

## **TRAFFIC IN CORPSES: SOME EVIDENCE FROM BARMING, KENT (1788-1812)**

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David Souden has proposed an ingenious method for measuring gross migration trends from the presence or absence of baptism and burial entries of husbands and wives on family reconstitution forms. He notes that the method has its limitations: for example, a move away followed by a return to the parish would not be captured and, if people were baptised or buried in a different parish from the one in which they were actually born, or died, the registration evidence on the family reconstitution forms would be a poor guide to their real movements throughout life. Keith Snell takes up this point and discusses several circumstances in which burial registration might prove a misleading guide to migration after marriage. First, the cost of burying paupers might incline parish officials to seek to return those who they suspected were moribund to their parish of settlement. If this happened to be the parish of marriage, then the person would appear never to have left. Second, family attachments to a particular locality might lead to a person being buried in a parish even though they had died, and possibly lived a large part of their life, elsewhere.

Although both Souden and Snell recognise the difficulties of inferring mobility from the registration of vital events, they differ sharply over the degree to which the problems of the evidence vitiate the whole exercise. Souden is much the more optimistic: while admitting that 'considerable movement may occur between the points of registration', he considers that burial in a place other than the parish of death was an 'infrequent' occurrence and concludes that 'the strength of the conclusions can only marginally be impaired.' Snell, on the other hand, sees both the removal of the elderly under the Poor Law, and the transportation of the deceased for burial in a parish of choice, as occurring on a significant scale: 'much movement occurred which was motivated in this way, either in old age or in coffins'. Furthermore, he argued that the frequency of Poor Law removal probably declined during the eighteenth century as the cost of removal rose and the cost of a pauper burial fell, thereby making it difficult to draw comparable inferences about mobility from burial registration over the long term.

The possibility that there may have been considerable involuntary mobility just before or after death, so that many people were not buried in the parish in which they spent most of their adult lives, is of considerable significance, not only for the

proper measurement of migration, but also for demographic questions such as the calculation of adult mortality rates. Unfortunately, as Snell points out in note 13 appended to his article, little has been written on the subject, though he cites instances of both the removal of the elderly and a traffic in corpses.

As it happens, the parish register of Barming in Kent provides us with an unusual opportunity to observe the relation between place of residence, death, and burial for a twenty-five-year period spanning the year 1800.<sup>1</sup> From 1788 to 1812 the rector of Barming, the Reverend Mark Noble, kept a very full burial register, noting not only the names and ages of the deceased, but also whether they had been born in the parish, where they had been usually resident, and where they had died. He also penned a character sketch of many of those he buried, often giving details of the circumstances in which they died, though he complained in 1810 that 'there are so many strangers settled in the Parish that it is now almost impossible to know much of them, especially as they are seldom long stationary'. Some of these sketches have been printed in the Miscellany section of this issue. They throw light not only on individual foibles, including the rector's, but also on some aspects of village life normally hidden to the historian such as violence, bigamy and incest.

While fascinating in their own right, the Barming burial register entries can be used more systematically to address some, though not all, of the questions at issue between Souden and Snell. The register enables us to detect the burials of strangers, whether temporarily resident in the parish, or brought in for interment after dying elsewhere. It does not allow us to observe the export of corpses from Barming for burial elsewhere, nor the successful removal of old people on death's door. In one case, however, we are told of the export of a corpse in circumstances which, though unusual, illustrate the importance of individual wishes to be buried in a particular parish, to which Snell drew attention in his article. In registering the burial of Sarah Blunden the rector noted that her husband had died only four days before she did, and that 'he was buried at East Farley [a neighbouring parish] by his relations and she at Barming by her's, according to their own particular desires'.<sup>2</sup> Between 1788 and 1812 the register contains 226 burial entries, and amongst them are examples both of people being buried where they happened to die, and of the return of corpses for burial in the parish. Amongst the former group are a large number of residents of Barming who died and were buried in the parish, the normal state of affairs, one might assume, and a small number of non-Barming residents who had died in the parish and were buried there. Many other residents dying in the parish chose to be buried elsewhere, like Sarah Blunden's husband. But we can tell how many non-residents happened to die and be buried on the spot in Barming, rather than being transported back to their home parish for burial. And we can tell how many people were transported back to Barming for burial, even though they had lived and died elsewhere.

