

CORRESPONDENCE

Letters intended for publication in **LPS** should be sent to RICHARD WALL, 27 Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1QA.

Editors' note

LPS readers are reminded that the editorial board is always prepared to offer advice on subjects within the scope of **LPS**. Sometimes queries which have been raised are discussed in print in this section of the journal but there are many others which are not published, so if you think we can help do not hesitate to contact us.

Prohibited areas

Dear Sir,

In the Open University course of D301, I did TMAs 06, 07 and 08 on the topic of seasonality of marriage. I was surprised to find some fundamental errors in Bradley's article in **Population Studies from Parish Registers** (pp. 1 — 13) when he is writing about the Church's year with reference to the 'prohibited periods'. These errors are also made by Edwards, and I think must affect their conclusions.

As you are no doubt aware, many of the dates in the Church's year depend on the date of Easter. Bradley says (p.9) 'although the date of Easter can vary by about a month, the addition of data by decades gives the effect of Easter varying by only about a week in the course of the decades'. If the variation is 'about a month' (as it is, Easter Day being the Sunday after the first full moon after the Spring Equinox: see the table in the front of the Book of Common Prayer) how can adding data by decades make any difference to that fact? He quotes Cheney's **Handbook of Historical Dates** in support of this, which I have not been able to find.

Since Bradley makes his first 'prohibited period' the time between Septuagesima and the first Sunday after Easter (ten weeks) there is room for error in his saying that it falls in 'roughly three weeks in February, the whole of March, and two weeks of April'. In my TMAs I was looking at the first forty years of the seventeenth century and found that the earliest date for Septuagesima was January 20 (in 1600 and 1611) and the latest was February 20 (in 1603 and 1614). The earliest date for the first Sunday after Easter was March 30 (in 1600:1611 was not a leap year, so the first Sunday after Easter fell on March 31) and the latest was May 1, 1603 and 1614. However, when it comes to Bradley's second 'prohibited period', that from Rogation Sunday to Trinity Sunday, which again depends on the date of Easter as Rogation Sunday is five weeks after Easter Day, his dating is so incorrect that his results must be wrong. He says (p.9) 'it could affect about two weeks in May'. Rogation to Trinity is invariably three weeks (see the B.C.P.) and in 'my' forty years it could start as early as April 27 (1600) or as late as May 29 (1603 and 1614.) Edwards, in **Population Studies from Parish Registers** (pp. 14-8) makes the mistake even worse by saying categorically (p.16) this period covers 'two weeks in May', and since May is the most popular month for marriages in his sample he

concludes that this 'prohibited period' 'appears to have less impact than the first' — which may be true, but could not be demonstrated using his dating.

Incidentally, Edwards further says (p.16) that the third 'prohibited period' from Advent Sunday to Hilary 'does not appear to have been observed at all'. This period does not depend upon the date of Easter but is, as he says, 'December and two weeks in January': up to January 13, in fact. I found (to my surprise: I thought the post-Christmas fortnight would have been very popular for marriage) that in 'my' three parishes that I was studying (a city parish, a market town parish and a village parish) this was in fact very rigidly observed, with a 'rush' of marriages on January 14 that was beautiful to behold.

I also have doubts about the **duration** of the first 'prohibited period', from Septuagesima to Low Sunday. The Council of Trent in 1563 shortened this period to the time from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday (the day before Easter Day). No less a person than the Archdeacon of Bristol confirmed to me that this is the current rule in the Church of England, but he did not know when, if ever, the rule was first laid down, or changed from the earlier and longer period. While the decrees of the Council of Trent did not affect the Church of England, if this decree reflected what was happening anyway it would indicate that the **perception** of that 'prohibited period' was much shorter than Bradley suggests. This is borne out by my observations in my three communities, which all show a marked drop in marriages between Ash Wednesday and Easter Day, with a 'rush' before and after this period. Bradley does not give his authority for the duration of the 'prohibited periods', but he quotes W. E. Tate's **The Parish Chest** in another context, and my copy of Tate gives the 'prohibited periods' as those given by Bradley, (Phillimore, 1983: pp.62 and 63).

To return to the question of the date of Easter. When I was working on the TMAs I could see no alternative to remorselessly working out the date of Easter for each year from the tables in the Book of Common Prayer and then working out from that the dates which depend on Easter (Septuagesima, Ash Wednesday etc.). It took me a long time and was rather tedious, but I can't see any other way to do it. Having done that I was left with the numbers of marriages for each church season, but it would take a better mathematician than I to work out the comparisons, as the lengths of each season varies tremendously. What is needed is an index like Edwards' on p.16 of **Population Studies from Parish Registers**, only it would be much harder to work out and would have to be based on days rather than weeks as several seasons begin in the middle of the week (Ash Wednesday, for example). But if conclusions about the observance of the Church's 'prohibited periods' are to mean anything, something of the sort will have to be done. Has anyone else noticed this, and are there any plans to correct it in future editions of **Population Studies from Parish Registers**?

Yours sincerely,
Jane Bradshaw

The Bank House, Oldbury on Severn, Bristol BS12 1PR.

Handbook of dates for students of English History

Dear Sir,

I am writing in regard to a letter by Jane Bradshaw which is shortly to be published in **LPS**. Her letter concerns the prohibited or discouraged seasons of marriage in the Christian calendar including finding out the date of Easter for each of the years in the period she studied.

I recommend that an editors' note to the effect that C. R. Cheney, in his book **Handbook of dates for students of English History**, published by the Royal Historical Society in 1945, gives the date of Easter for every year from 500AD to 2000AD on pages 156-61. Moreover, on the Tables 1-36 pp. 84-155 calendars are given for all possible dates of Easter. These yearly calendars show the major feasts and festival days within the Christian year, e.g. Septuagesima, Ash Wednesday, Rogation, Trinity, Advent, Michaelmas and Lammas Day etc.

An editors' note regarding this may stem the flood of mail that you may well receive from anyone familiar with Cheney's work.

Yours faithfully,
Glynis Reynolds

As at/ 27 Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1QA.

P.S. The tables on pp. 84-155 are not entirely accurate in that 1616 is shown on both Tables 10 and 19. However, recourse to the Chronological table of Easter Days on pp. 156-61 shows that the date 1616 on Table 19 should in fact read 1615.

Small towns in Britain — research project

Dear Sir,

We are currently setting up at Leicester University a collaborative research project on 'Small towns in Britain 1600-1860' which will involve the collection of parish register and occupational data. Anyone interested in participating in the project is invited to contact me for information.

Yours faithfully,
Peter Clark

Department of Economic and Social History, The University of Leicester.