in the case of the large market town of Wem. These data also suggest that the observance of this prohibition weakened during the early nineteenth century, with an increase in the proportions of marriages solemnised in March, but earlier the discouraged period was widely recognised. This corresponds well with Bradley's findings for Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire parishes⁴ and with Massey's findings in Burton Joyce⁵. Similar findings also occur in the data for Oswaldkirk (North Riding, Yorkshire)⁶ and in the Ardèche⁷. It therefore seems fair to conclude that in general throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century Lent was still avoided for weddings and that only in the early years of the nineteenth century did the situation change, but the strength of observance depended very much on the size of parish, which in turn may well reflect the control of social convention and more specifically that of the incumbent.

These data also raise questions concerning the relative performances of February and April. If March marriages were discouraged, is the February peak simply a response to this constraint, an attempt to beat the ban which Lent imposed? But if this were so, why is April which comes after the end of Lent such a quiet month?

Table 2. Marriage seasonality in seventeen Shropshire parishes 1761-1810 by size of parish.

	Total No. of marriages	Index values/month											
		J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
c.3000 (Wem)	891	143	130	73	96	110	88	81	68	76	76	69	183
1000-1999	992	80	100	52	96	217	136	65	94	72	92	95	95
600-999	599	70	107	45	85	268	138	84	64	52	106	89	86
300-599	590	73	78	35	93	304	113	101	80	53	73	97	97
200-299	283	75	114	53	98	246...	120	100	62	64	62	112	88
All parishes †	3355	93	107	53	94	215	118	82	77	66	84	89	116

By decade

	Total No. of marriages	Index values/month											
		J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
1761-1770	660	98	112	54	87	242	98	81	77	61	89	85	116
1771-1780	734	89	121	35	94	262	117	76	75	58	76	89	107
1781-1790	639	94	87	40	97	194	137	94	60	66	107	91	131
1791-1800	659	95	88	48	101	186	120	70	98	76	82	87	121
1801-1810	663	89	122	82	95	194	120	71	73	69	89	92	103

(100 = annual total/365 x number of days in a month)

The second period when marriages were discouraged was from Rogation to Trinity, covering two weeks in May; here the published evidence is more equivocal, but the results are plain. For the total sample May is easily the most popular month, rising in importance until 1780 and falling slightly thereafter. In the villages May dominates the marriage pattern, with index values double and treble those that might be expected with an even monthly distribution. In the market town of Wem however, while May always features as a popular month, it is December which dominates the registers. Thus the second period appears to have less impact than the first, confirming Bradley's findings⁸; refuting the notion that 'marriages in May were unlucky'⁹, and suggesting a possible regional contrast between Shropshire and Yorkshire, as May never features as a peak month in the Oswaldkirk data¹⁰. Indeed this may be an example of local, economic or customary factors shaping patterns of marriage seasonality. For example, May festivities and fairs seem to have been common in Shropshire¹¹. Two contemporary **Directories** list May Day fairs in a majority of market centres in the county, but whether these together with the spring time season encouraged marriage is an open question¹².

The final prohibited period, from Advent to Hilary, covering December and two weeks in January does not appear to have been observed at all. In the villages the index numbers for December and January are at about the same level as in November and several other months in the year, while Wem records both December and January as peak months over the whole period. Bradley has noted that from 1720-70 any discouragement on marriage in these months appears to have been relaxed, so that by the end of the eighteenth century December was frequently the most popular month¹³. Certainly there is evidence of December peaks in other areas, but their incidence is infrequent.

A number of other features can be noted from these aggregate tables. It has been suggested that a summer trough in marriage is a fairly general phenomenon, with August recording low monthly totals; this has been connected with the labour demands of harvest time, but Bradley has noted that the same pattern recurs in less rural parishes, in part refuting such an occupational explanation¹⁴. In these data, while levels of marriage in July, August and September are low, there is considerable variation through time and between groups. Generally September is the lowest of these three months followed by August and then July: indeed July seems to be one of the more popular months in the smaller parishes. Overall, marriages appear to be concentrated in May, June and July, with the summer period of above - average numbers increasing in length as parish size decreases. In many other studies November stands out as a popular month, possibly reflecting an easing of the farming year and a time of surplus, but here a November peak only occurs amongst the smallest parishes¹⁵.

The broad pattern that stands out in these aggregate data confirms the importance of Lent as a control on monthly seasonality, but indicates that more diverse factors, probably highly local in nature, influence the degree of observance of the other two discouraged periods. These data also suggest that certain of the contrasts that exist may well be a function of the size of the parishes concerned, reflecting the degree of economic diversity. In particular the monthly pattern of Wem, the small market town differs from that of the rural parishes, suggesting that size and degree of urbanisation may influence seasonal characteristics, producing contrasts between town and countryside. Moreover in the smaller parishes the incumbent or chief landowner played a dominant role. This was particularly true in 'estate parishes' where the influx of new employees was closely controlled from year to year¹⁶. In such circumstances, marriage may well have been associated with certain constraints and customary months of solemnisation. Similarly, in such parishes a devout incumbent might have been particularly effective in maintaining the ecclesiastical periods of discouragement free of marriages, particularly in December when Christmas services and festivities may well have taken precedence.