To appreciate the appearance of the burial of casual deaths in Barming it is helpful to know something of the circumstances of the parish. The parish was small in extent, measuring about one mile square, and was situated on the north bank of the Medway about two miles west of Maidstone on the main road to Tonbridge. The parish of Maidstone, which extended beyond the limits of the town and included

some outlying hamlets, was adjacent to Barming on its eastern border. In the census of 1801 Barming numbered only 328 inhabitants, and from Hasted's description of the parish in 1798 and the occupational structure reported in the 1831 census it is clear that the population was engaged almost entirely in agriculture, including hop and fruit farming.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed of the fifteen burials of non-residents, eight were of hop pickers or their children.<sup>4</sup> One other non-resident, a bricklayer, died while working in the parish and was buried in Barming.<sup>5</sup> Of the remaining six non-resident deaths and burials, three were passing through ('a stranger who fell ill and died'; the son of 'strangers upon Barming Heath'; and a 'poor creature hid[den] in an outhouse, being found almost in a dying state'),<sup>6</sup> two were accidental deaths (a road accident and a drowning),<sup>7</sup> and a hard-drinking labourer caught a fatal fever while visiting relations in the parish.<sup>8</sup> While these fifteen people were buried in the parish in which they happened to have died, it is noteworthy that, with the possible exception of the bricklayer, they were poor or, in the case of the accidental deaths, in an advanced state of decay. It may, therefore, have been scarcely practicable to have exported the corpses to the home parish. Nor can we observe whether these cases were offset by other casual or accidental deaths in Barming that were followed by the export of the corpse for burial elsewhere.

When we can observe the transportation of corpses, in the case of non-residents brought back to Barming for burial, we find that it occurred on a far from negligible scale. No less than 64 of the 226 burials recorded in Barming in this period (28 per cent) were of imported corpses. Some had been absent only a short period of time, for example William Dennis was brought back from Rochester, about ten miles away, having 'left Barming a week and engaged himself to work in a Blacksmith's shop, when using the great sledge hammer he broke a blood vessel and bled for several days at the mouth and nose which continued until his death'.<sup>9</sup> Others had been away for most of their adult lives. For example the burial entry of George West (age seventy) reveals that he had been born in the parish and had been a servant to a previous rector. He had left the parish to go into service in Linton, 'whence he married the daughter of a neighbouring farmer and settled in Maidstone . . . he kept a coffee house there.' He was clearly still attached to the parish of birth, since not only was he brought back to be buried in Barming but he also bequeathed '£20 to the Poor of Barming payable at Christmas next.'<sup>10</sup> Five months later his widow (age sixty-six) died, and she too was brought to be buried in Barming with her husband, rather than in her home parish of Linton, or in Maidstone where she was still living when she died.<sup>11</sup>

Evidently there were many conflicting reasons of convenience and sentiment that might influence where a person was buried. In almost exactly half of the entries relating to imported corpses the rector noted some connection with the parish: the deceased might have been born in Barming, or lived there at some stage, or had relatives still living there. Occasionally he expressed an opinion as to which was the salient motive. For example, when he buried Thomas Samson, he wrote 'son of John and Ann of the parish of Leeds in this county [about six miles away] — he was born here; his age was 17 years; his mother was a Beckett [a prominent Barming

farming family]; probably it was on that account he was buried here.<sup>12</sup> For the remaining half of the entries relating to the burial of imported corpses the rector is silent as to why the latter should have been brought to Barming. If there were connections with the parish through kin, or earlier residence, they were so obscure that they defeated the rector's apparently encyclopaedic knowledge of the parish and its inhabitants.

