

CORRESPONDENCE

Age at baptism in pre-industrial England

Dear Sir,

Berry and Schofield in their paper with this title published in **Population Studies** in 1971 (p. 453) point out that, while during the latter half of the seventeenth century the interval between birth and baptism was relatively short and corresponded roughly with the Church's requirement that it should not exceed fourteen days, later this interval increased until at the end of the eighteenth century periods of more than a month were common and sometimes more than a year intervened. Their results are based on registers from eleven London parishes, sixteen northern parishes and sixteen parishes scattered over central and southern England. They commented that local variations between parishes were very great and expressed the hope that evidence from other parishes might help to clarify the picture. Some relevant entries have been noted during a study of the parish registers of Ratcliffe on Soar and are presented here to supplement the data already published.

Ratcliffe on Soar is a small rural parish in South Nottinghamshire close to the confluence of the Soar and Trent. The Compton Census of 1676 records no recusants or dissenters in the village. Visitation returns state that there were only two Dissenter families in 1743 and only "two or three of those called Moravians" in 1764. In 1829, there were enough Wesleyans present to hold meetings in one of the small village houses. According to the Visitations, there were seventeen families there in 1743 and twenty in 1764. A reconstruction of the population from the parish registers suggests there were about seventy inhabitants in 1700 rising to a more precise estimate of 130 in 1780. The 1811 census gives the population as 169. The number of baptismal entries in the registers during the years in question is therefore small, typically two or three a year, and the total number of entries quoting birth dates and the proportion quoting both birth and baptism dates are considerably smaller than those studied by Berry and Schofield. Nevertheless, there are some fifty entries of birth and baptism dates and these may give some indication of registration practice in a small, purely agricultural community.

The relevant entries fall into three groups; each made by one minister or curate serving the church throughout that period:

- (a) 1663-1677: There were thirty-six baptisms, twenty-six of which have birth dates. Two baptisms from 1653, one with a birth date have also been included in this set.
- (b) 1781-1786: There were twenty-three baptisms, seven of which have birth dates.
- (c) 1798-1812: There were fifty-six baptisms, nineteen with birth dates, while two other dates of birth can be discovered from an entry in the **Nottingham Journal**.

The distributions of the ages at baptism in each period are tabulated below using the method of percentiles adopted by Berry and Schofield.

In the first period the pattern noted by Berry and Schofield is found. Babies were baptised shortly after birth — in half the cases on a Sunday—and the baptismal entries therefore give a reasonable guide to the age of the population. This is also true for the period 1781-1786 with one exception, which is the more surprising since two other babies born at the same time into the major two farming families of the village were christened when only one day old. The family of the other child were probably cottagers and she was not christened for four months.

The data for 1798-1812 is very odd. The shortest interval indicated in the register is fifty-three days and the other intervals are much longer. Indeed the birth dates seem to have been recorded specifically to emphasise these long delays. There are three cases where it is clear that children of a family were 'saved up' and baptised together. In one extreme case, a father, aged twenty-nine, and two of his children, aged six and three years, were baptised together with a third, presumably infant, child. Attempts to check the dates of birth of other children baptised during this period using other sources, for example the 1851 census, can only indicate the year of birth but, to that extent at least, do not suggest that in these cases there were similar inordinate delays in baptism. For example, out of twelve persons in the 1851 census who can be identified in the baptismal registers, ten ages check to within one year of the date of baptism and three of these check exactly. The two cases checked from a newspaper report are exceptional in that they record the birth of triplets quickly followed by the death of two of the babies. The very short intervals are therefore not typical of the period.

There is no obvious reason for the extreme delays noted in this period and the sample is too small to make any detailed interpretation worthwhile. It does raise the possibility that the marked increase in interval between birth and baptism noted in about half of Berry and Schofield's list for 1791-1812 may arise from a bias in the sample due to the minister wishing to draw special attention to cases of undue delay in baptisms. However their use of a rule excluding registers from consideration if more than ten per cent of the entries lacked either birth or baptism entry may have avoided this risk.

