

NOTES AND QUERIES

THE ECCLESIASTICAL RETURNS OF 1563 : A CAUTIONARY NOTE

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In recent editions of **LPS** and the **Local Historian** attention has been drawn to a rather neglected source for the study of population history, the ecclesiastical returns of 1563 and 1603.¹ The 1563 return, which forms the subject of this note, was supposed to list the total number of households or families in each parish. Just such a list survives amongst the Harleian MSS for the town of Cambridge, enumerating 'all and singular the households and the whole number thereof' in each of the fourteen Cambridge parishes.² The figures do not appear to be simply rounded estimates, as is sometimes the case,³ and when added produce a total of 536 households for the whole town. To convert households to total population a multiplier of 4.5 was used, a figure informed by the known mean household size for five Cambridge parishes calculated from an early Stuart census, though slightly higher to allow for the bias in this later census towards those poorer parishes which typically exhibit low mean household sizes.⁴ In round numbers, this produced an apparently reliable (if approximate) population total of 2,400.

Doubts about the reliability of this estimate were aroused by the existence of an enumeration made in 1587 by the Vice-Chancellor of the university, which certified that by this time the town contained 4,990 inhabitants.⁵ It seemed wholly improbable that the town's population had doubled in the space of just twenty-four years, and my immediate suspicion was that the 1587 total was simply a vague estimate, particularly as there is no evidence of how this figure was arrived at. I decided to test the 1563 return nonetheless, which was achieved by comparing parish population totals calculated from this list with baptismal evidence. Apparently reliable registers survive for four Cambridge parishes in the 1560s — Little St Mary, St Benedict, St Edward and Great St Mary — and these exhibit an annual average of 6, 7, 10 and 17 baptisms respectively during this decade.⁶ Their estimated populations for 1563, using a multiplier of 4.5, were 149, 180, 153 and 360 respectively, which gives baptism rates of 40, 39, 65 and 47 per 1,000. Now as birth rates generally stood at between 28 and 40 per 1,000 in pre-industrial European populations,⁷ two of these parishes produce figures which lie outside of the likely range, whilst the other two stand on the extreme upper limit. Even if a multiplier of 5.0 is used for St Edwards and Great St Mary, which might be justified as these were two of the wealthier, more central parishes of the town, they exhibit baptism rates of 59 and 43 per 1,000 respectively. The St Edward's figure remains exceptionally high, and could only have been produced by exceptional circumstances. But examination of burial registers for this parish reveals that mortality conditions were stable throughout this decade: never did the number of burials reach 1.5 times the nine-year moving average, so high fertility cannot be explained in terms of compensation for high mortality. Whilst one may occasionally suspect baptism registers of under-registration, **over**-registration seems highly improbable. The most likely explanation of this figure, therefore, is that the 1563

return undercounts the number of households in St Edwards, and quite possibly also in the other parishes as well.

This is a very simple method of testing census-type evidence which can often prove useful. It was employed to determine the reliability of the early-Stuart census mentioned above, on this occasion with encouraging results. It also revealed that the 1642 Protestation Returns for the town of Reading are of no value as a basis for estimating population size, producing a total of just 4,150 which would require an unlikely baptism rate of 57 per 1,000 if it were correct. In the case of the 1563 return, further testing at the local level by comparison with parish register data, for both urban and rural parishes, might prove valuable, particularly as it has already been used in an attempt to assess the long-term trend of urban population change during the earlier sixteenth century.⁸ Such testing will provide a broader indication of its degree of reliability, though there are already signs that it may be more generally deficient. Palliser and Jones' calculation of national population from this return, based upon a generous household multiplier of 5.05, produces a total of 2.6 millions — well below the Wrigley and Schofield back projection estimate of three millions for 1561.⁹ It may be, of course, that the back projection calculation is wrong, though given the skill and care with which this study was conducted the burden of proof must rest with those who would want to doubt their figures rather than with those willing to accept them. Further testing of the 1563 return, therefore, will not only serve to indicate its own reliability at the local or regional level, but — if it is found generally wanting — might also provide support for the higher figure calculated by back projection. Once again local demographic research can contribute in a very significant way to the broader, national picture.

NOTES

1. D. M. Palliser and L. J. Jones, 'The diocesan population returns for 1563 and 1603', **Local Population Studies**, no. 30, spring 1983; Palliser and Jones, 'A neglected source for English population history; the bishop's returns of 1563 and 1603', **The Local Historian**, vol. 15, no. 3, August 1982.
2. British Library, Harleian MSS, 594 f.196.
3. C. Phythian-Adams, 'Urban decay in late medieval England', in P. Abrams and E. A. Wrigley (eds), **Towns in societies**, 1978, Table 1, pp. 171-2.
4. N. Goose, 'Household size and structure in early-Stuart Cambridge', **Social History**, vol. 5, no. 3, 1980, pp. 359-63.
5. British Library, Lansdowne MSS, li f.144. This figure excludes students, who numbered a further 1,500.
6. These registers are all held at Cambridge County Record Office.
7. E. A. Wrigley, **Population and history**, 1969, p. 62; E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, **The population history of England 1541-1871: a reconstruction**, 1981, p. 174.
8. Phythian-Adams, 'Urban decay', pp. 170-3.
9. D. M. Palliser, **The age of Elizabeth: England under the later Tudors 1547-1603**, 1983, Table 2.1 and pp. 34-6; Wrigley and Schofield, **Population history**, Table 7.8, pp. 208-9.