Whatever the reasons may have been for bringing corpses back to be buried in Barming, the distances travelled were generally small. About half came from Maidstone, a further 12 per cent from the London area (thirty-three miles away) and almost all the rest from parishes within a radius of about five miles. Furthermore, people of all ages were brought back for burial in the parish. Since the disagreement between Souden and Snell is primarily about the representativeness of the place of burial of those who married (the husband and wife on the family reconstitution forms), I repeated the calculations distinguishing between married adults and everyone else. Married adults were no different: almost exactly the same proportion of burials (31 per cent) turned out to have been of people who had died outside the parish.

If almost one third of all burials of married adults were of people who had lived and died outside the parish, albeit in some cases not for a long period of time and in most cases not very far away, what implications does this have for the measurement of migration from the register entries brought together on family reconstitution forms?

As Souden has explained, the calculations are based on couples which either married or gave birth to children in a parish. If, for the sake of argument, we suppose that they had moved away from the parish later in life, then transportation for burial in another parish would only give a misleading impression of immobility if it involved a return to their parish of marriage or family formation. If burial were in another parish altogether, their burial entry would still be lacking on the family reconstitution form, and the fact of their mobility would be correctly inferred. The critical question, therefore, is not so much how many married adults were buried in parishes other than the one in which they died, but how many of those who had left were brought back to be buried in the parish in which they began their married life.

Unfortunately, the Barming burial register seldom records the parish of marriage or family formation and so provides insufficient evidence to enable us to answer this question. However, it does make it clear that people were transported for burial in another parish for a variety of reasons (for example, to return to a parish of birth or to be buried next to a spouse), and in many cases the parish concerned will not have been the parish of marriage or family formation. Consequently the amount by which out-migration will have been concealed by a return after death will be less than might seem to be implied by the fact that one in three adult burials involved an imported corpse.

In any case, the traffic in corpses is as likely to have exaggerated as to have concealed the true extent of out-migration, since those who remained in the parish

until death and were then transported for burial elsewhere will appear to have left the parish while they were alive. Again, the Barming burial register does not provide sufficient evidence to enable us to calculate whether the traffic in corpses in fact produced more false movers than false stayers, or vice-versa, but the two errors are likely to have offset each other to some extent. Consequently, although the register throws valuable light on the existence of a far from negligible traffic in corpses, amply justifying Snell in raising the issue, it leaves unresolved the question of whether the resulting errors in inferring migration from family reconstitution forms are serious ones, or whether Souden is after all right to claim that 'the strength of the conclusions can only marginally be impaired.'

Finally, it must, of course, be emphasised that the evidence presented here refers to one small Kent parish for only twenty-five years spanning the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Other incumbents may have kept burial registers in which residence at death was recorded, and it would be most valuable if similar studies could be made to discover whether the nature and scale of the traffic in corpses revealed in Barming were typical or not. It would also be valuable if the place of marriage or family formation could be discovered through a family reconstitution of the register, together with those of surrounding parishes. Only in this way can a proper assessment be made of the degree to which the measurement of adult migration from the absence of burial entries on family reconstitution forms has been distorted by the traffic in corpses.

#### NOTES

1. I am greatly indebted to Colin Barham for drawing my attention to the Barming register.
2. 1789:9, following the rector's sequential numbering of burials each year.
3. 1801 Census of England and Wales, Enumeration. P[arliamentary] P[apers] 1802, vii; 1831 Census of England and Wales, Enumeration abstract, PP. 1833, xxxvi; E. Hasted, **The history and topographical survey of the country of Kent**, IV Canterbury, 1798, pp. 383-5, and map facing p.258.
4. 1788:10; 1792:6; 1793:6; 1800:2; 1807:9; 1808:11,14,16.
5. 1792:3.
6. 1809:7; 1800:5; 1808:8.
7. 1793:4; 1804:4.
8. 1789:10.
9. 1808:12.
10. 1798:1.
11. 1798:5.
12. 1790:6.