Age at baptism in days

Period	No. of baptisms	% without birth dates	for 25% entries	for 50% entries	for 75% entries	Min	Max
1653-1677	38	29%	8	14	30	0	58 years
1781-1786	23	70%	0	3	9	1	130 years
1798-1812	56	63%	171	607	2190	1	29 years

Your sincerely,
Harry Collins.

Vikings, Ratcliffe on Soar, Nottingham.

Roger Schofield comments:

“It is always good to get more information on the age at baptism, but as Mr. Collins rightly points out, the large number of baptism entries with no corresponding date of birth raises doubts as to the representativeness of the ages of baptism that can be calculated and makes it difficult to interpret the figures.

The kind of bias which may result is very graphically illustrated by Mr. Collins' results for the period 1798-1812 when the incumbent is generally only noting the dates of birth of those who are unusually old when they are baptized. It was precisely the obvious danger of this kind of bias which led Midi Berry' and me to reject any register in which more than **10 per cent.** of the entries lacked the date of birth.

The habit of baptizing several members of a family at once, which Mr. Collins highlights, is an interesting one and seems to have been rare before the end of the eighteenth century. From the work the Cambridge Group has been doing on the aggregative analysis of a large number of parish registers it looks as if both baptism and burial registration began to deteriorate rapidly after 1780, reaching a nadir in the 1810s.

Occasionally an incumbent tried to stem the ebbing tide. The most dramatic example I know is contained in the aggregative analysis of Hinckley, Leicestershire, sent to us by Miss Herrington of Leicester. In the 1820s about 160 people were baptized each year but beginning in 1830 the number plunged sharply downward until in 1836 only seventy-five baptisms were recorded. Suddenly, in June 1837 no less than 360 people were baptized, seventy-eight on 28th June and an astonishing 161 on 30th June. Dates of birth or ages are given for these 239 people from which it is clear that very few were infants. Almost half were aged between one and five, just under half between six and nineteen, and 6 per cent were of age twenty and above. When these baptisms are added back into the appropriate years, the annual totals look more reasonable, but there still seems to have been some falling off in the number of baptisms registered since the 1820s.

The timing of this sudden rush of laggards to the font may well also tell us something about popular attitudes to the civil registration of births, for the final, and largest, group of 161 persons was baptized on the last day before civil registration began. However this may be, Hinckley furnishes particularly dramatic evidence of a more general laxness in attitudes towards baptism in the early nineteenth century, which led to both higher ages at baptism and omissions. It would be interesting to know if other readers of **LPS** have also studied this development, to which Mr. Collins has so valuably drawn our attention.”

Infanticide

Dear Sir,

Keith Wrightson's intriguing discussion of the evidence for infanticide (**LPS**, 15, pp. 10-22) has reminded me of a reference which may be of general interest. John Mirk (**or** Myrc) who wrote a well-known religious

treatise in the fifteenth century called **Instructions for a Parish Priest** comments on the possibly deliberate smothering of babies by parents.

In the first entry, he reminds the priest to enquire of husbands:

'Hast thow also by hyre l-layn
And so by-twene yow the chylde l-slayn?'

(Edited G. Kristensson, **Lund Studies in English**, 49(1974)p.145)

This could be interpreted as no more than a warning to parents to act responsibly **before** a child is born, but an earlier editor in 1868, Edward Peacock, had no such doubts when he wrote in a marginal note: 'Hast thou and she overlain any of your infants?' (**Early English Text Society**, No. 31 (1868) p. 45).

The second entry puts the sinister possibilities more distinctly. Mirk pointed out that among the cases reserved for bishops to deal with is:

'the modure that the chylde over-lyth
the fader also sende thow wythe'

(**Lund Studies in English**, 49. p. 160)

Here, as Kristensson writes in his glossary, 'over-lyth' unequivocally means 'smother by lying upon' (p. 253). Clearly, where babies were reported as 'accidentally' smothered, the medieval church seriously investigated the possibility that they had been deliberately killed, and that the crime had involved the collusion of both parents.

Yours sincerely,
David Dymond.

Cambridge University Board of Extra-Mural Studies, Madingley Hall,
Cambridge.

