

The purpose of this note is to invite those with intimate knowledge of local circumstances to suggest reasons for very high baptism/marriage ratios at this period, if this happens to have occurred locally. It should be borne in mind that until Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753 it was possible to contract a valid marriage without the celebration of the marriage taking place in church. Any man and woman who exchanged vows in the presence of witnesses (and who were free to marry) could establish a union recognised in ecclesiastical law. It is conceivable that the change in the ratio may be due to the frequency with which couples in some parts of the country decided to forego any church ceremony. Their offspring would be legitimate and would therefore, presumably, be recorded in the baptism register exactly as if their parents had married in church. There are some indications that the period in which baptism/marriage ratios were often so high was also a period when a particularly low percentage of children were registered as bastards at baptism. And it is possible therefore that the two traits are related, since the distinction between a legitimate and an illegitimate birth might be harder to draw. Many offspring of semi-stable unions, which in an age of universal church marriage would be registered as bastards, might be given the benefit of the doubt when their parents were not obviously less 'married' than many other couples.

Any comments upon this curious feature of late seventeenth century parochial registration would be most welcome. What we have suggested above is no more than a ballon d'essai. We should be equally happy to see it puffed up or pricked.

THE USE OF THE DESCRIPTION 'WIDOW' IN PARISH REGISTERS

Mr. D.J. Steel in Volume 1 of his new National Index of Parish Registers (London, 1968) notes (page 83) that 'the term Widow was often used in the eighteenth century, not only in the modern sense but also to indicate a woman past middle age who lived alone and was either of independent means or maintained herself by her own efforts'. We are greatly interested in this question since it may affect the interpretation of parish registers and listings of inhabitants both in demographic and social structure analysis. Accordingly, if any reader is familiar with the extent of this usage of the word 'widow' locally, we should be most grateful for information which would help to clarify the circumstances in which it occurred and the time period over which it was used in this sense.

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