CORRESPONDENCE

Letters intended for publication in LPS should be sent to Kevin Schürer, 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.

Access to the civil registers of births, marriages and deaths. [Reproduced below are copies of correspondence between Dr Roger Schofield and Mr William Waldegrave, the Government Minister of Public Service and Science. We thank the Minister for permission to reproduce his letter in LPS.]

Dear Mr Waldegrave

It is reported in the Cambridge Evening News of Friday 26th June 1992 that you would welcome hearing from historians who had difficulty in obtaining access to Government records. The records of interest to us are the civil registers of births, marriages and deaths beginning in 1837 and continuing to the present day. At present public access is only possible through indexes held by the Superintendent Registrars and by the Office of Population, Censuses and Surveys at St Catherine's House in London. There is no public access to either the original registers, held in the offices of the local Superintendent Registrars or the copies of these registers which are held by the Office of Population, Censuses and Surveys in London. For the purposes of our research, charting the demographic history of England and Wales in the last two centuries, access to the originals, or to the copies which have been made of them, is essential as we need to study the demographic history of whole communities. The indexes are only useful if you know in advance the names of the individuals whose events you wish to trace. Unfortunately, apart from the period between 1866 and 1920, and again for one brief interlude in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Office of Population, Censuses and Surveys has not allowed access either to the originals, or to the copies, of the registers. Access to the microfilm copies of the registers, which have recently been made, has never been available.

Over the years there has been considerable talk of the transference of the older registers to the Public Record Office, but my understanding is that this is not likely to happen in the near future. We would very much welcome your looking into this matter. Our ideal solution would be for the transference of the non-current civil registers now held by the Superintendent Registrars to the
local county record offices. These offices, in their capacity as Diocesan Record Offices, already hold the original parish registers, and are proper repositories used to the production of public records.

Yours faithfully
Roger Schofield

ESRC Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, 27 Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1QA.

Dear Dr Schofield,

Thank you for your letter of 7 July 1992 about access to the civil registers of births, marriages and deaths.

I am glad to be able to say that the Government have considered this issue and recognised that the existing statutory provisions are too limiting. These provide for access to the records through the purchase of certified copies of individual entries identified from publicly available indices. As you say, the need of historians and genealogists is less for certified copies of particular entries than for access to the records as a whole. Consequently the Government has formulated proposals and these are contained in Chapter 6 of the White Paper entitled "Registration: proposals for change" (Cm 939) which was published in January 1990. The White Paper followed publication of a Green Paper "Registration: a modern service" (Cm 531) in December 1988.

The main proposal is that records over 75 years of age should be classified as "historic" and opened up to public view. The White Paper also deals with the means of providing access to these older records which enter the public domain. In respect of the centrally held records for England and Wales, the Government has proposed that the contract for the provision of a central library would be offered to those who might wish to run it outside Government, either as a non-profit making trust or a commercial concern. Those who took the contract would be required to have regard to the needs of genealogists, historians, and researchers. It would be overseen by the Office of Population, Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) who would supply the contractor with a copy of every record which is to be publicly open, and of new records as these become available each year, in a medium to be determined. (The fragility and uniqueness of the paper copies of the record renders it undesirable to allow public access directly to them).

With respect to the historic records in the custody of local superintendent registrars, the Government considers that the way in which they might be opened up to the public is a matter to be determined by local authorities in accordance with local opinion and demand. This might be through display in a county archive or public library or by purchase of OPCS film or fiche. The costs of providing such a service would be recoverable by the local authorities.

The difficulty arises over the fact that primary legislation is needed to implement these and other proposals in the White Paper and, with the pressure
on the current legislative programme, it looks most unlikely to be included in this Session's business.

Yours faithfully
William Waldegrave

Minister of Public Service and Science, Cabinet Office, 70 Whitehall, London SW1A 2AS.

Estimating population totals from the Hearth tax and Compton census

Dear Sir

I am writing to ask for some help in calculating seventeenth century population totals. I am working on a history of West Suffolk 1635-75, which is nearly complete. I recently came across the Suffolk Hearth tax returns for 1674. Given that, as I understand it, the population remained static, at the best, in the mid-seventeenth century, it struck me that it would be useful to add statistics for each parish and hundred as well as the West Suffolk totals (and to compare these results with the West Suffolk county area’s census totals for 1801, 1851, 1901 and 1951).

At present I am breaking up the figures into subtotals for each value of hearth return (i.e. one, two, three hearth payers etc) so that percentages of wealth in each parish might be 'guessedimated' and also the percentage of those in 'certificated' social security.

I intend further to group the parishes into seven categories according to size from small villages to large towns. Consequently I hope that the total results and the various subtotals will be of value to social historians, given that West Suffolk in the seventeenth century included the thinly populated poor Brecklands, the richer dairy farmlands, the industrialised cloth production districts and Bury, then a provincial centre.