Smallpox inoculation deaths

Dear Sir,

I noted the letter in **LPS 18** concerning infants who died following smallpox inoculation and can add to this by quoting two entries from the register of Marston Trussell, Northants. — ecclesiastical register 2/i/4:

25 March 1790, died 25 March. Thomas son of Nicholas and Ann Bishop inoculated when the Parish were in general for small Pox.

26 March. Charles son of John Junior and Elizabeth Partridge likewise.

Thomas Bishop was born 16 February, 1790, baptised 8th March and Charles Partridge was born 10 February 1790 and baptised 8th March also.

Yours faithfully,
Gillian F. Richard (Ms.)

9 Milton Street, Kingsley, Northampton.

1801 census: Guildford

Dear Sir,

In the parish records for Newdigate, Surrey, held at the Guildford Record Office, there is a single page of census record for 1801 which gives the names of the head of each family plus the number and sex of children (PSH/NR/9/1), e.g.

'James Ede, 6 males, 6 females'

also

'Inhabited houses,	63; uninhabited 2
Families	76
In trade	11
Manufacture	1
Total population	445.'

Yours faithfully,
Alan J. Skilton, RIBA.

An early Oxfordshire maternity home

Dear Sir,

I was most interested in Mr. Henstock's article in **LPS** Autumn 1975 especially as I had recently stumbled upon a similar establishment in Oxfordshire. When transcribing the registers of four adjacent parishes in the west of the county, I noticed a number of references in the burials, and later among the baptisms, of children from 'Sworn Lains', the name being changed to 'Stonelands' about 1765. Then, in the early Burford registers, the place was called 'Foresworn Lains'.

This place proved to be an extra-parochial area of some six acres on the boundaries of four parishes, one of which was a 'detached parcel of Berkshire'. It was some two miles east of Burford and barely a quarter of a mile from the main London to Gloucester highway. There are no title deeds earlier than 1940 but Quarter Sessions recognisances show that there was an inn here and that in 1801 the licensee was the owner of the lying-in home. He inserted an advertisement that year in the local newspaper, Jackson's **Oxford Journal**:

Notice is hereby given that near Sworn Lays, in the County of Oxford, is a House belonging to no Parish, well situate to receive LYING-IN WOMEN privately: and such may be treated with on reasonable terms, by applying to James Hart, at Sworn Lays Great House, near Burford, Oxfordshire.

Such a place was clearly attractive for the purpose as it was beyond the jurisdiction of parish overseers, local magistrates and the clergy, although the sheriff's writ reached it. Unfortunately little real or documentary evidence exists but reference was made to it in Rawlinson's Diaries (1720-30) as 'the Bastard School . . . Here is a House which no body claims'. The local tradition is that it was used for lying-in by naughty ladies of

King Charles' court when at Oxford (1642-6), and also as a pest house for plague and smallpox where Oxford Scholars stayed during plague years in Oxford.

The records of baptisms and burials from Stonelands ceased in 1836, by which time the new Poor Law was effective and workhouses had been built. The area was absorbed in the neighbouring parish of Asthall by an Enclosure Award of 1841. The place was roofless by 1906 and its last wall had to be demolished as unsafe in 1946.

The old name 'Foresworn Lains' can perhaps be translated as 'forsaken births' — 'forsaken' is an old meaning of 'forsworn' and 'lains' or 'laa-ings' from 'Lay', which could mean the bringing to bed for childbirth. The out-house used as a maternity ward was locally known as the 'laa-ing house'. The reason for the change to 'Stonelands' from 1765 is unknown, but there were stone quarries adjacent to the house.

I was fortunate in finding two sets of manuscript notes, one c. 1895 by an old village historian recording the stories prevalent at that date, the other c. 1960 by a local doctor who wrote his reminiscences of his youth c. 1906.

The fuller story of 'Sworn Lains' is printed in Oxfordshire Local History '**Top Oxon**' No. 21, for 1976-7, obtainable through the County Archivist at County Hall, Oxford, for 50p including postage.

Yours faithfully,
F. R. L. Goadby (Brigadier)

Gaunt Mill, Standlake, Witney, Oxon. OX8 7QA.

