AGE AT BAPTISM: FURTHER EVIDENCE

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Age at baptism has attracted considerable attention from historical demographers in recent years. They are naturally concerned with its implications for the adequacy of parochial registration, and they are anxious to make some form of statistical allowance for it.¹ Systematic analysis of the problem began in 1971 with an article by Berry and Schofield who presented a good deal of evidence from a wide range of printed registers.² In the intervening years this study has been supplemented by a number of contributions to this journal, notably the article by Jackson and Laxton which appeared in Spring 1977.³

These last two authors noted that Berry and Schofield were able to offer only a few sets of figures for the crucial period of the eighteenth century when the interval between birth and baptism appears to have grown appreciably wider. There is obviously a need to trace this development with as much precision as possible, and Jackson and Laxton have provided much useful data to this end. Further evidence, however, may well be of value, especially when it comes from a part of the country which has not appeared in the samples so far.

From 1721-1812 the registers of St. Mary Magdalen, Colchester (in Essex), provide an almost unbroken series of birth and baptism entries. The sample, naturally, is small but it does have the important virtue of continuity. In some decades, it is true, the number of incomplete entries exceeds the 10 per cent limit observed and recommended by Berry and Schofield,¹ but this does not vitiate the figures. The limit has been imposed on the reasonable assumption that clerks might have troubled to record birth-dates only in cases of unusually late baptisms. There are no fears of such a distortion in this instance. Most of the 'incomplete entries' do not lack the date of birth but are deficient in other respects. Apart from those which are simply ambiguous or unintelligible, some record 'split' events (with births or baptisms in other parishes) while others note births and not baptisms. Only in the decade 1741-50, when no more than thirteen of the twenty-seven entries give both birth and baptism, have the totals been disregarded.

The figures presented in the Table below have been calculated in accordance with the conventions first established by Berry and Schofield and later modified by Jackson and Laxton. The sole deviation from these precepts lies in the omission of the mean which could not be estimated with any confidence in view of the vagueness of some of the longest birth-baptism intervals. Some further preliminary remarks are necessary. It is comforting to note that private as well as public baptisms are recorded in the registers. A number of entries make mention of both birth and baptism and also a subsequent reception in the presence of the congregation. Then there is the question of the army's arrival in the parish. From 1795 are registered the baptisms of children belonging to soldiers stationed at the barracks nearby. These have been omitted from the tabulated figures.

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In such an unavoidably small sample the results show some eccentricities, but there remain some trends which deserve to be noticed. The interval between birth and baptism conforms in rough fashion with the somewhat disparate findings of Berry and Schofield for this period, and there is likewise a general, though by no means a consistent, tendency for the interval to increase in the course of the century. There is as yet no agreement on the possible differences between baptismal habits in town and country, but certainly this evidence from a former industrial centre, and by this time a market town of some ten thousand inhabitants, corresponds with the intervals calculated by Jackson and Laxton for Liverpool rather than with the longer ones given by the same authors for East Somerset and West Wiltshire.

This short study also prompts some more general conclusions. It has been emphasised more than once that it is important to take account of local circumstances in assessing the pattern of baptismal practices. This Colchester material only serves to reinforce these pleas for caution. Many of the pitfalls which await the unwary are encountered here. In the first place, there are some predictable features: some parents had all or some of their children baptised on the same day while others adhered to a consistent interval between birth and baptism. Then there are factors which, though important in other examples, appear to have had no impact in this case: the local fair, for instance, which took place on 21-22 July, prompted no rush of baptisms on those days. (This phenomenon may perhaps be found to have been the preserve of rural rather than urban areas). Finally, there are factors which unfortunately cannot be traced: there are, for example, no returns for non-conformists, though it is known that there were many dissenters, including Baptists, elsewhere in the town, and indeed in one parish an increase in baptisms in mid-century was explicitly ascribed to 'the decrease of the dissenters' or some other cause.