I’ve been informed that, at present, the accepted multiplier to calculate population from numbers of Hearth tax payers of a parish is 4.3. I am writing to enquire whether this is still regarded as the best multiplier. I felt that before I began the actual calculations I might as well have the most ‘accurate’ figure. I also wonder whether this figure of 4.3 for the 1674 Hearth tax returns is appropriate for rural parishes and largish villages and towns.

Finally, if one has the Church of England’s communicants lists for this period, can one assume that these adults over sixteen represent 62 per cent of the total parish population or is there now a more accurate figure?

Yours faithfully
K.E. Burrows

9 Townlone Road, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, IP33 2TE.
Editors' note

The problems raised by this request for help from Mr Burrows are discussed at some length in the recent LPS supplement, Surveying the People, especially in Tom Arkell’s chapter on 'A method for estimating population totals from the Compton census returns'. In LPS 28 he also demonstrated the limitations of applying a universal multiplier to household totals in the later seventeenth century and, in a separate contribution to this issue, Anne Whiteman and Mary Clapinson warn against many of the pitfalls involved in using the Compton census figures for demographic purposes.

Nonetheless, it should also prove helpful to summarise the main arguments here because this approach to estimating population totals in the 1670s is based on at least four vulnerable assumptions.

1. That a single multiplier can yield reliable estimated totals for nearly all parishes. In fact the available evidence for the later seventeenth century shows that in most communities there was considerable variation round the median mean household size of 4.3 and that outside London the actual population totals for over one in four communities lay outside the range of 3.8 to 4.8. Thus anyone using a single multiplier of 4.3, rather than a multiplying range of say, 3.8 to 4.8, should appreciate that their calculations will give only very approximate estimates, which must not be confused with real census-type enumerations.

2. That the Compton census returns consistently recorded communicants or men and women aged over sixteen and that an approved single multiplier applied to their totals can compensate reliably for the missing children. In fact only about two in three Compton returns counted both men and women as intended, although the proportion in different dioceses varied from one in ten to nine in ten. Most of the remainder enumerated either men alone, households or all the inhabitants, that is men, women and children, but for some parishes it is often very difficult to determine who was counted with certainty. For further evidence on this and other interpretative problems for the Compton census, reference must be made to the work of Whiteman and Clapinson.

To estimate the proportion of children under sixteen in the 1670s, Wrigley and Schofield used model life tables and back projection to suggest that it was as low as 31 per cent. However, the surviving empirical data do not endorse this theoretical approach, but rather imply that the norm may have come much closer to 40 per cent. One can therefore normally assume that the proportion of children ranged from one in three to two in five of the population and that in those parishes where the Compton census probably returned men and women, multiplying the total by a range of 1.5 to 1.67 or 1.7 should yield sound population estimates.

3. That many surviving Hearth tax lists, such as the one for Suffolk in 1674, are virtually complete. Unfortunately, although it is always tempting to assume that the published and best available Hearth tax returns are trustworthy, many are not as comprehensive as one would wish and, as yet, no comprehensive guide
exists to help identify them. The most likely candidates for omission are the exempt. Overall, it appears as if about one in three to two in five households were usually exempt from paying the Hearth tax, but this proportion could vary from one in five to four in five in particular localities. All Hearth tax lists which contain such proportions of non-chargeable households cannot be regarded automatically as complete, because they tended to be higher in many towns and coal-mining areas, for example. It was also not unusual for householders receiving poor relief to be omitted, especially from the lists for the 1670s. One common misconception is that only paupers were excused from paying the Hearth tax, but those receiving regular relief normally formed only a minority of the exempt because the main criterion for exemption was occupying a house worth twenty shillings a year or less, which could cover small holders with up to about three acres. In, Surveying the People, one Hundred in West Suffolk is taken as an example to show how the Compton census returns can be used to help identify those parishes where the real paupers are most likely to have been omitted from the Hearth tax lists.

4. That the administrative boundaries for the Hearth tax coincided with the parochial ones so that direct comparisons can be made with both the Compton returns and the nineteenth century census totals. This obtains in Suffolk and many other counties, where the parishes were relatively small and numerous and coincided with the areas for which the petty constables or their equivalent were responsible. But where the parishes tended to be much larger, as in Lancashire and Staffordshire for example, or the constablewicks, tithings etc were established before the parish boundaries, as in Sussex, insuperable problems may arise. Finally, the existence of chapelleries often causes serious confusion as to whether the relevant Compton totals applied to just the parish or also included their satellite chapellries.

