RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

ON THE ACCURACY OF A LATE SIXTEENTH CENTURY PARISH REGISTER

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Introduction

Parish registers are much used by demographers and historians and because of this it is important to assess their accuracy. This paper investigates the parish registers of Long Melford in Suffolk, where at the end of the sixteenth century it appears one in four marriages are missing from the parish register and about one in eight burials.

The problems with the Melford register in this period fall into three quite separate groups:

1. no record of events which were originally recorded; that they were originally recorded can be deduced from other records.

2. inaccurate recording of events (such as the name of a man being substituted for that of his son or a person changing sex). This is of particular importance to family historians and people undertaking detailed family or population reconstitutions.

3. no record of events which definitely happened within the parish but appear never to have been recorded.

Of course, inaccuracies in the registers can only be discovered when it is possible to compare the registers to other records. In the case of this exercise the first and second types of error listed above appear by comparing the parish register with Bishops’ Transcripts (BT), and the third by comparing it with the accounts of the churchwardens and poor collectors.

The parish register and the Bishops’ Transcripts

Bishops’ Transcripts, where they survive, are, of course, useful to check parish registers. Those of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, which covered Long Melford, include some from the last forty years of the sixteenth century. They must be amongst the earliest still existing. They were completed much nearer the date of the event they record than many parish registers. As LPS readers know, parish registers were required from 1538, but many were originally kept on paper until the 1598 Act requiring records from the beginning of Elizabeth’s reign onwards to be copied into parchment books.
The existing parish register for Long Melford in Suffolk records baptisms and burials from late 1559, and marriages from 1570. It is, however, a copy for the first (approximately) sixty years. It is written in the same hand until 1627, and was presumably copied up sometime before this date. It is likely that this is at least the second transcription of the records; the preface to the register mentions that the old register did not include any events prior to 1559. It seems likely that the register was first copied in 1598 or thereabouts and later copied again. The law required a book of registers to be kept, but at least until 1598 it is possible that the parish clerk recorded events first on separate pieces of paper and later wrote them into the book. With so many chances of bits of paper getting lost, clerks misreading the handwriting of their predecessors and getting fed up with a long copying job, it is surprising that the register is as accurate as it is.

So what differences are there between the parish register (PR) and the Bishops’ Transcripts (BT)? BTs exist for seventeen and a half or eighteen and a half of the years between 1559 and 1599. One of the missing years’ BT must have existed because Boyd’s Marriage Index lists events recorded in it, but can no longer be found in the bundles of register bills. In that period (excluding marriages in the 1560s which are not in the parish register at all) there are ninety-three events (baptisms, burials or marriages) which are on the BTs and not in the PR, and 140 which occur in the PR but which are not in the BT. These latter 140 are interesting in terms of how it happened that the clerk missed them off his returns to the archdeaconry, but not as important in other ways because few people base statistical or other evidence on BTs.

Of the ninety-three events not in the parish register, only fourteen are baptisms, forty-one are burials and thirty-eight are marriages. They are concentrated in the years 1585 to 1599, which account for seven of the baptisms, twenty-seven of the burials and thirty-five of the marriages. In this fifteen year period 102 marriages were recorded in the parish register, so one in four of the total marriages are missing from the PR. There were 902 baptisms recorded in the PR during the period, so only one in sixty-five are missing. Why should the figure for baptisms be so small when so many marriages are missing? Could this relate to the way the records were kept, in that perhaps the clerks kept all the baptisms listed together but had marriages on separate bits of paper which were easier to lose? Or is there some other explanation?

Because the proportion of "missing" marriages is so high, I have checked the marriages and the individuals in several ways. I have checked for them in Boyd’s Index, to see whether they were actually celebrated elsewhere, but can find no trace. The individuals were largely from Melford, and none of the couples seem to both be from outside the parish. There are later records (children born, husband or wife dying, their being mentioned in wills, poor accounts, tax returns and the like) of seventy per cent of these marriages; the figure for all marriages of the period is almost identical. In no respect do the "missing" marriages seem unusual.
When we consider the burials, we have also to look at other records, so the figures for burials are given below. However, the BTs also point to other errors of transcription, either in the BT or more commonly the PR.

**The parish register and other parish records**

Although the inaccuracies mentioned above are important, they are not perhaps really surprising when we think of what has actually gone into the production of the records. What may be of more importance is the non-recording of events which we know about from other sources. I am referring particularly to the burial of people who have been receiving poor relief or are for any other reason buried by the parish.

The parish of Long Melford had its own income for poor relief from 1495 at the latest, when John Hills left land, the income of which was to go to the poor. This was added to in 1514, when one of the rector did the same. There are references to provision for the poor in the churchwardens’ accounts from the 1550s, including the provision of clothes to the poor in 1563 and a will mentions the poor collectors in 1566. There are scattered references to individuals in these earlier accounts, but the first surviving long list of those who received relief is from 1585, and there are several for the rest of the century, some week by week accounts of relief paid.³

In the 1580s and 1590s there are some fifty-two references to either the churchwardens or the poor collectors either buying winding sheets for poor folk who had died and/or contributing to their funeral expenses. Most references are to winding sheets, but some are more detailed, as for example:

Laide out to Elisabeth Lane for looking to John Reynolds 12d
For a windinge sheete for the said John Reynolds 2s 4d
Laid out to Elisabeth Lane at his buryall 16d
To those that bore him to church 2d

John Reynolds was in fact a stranger, which was probably why they had to pay people to bear him to church, but almost all the other people mentioned are local, and many of them had either been receiving poor relief or were the dependents of people getting regular or occasional relief. Of these fifty-two references, eighteen of the individuals are in the burial records of the PR, and another four are recorded as having been buried on the BT but are not in the PR (and are thus included in the forty-one mentioned above). This leaves thirty people who were buried and whose burial was not recorded in the PR. Of these, twenty-seven occurred between 1585 and 1599.