Finally, there are a number of ways in which marriage seasonality could be investigated further with profit. Firstly, marriages could be divided into those between local people and those where spouses come from outside the parish. If there are differences in the seasonality of the marriages of the two groups then both mobility and employment may be influential in shaping the aggregate seasonal pattern. Secondly, greater attention needs to be given to the precise role of economy in shaping seasonal trends. Chambers has indicated the close relationship between nuptiality and the economy over longer time periods¹⁷, and there is no reason why comparable associations should not hold good on an annual and seasonal basis, as Ogden found among the silk-growers of the Ardèche¹⁸, annual and seasonal hiring, the contractual terms of service, and the regional and temporal emphasis on 'living in' and 'cottage labour' may be important¹⁹.

Where possible it would also be useful to identify 'local' customs and the role they play. It has been suggested that the Shropshire May fairs may have contributed to the higher frequencies of that month, but other local

customs may equally sway the pattern and determine the tempo of this aspect of vital events.

These issues and their interconnection form one route to the explanation of marriage seasonality, and by so doing, illustrate the internal connectivity of 'the world we have lost' and the need that exists for further research on this topic.

NOTES

1. L. Bradley, 'An enquiry into seasonality in baptisms, marriages and burials', Part one, **LPS** No. 4, 1970, pp. 21-40.
2. The seventeen registers used have all been published by the Shropshire Parish Register Society. The volumes consulted were: Wem, (Lichfield [L], vols 9 &10, 1583-1812); Condover (L, vol. 6, 1570-1812); Bitterley, (Hereford [H], vol. 4, 1658-1812); Stanton Lacy, (H, vol. 4, 1561-1812); Stretton, H, vol. 8, 1661-1812; Stretton, H, vol. 8, 1661-1812; Wistanstow, (H, vol. 17, 1 1661-1812); Bromfield, (H, vol. 5, 1559-1812); Berrington, (L, vol. 14, 1559-1812); Stokesay, (H, vol. 17, 1559-1812); Hopesay, (H, vol. 18, 1660-1812); Onibury, (H, vol. 18, 1577-1812); Smethcote, (L, vol. 1, 1609-1812); Acton Burnell, (L, vol. 19, 1568-1812); Pitchford, (L, vol. 1, 1558-1812); Stapleton, (L, vol. 1, 1658-1812); Longnor, (L, vol. 5, 1586-1812); Leebotwood, (L, vol. 5, 1547-1812).
3. A detailed discussion of the calculation of the marriage index is presented in: M. Fleuri and L. Henry, **Nouveau manuel de dépouillement et d'exploitation de l'état civil ancien**, Paris, 1965, pp. 103-5.
4. L. Bradley, **LPS, No. 4, 1970, p.34**.
5. M. Massey, 'Seasonality, some further thoughts,' **LPS**, No. 8, 1972, pp. 48-54.
6. P. Rowley, 'Seasonality in Oswaldkirk, North Riding, Yorkshire,' **LPS**, No. 11, 1973, pp. 44-47.
7. P. E. Ogden, 'Patterns of marriage seasonality in rural France,' **LPS**, No. 10, 1973, pp. 53-64.
8. L. Bradley, 'Marriage seasonality — May marriages,' **LPS**, No. 3, 1969, p.54.
9. A. W. Smith, 'Marriage seasonality,' **LPS**, No. 2, 1969, p.67.
10. P. Rowley, **LPS**, No. 11, 1973, p.45.
11. B. Trinder, **The Industrial Revolution in Shropshire**, 1973, p.364.
12. Barfoot and Wilkes, **Universal British Directory**, 1797, and Tibnam and Co. **The Salop Directory**, 1828.
13. L. Bradley, **LPS**, No. 4, 1970, p.37.
14. L. Bradley, **LPS**, No. 4, 1970, p.39.
15. L. Bradley, **LPS**, 4, 1970, p.39. H. Palli, 'Seasonality of marriage in Estonia', **LPS**, No. 14, 1975, pp. 50-52.
16. D. Mills, 'English villages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: a sociological approach,' Part one, **Amateur Historian**, vol. 6, No. 8, 1965, pp. 271-8.
17. J. D. Chambers, **Population, economy and society in pre-industrial England**, 1972, Chapter 6, pp. 128-151.
18. P. E. Ogden, **LPS**, No. 10, 1973, p.63.
19. R. E. Prothero, **English farming past and present**, 1912, pp. 53-4, 86-9, specifies some of the characteristics of hiring fairs and the conditions of service that governed annual hirings. An introduction to the role of fairs and markets is given in the **Report on Markets and Fairs in England and Wales**, vol. 1, HMSO 1927, No. 13.