Light on daily life in the late eighteenth century

Dear Sir,

I noticed a comment by May Pickles in her study of Wharfedale, printed in No. 16 of **Local Population Studies**, to the effect that reliable information concerning eating habits in past centuries is hard to find.

In the light of this. I thought it might be of interest to your readers to share in a discovery made in Berkhamsted. The Local History Society of which I am a member has been engaged for five years in recording such old buildings as we have left. About two years ago, we were investigating a brick terraced cottage next to a little timber-framed house, to establish whether it also contained any older work. In the loft, covered with black dust, we found a metal spike of papers, which proved to be the personal accounts of the Matthews family, a firm of local builders and odd-job men, who were known to have lived in the next house, and about whom we already knew something, as two of their ledgers have survived elsewhere. The earliest date in the papers is 1764, the latest 1839. There is no guarantee that all their accounts were kept here, for there are many gaps.

One may assume that they would have had a garden, common rights, and possibly some other land, providing perhaps milk, eggs, poultry, fruit and vegetables. Other than that, all their food must, we suppose, be dealt with in these accounts, and I append some representative extracts.

It has also been suggested to me that some supplies may have been paid for in cash, but in view of the fact that the family ran up bills for very small items, and expected months of credit, it seems unlikely that anything was paid for at the time of purchase, and that they either produced the items mentioned above themselves, or went without.

Wm. Matthews to Humy. Tompkins

Ballance	Accounts due to me	...	...	6	9
June 1774	for 4 pd. $\frac{3}{4}$ Mutton	...	...	1	9
	for 5 pd. half Veal	...	...	1	10
Jan. 1775	for 13 stone 4pd Bakom	...	...	1	19 5
July 1775	for 7pd. half Beef	2	10
May 1777	for 9 pd Beef	3	4 $\frac{1}{2}$
July 1777	for 4 pd half Lam	1	10 $\frac{1}{2}$
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(Mr. Matthews paid off 10/6 of this!)

Other butcher's items later include Cows hart 1/-, one (illegible) pluck at 10d, one cheake at 1d, calfs head 1/-.

The family did not bake their own bread. For some reason they used two suppliers simultaneously — Samuel King and Thomas Butterfield. The price was 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ d, no size mentioned, in May 1787, 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ d by August, down to 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ d in October. One bill is presented in a different form — '160 Potel Loves at 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ d'. By 1790 Butterfield refers to Quart Loaves and they now cost 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ d. King had been dropped by this time.

More than one bill is a strange mixture, as when Matthews pays William Norris for nails, hinges, tacks, several lots of pork and a gridiron, or nails, lock, file, thirtyone pounds of pork and a peck of onions.

Mr. Matthews buys various items for his business, some of them rather strange, for instance, '3 setts Gloria plates Angel and flower'. They come black, white or lacquered.

By 1809 the Grand Junction Canal was in use and elm timber is delivered to Two Waters Wharf.

There are also accounts for the education of a number of children and for the purchase of footwear and medicine. In 1809 William Collier drew teeth (2/-) and in 1810 he is 'Inoculating Mrs. and Two Children £1. 1. 0d'. One other item of interest is a letter which was filed amongst the bills.

'Hammersmith September 28 1790

Dear Mother

I should be obliged to you if you would send my Black all together as it is and Then I shall go in Mouning as all them that can get a black gown does for the Duke of Cumberland. So I don't like to look Different from every body else or I would not Trouble you t send Them pray send Them lmeaditly for he will be Buried to morrow night Mother it is in my Blue Box and if you Cant find the Key you most Rinch the Box open for I most heave Them Deritly please to Derict Them to be left at The Bell and Crown Halburn and I will send for Them from Their so Dont Delay sending them so god blefs you all and believe me your ever affectionate Child

Mary Mathews'

The letter is endorsed on the reverse 'September ye 30 1790 the Parsil was delivered to the Coachman'.

Yours faithfully,
Margaret Hole.

91 Churchway, Haddenham, Aylesbury, Bucks.

[Editors' Note: It has not been possible to print this contribution in full and readers interested in learning more about these accounts should contact Margaret Hole.]