There is a variety of possible explanations. The "missing" bodies could have been taken to other places to be buried; there is some evidence in the late eighteenth century of many people not being buried where they died, but of the body being moved to another parish.⁴ But in some of these Melford cases the accounts mention the digging of the grave or the bearing to it. And these were paupers, or at least people who sometimes received relief. Moving bodies around the countryside cost money for carters and horses: who would pay for this?
A more likely explanation comes from the parish accounts of Melford a century later, when the incumbent adds a gloss that whereas the Overseers paid for the burials, they would not pay the 2d for writing the name in the register. As far as I know, the first national legislation taxing register entries occurs only at the end of the the seventeenth century. Are there examples from elsewhere of charges being made as early as the 1580s? Are there any other explanations for the non-appearance in the PR of these burials, apart from the inefficiency of the clerk or his not thinking that they were worth recording, being but poor folk?

This latter explanation would not account for another, smaller group of "missing" burials. In the same forty years there are nineteen Melford people who either leave wills or whose relatives applied for administrations, who are not in the PR burial records. Of these two are in the BTs. Of the remainder, twelve died in the fifteen years between 1585 and 1599.

Some of these people could well have died outside Melford, the wording of the wills show that three of them very probably did die elsewhere and more may have done so. However, two of the wills are nuncupative, and the witnesses are Melford people, making it almost definite that they died in Melford. Those who left wills all say that they want their body buried in Melford, although of course if they died a long way away that might not have been possible. Nevertheless some of these people, at least two and probably more, died in Melford and are not mentioned in the PR.

In the years 1585-99, 391 burials are recorded in the Melford PR. There are twenty-seven additional burials recorded in the BTs, thirty poor people who were almost certainly buried in Melford whose burials were not recorded, and somewhere between two and nine people for whom probate evidence exists whose burials are not so recorded. Thus somewhere between one in seven and one in eight burials are not in the parish register.

These "missing" burials, and the marriages mentioned earlier, can only be "found" because they appear in, or can be inferred from, other records. One can speculate about these being the only events which are missing from the PR, or whether there were others as well. I mentioned earlier that BTs survive for half of the years in question; there is no reason to suppose that the discrepancies would be any the less for the other years, so it is possible that there were another thirty to forty marriages in the period which are now unrecorded, and some baptisms and burials.

The PR appears to be more accurate when compared with the BTs in the years after 1600, but there only seven years BTs surviving in the period to 1640. Transcription errors should decline as the events recorded are within the living memory of the man making the copy of the register. Unfortunately the poor records for Melford are much less detailed after about 1606, and we do not have detailed accounts from the Overseers. We therefore cannot tell whether poor people are still being buried with the financial assistance of the Overseers and their names not being recorded in the burial registers.
Explanations?

The most likely explanation is often the simplest, and it may be that the parish clerks of the period were particularly forgetful or unorganised. John Gawger was clerk from at least 1571 to 1588, when he died, and was probably followed by George Frend, who was certainly doing the job by 1592 and continued until he died in 1597. Both were members of well established local families, part of the "middle and the good" of Elizabethan Melford. Both appear as witnesses and scribes of wills and the Gawgers were part of that group that regularly became feoffees of town lands and held similar positions. George Frend had been Constable in 1564 and as a husbandman rented some of the town lands for some years. His father John, a yeoman, was one of a group of good solid middling people in Melford who made positively "puritan" wills mentioning the "elect" during the reign of Queen Mary.

Obviously both men could have been inefficient, however respected their families, but the Vestry committees over these years in Melford contained men used to dealing with records and moneys, large scale clothiers and the elite of the local farmers, as well as some of the gentry. It seems unlikely that they would have accepted really inefficient clerks.

The other major suspects in terms of inefficiency are the men who eventually copied the registers in the 1598 and/or in the late 1620s. Thirteen of the thirty-five missing marriages occur during periods when the PR has more than two months with no marriage recorded, the longest gap being a period of nine months. These gaps could be the result of pieces of paper or parchment getting lost before the register was copied into the existing book. As there were fewer marriages than baptisms or burials, were the records written on smaller, more easily misplaced, pieces of paper?

However, even this possibility leaves twenty-two other "missing" marriages. Pure transcription errors seem the only reason for these marriages, and some of the burials, not being recorded; however, once again I wonder why the problem does not arise with baptisms.

The possibility that some poor people were not included in the burial register because their families could not afford the fee and the Overseers would not pay it is a very interesting one. Is there any sixteenth century legislation about fees for register entries of which I am unaware? Might the inability to pay a fee also relate to missing marriage and baptism entries? Are there other likely explanations?

Is this scale of inaccuracy of PRs common for the sixteenth century? Are they commonly more accurate after 1598 when they are put into books? Is there any evidence from other parishes of possible explanations for the exclusion of certain poor folk from the register? Is there any evidence from church courts and visitation records about the standard of register keeping, rather than its complete absence? I would be very interested to know of any evidence from other parishes, or ideas from readers.
NOTES

2. Stephens, Sources, p.28.
3. Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds [hereafter given as SRO] FL509/5/1 (Churchwardens and other accounts), FL 509/1/15 (Black Book of Melford).
5. SRO FL 509/3/15 (Nathaniel Bisbie’s Book)

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