These assorted considerations are familiar enough and require no elaboration. Only two points deserve special attention here. The first concerns the effect of heavy mortality. In time of widespread sickness — provided that the epidemic was not so severe that no-one dared venture outside — anxious parents were eager to have their ailing or vulnerable children baptised as soon as possible. This was certainly true of the late 1730s when smallpox visited the town, and this may account for the surprisingly short intervals recorded in that decade. The second factor relates to the influence of the incumbent. The church, or rather the chapel, of St. Mary Magdalen was heavily damaged during the Civil War, and it was not used again until 1721 after it had been refurbished at the expense of the rector, and master of the parish hospital, Palmer Smythies. Before the restoration, parishioners went elsewhere to christen their children. This produced many delayed and multiple baptisms. On 28 March 1717, for example, the minister at neighbouring St. Leonard's conducted a mass christening of many Mary Magdalen children, including two teenagers. This pattern was repeated in later years. On 9 August 1720 there was a set of family baptisms involving youngsters well advanced in years, and the candidates on 19 September following were even older, with ages ranging from seventeen to fifty-two. Matters changed abruptly after 1 September 1721 and regular, early baptisms became customary under
the eye of the long-serving Smythies, who remained rector until 1773.\textsuperscript{13} In the early days of the new regime there were still some late baptisms, as a legacy, no doubt, of earlier negligence, and these cases may make the figures for 1721-30 unduly high. When allowance for this bias is made, a more regular increase in the birth-baptism interval during the century becomes apparent.

Such statistical adjustments, however, can easily become too sophisticated. It is essential always to bear in mind the reality which lies behind beguiling figures, and local circumstances of the kind described above can make nonsense of the most plausible of graphs and tables. National surveys must be regularly supplemented by sensitive local work, and to this truism of population studies the important question of the age at baptism is no exception.

Table  Age at baptism in St. Mary Magdalen, Colchester, 1721-1812.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interval in days by which the stated percentile of births were baptised.</th>
<th>25%</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>75%</th>
<th>90%</th>
<th>Semi-inter quartile range</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Incomplete entries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1721-30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>11\textsuperscript{1}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1731-40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1741-50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1751-60</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1761-70</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1771-80</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1781-90</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1791-1800</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1801-12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Essex Record Office, D/P 381/1/1-3.

Note 1. This total includes the births of five children belonging to the incumbent, Palmer Smythies. The baptisms took place at St. Mary’s at the Walls.

Notes

1. The study of most relevance here is E. A. Wrigley, 'Births and baptisms: the use of Anglican baptism registers as a source of information about the numbers of births in England before the beginning of civil registration,' Population Studies, XXXI (1977), 281-312.


3. S. Jackson and P. Laxton, 'Of such as are of riper years? A note on age at baptism,' L.P.S., 18 (1977), 30-6.

4. See also Dr. Schofield's reply to a contribution by H. Collins in L.P.S., 19 (1977), 50-2.


6. The two baptisms on 21 July 1793 and a further one on the same day in 1805 are the only ones to occur on these dates in the entire period. For the fair, see P. Morant, The history and antiquities of the most ancient town and borough of Colchester ... (London, 1748), Book II, 77. It should perhaps also be noted here that two adults were baptised on Easter day 1723.

7. These are missing from the diocesan returns in the Guildhall Library, MS 9558.

8. This remark appears after the burial entries for 1793 in the register of All Saints in the Essex R.O., T/R 108/4.


10. Four baptisms in 1737, which all took place within three weeks of birth (and in one case on the same day), have the melancholy marginal addition 'dead' beside them.

11. This information is given in a note at the front of the first register, Essex R.O., D/P 381/1/1. There is a description of the derelict chapel in the visitation of 1705, Essex R.O., D/ACV 9a, f.64. Morant has some interesting comments in his Colchester, Book II, 21-2.

12. He was succeeded by his son John. Palmer was also rector of St. Michael's, Mile End, and he was the predecessor of Samuel Parr as master of the Royal Grammar School. See R. H. R. Smythies, Records of the Smythies Family (London 1912), 9, 14, 38-9.

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