

NOTES AND QUERIES

ILLEGITIMATES RECORDED IN THE 1831 CLERGYMEN'S RETURNS

Stephen A. Royle

In the 'News from the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure' published in **Local Population Studies** 24, 1980, there appeared a discussion of some of the problems encountered in trying to discover rates of illegitimacy in the early nineteenth century. The 1820s especially were singled out as a decade for which it is particularly difficult to conduct research, a point made more fully in the recent **Bastardy and its Comparative History**.¹ The problem is that Rose's act of 1812 set out to standardise Parish Register entries by the issuing of printed forms and although far from successful — vital registration not being finally standardised until 1837 — many printed editions of Parish Registers take the act as a watershed and come to an end in 1812. This in turn accounts for many volunteer researchers using the printed versions of Parish Registers also ceasing work at 1812. From 1837-1838 most areas have readily available civil registration returns but the 1812-1837 period is rather less well documented than the eras before or after. The Cambridge Group express particular concern for the lack of information available on illegitimacy as the 1820's seem to have represented a 'set-back in the upward slope of illegitimacy levels towards the mid 19th century high.'

There is, however, one nationwide (England and Wales) source of information that can shed some light on illegitimacy and indeed on other demographic phenomena for a large part of this 1812-1837 period. I refer to the manuscript 1831 Clergymen's Returns held in the Public Record Office (HO 71/1 — HO 71/130). These are a survival from the compilation of the 1831 Parish Register Abstract² which formed part of the Census report of that year. Full details of the material available in these returns, together with an empirical example of their utility, can be found in my recent article in **The Local Historian**,³ for present purposes suffice it to say that the major classes of information on each parish's schedule relate to the numbers of baptisms, burials and marriages from 1821-30 and the age of persons buried for each year from 1813-1830. There is also an estimate of the numbers of persons interred 'in Burial Grounds of Dissenters, Jews and in other Burial Grounds wherever a Register is kept' for each year from 1813-30. Additionally there is information of particular interest to students of illegitimacy since the clergymen were instructed to enter 'what number of illegitimate Children may have been born in your Parish or Chapelry during the Year 1830, according to the best Information you possess or can obtain; and distinguishing Male and Female Children?'

How this data may best be used in the construction of illegitimacy rates must be left open for discussion for there is certainly a dichotomy between the illegitimate **births** for 1830 and the schedules' record of **baptisms**; it cannot be known precisely how many of the illegitimate

children were baptised. John Rickman, the 1831 census controller, was well aware that baptism rates and birth rates need not be one and the same for he noted in his report four causes of under-registration: 'the neglect of incumbents, dissenters baptising after their own fashion or not at all, irreligious negligence and children dying before baptism. In fact, Rickman instructed the clergymen to record on their returns also 'whether any and what annual average Number of Births, Deaths and Marriages may, in your Opinion, have taken place in your Parish, without being noticed in the Parish Register?' and in varying proportions the unentered births must represent the sum of the four causal factors for underrecorded baptisms' mentioned in the report.

The relationship between illegitimate births, unentered births and baptisms probably varied from place to place but the 1831 returns at least give the raw material from which some sort of illegitimacy rate can be calculated for 1830. However, the numbers of unentered births was, on occasion, surprisingly high — for example for the textile town of Hinckley, Leicestershire, where there were 7 illegitimate births in 1830, 39 births were on average unentered in the Registers during a period when the annual number of baptisms ranged from only 130 to 193. Such figures may well cast doubt in the researcher's mind on the validity of earlier illegitimacy rates based on Parish Register information alone when no correction factor of unentered births was available and so the Clergymen's Returns could prove to be a mixed blessing in the end!

NOTES

1. P. Laslett, K. Oosterveen and R. M. Smith (eds) **Bastardy and its comparative history**, London 1980.
2. **British Parliamentary Papers** 1833 (149) xxxviii (report); 1833 (149) xxxvi (abstract).
3. S. A. Royle 'Clergymen's Returns to the 1831 Census,' **The Local Historian** 14.2, 1980 pp. 79-90.
4. **British Parliamentary Papers**, op. cit. (report).

REGIONAL CATALOGUES

covering all aspects of

LOCAL HISTORY

in England and Wales

issued in sequence.

BARNSTABLE BOOKS,

28 RAVENSBOURNE DRIVE,
CHELMSFORD, ESSEX CM1 2SJ.
Tel.: 0245-58649.

—
Collections Purchased.