In short, unwary attempts to make population estimates from the Hearth tax and Compton census may be sabotaged from several different quarters, but when the sources are sound and are handled sensitively, reasonably reliable estimates can be obtained for most, but not all, parishes in many counties. Even then, however, one must not be tempted to pass off these estimates as if they were actual enumerations.

Long Melford parish registers

Dear Sir

Following my article about the inaccuracies in the Long Melford registers which appeared in the last edition of LPS I received some letters from readers confirming the frequent differences between parish registers and Bishop’s transcripts, but none of the correspondents could offer any further evidence about the non-registration of paupers.

My article mentioned that in the later seventeenth century the rector of Melford mentions that the rector refers to the fact that the overseers of the poor did not pay the 2d cost for recording a burial in the parish register, and that this was
before the Act imposing a charge for registration. This rector, Nathaniel Bisbie, did register the death of paupers even though he only received 6d for their burial compared to the 8d paid by the majority. He comments "That the paupers pay nothing for the registering of their buryals, it is purely out of the parsons kindness" (Nathaniel Bisbie's Book: Suffolk Record Office, FL 509/3/15). My thanks to Arthur Teece of Long Melford Historical Society who has examined Dr Bisbie's accounts in detail for this reference.

I would be very interested to know whether any other LPS readers have come across any reference to a charge being made for registration before the Act at the end of the seventeenth century and, if there is mention of a charge, whether the overseers of the poor paid it. I do not know of any late sixteenth century rectors' or vicars' personal accounts, but perhaps there is a reader who does. Do they record any fee received for registrations? At the very least it would be interesting if anyone working in the sixteenth or seventeenth century community with both parish registers and detailed poor law records could check and see whether all the paupers who die are recorded in the parish register.

If the rectors of Melford charged for registrations, it seems unlikely that they were the only incumbents to do so. If the overseers refused to pay the charge, perhaps this too happened elsewhere? Is Melford in the late sixteenth century an anomaly or is this a common type of under-recording which should be noted when using registers to give any idea of population or to reconstitute communities?

Yours faithfully
Lyn Boothman

18 York Street, Cambridge, CB1 2PY. Tel. (0223) 323042.

Information on a new FFHS project

Dear Sir

For many years family history societies have produced Members' Interests Directories in which members have been able to 'advertise' the families they are researching, hoping that others, interested in the same names, would be able to exchange information. The same was true for the well-known 'County Families' Directories, produced by John P. Perkins, which proved to be very popular and the information reached further afield with more subscribers than the local society booklets.

It is now time to set up a national list of family names being researched by family historians to complement the present system of county/society/regional directories to which only a comparative few contribute. The Federation of Family History Societies is sponsoring a project to list all the families being researched in the British Isles – to be known as 'The British Isles Genealogical Register'.
It will be open to everyone, not just members of family history societies. There are hundreds of people out there who are content to do their own thing and do not wish to belong to a society, or are totally ignorant of the fact that such things as family history societies exist and so cannot appreciate the give and take of information that is available. I’ve seen the surprise on some faces when told!

The application forms will be made available to local history societies, record offices, libraries and family history societies throughout the UK. Family historians living outside the UK with ancestral roots in the British Isles will also be invited to contribute.

Each entrant submits their research names with places and dates for a £1 fee per form which will cover the operating costs of the project. Unlike other directories, the ‘British Isles Genealogical Register’ will be available in county sections – eg the Yorkshire section will contain Yorkshire interests only, thus helping family historians to concentrate their interests within one county. This should increase the possibilities of ‘family contacts’, and enable them to select only the counties in which they are interested. Scotland, Ireland and Wales will be treated as separate countries in three separate sections. The entries for each county will be given free to all the societies of that county as hard copy or micro-fiche. Each society will be free to publish the information as a book or one micro-fiche or hold it as a referral index for their area as it wishes.

The Federation of Family History Societies invites you to register the surnames that you are researching in the British Isles. In this way, you can make your interests known to thousands of other family historians – world wide.

Yours faithfully
Carol McLee

Federation Projects Co-ordinator, 3 The Green, Kirklevington, Yarm, Cleveland, TS15 9NW.

1891 Cheshire census database project

Dear Sir

As Chairman of the South Cheshire Family History Society, I have made application to the Cheshire County council for a grant, under the banner of ‘A Cheshire Celebration - Year of Culture 1993’, to support a project which involves compiling a computer database from information contained within the 1891 census of Cheshire.

For some time now the Society has been acquiring the 1891 Census on micro-fiche under a sponsored purchase scheme and I see the proposed project as a simple and natural extension of this.
In my application for a grant, which proved successful (upon certain conditions being met), I outlined the project, in which I stated that I would approach all Local and Family History Societies in Cheshire with a view to seeking help in completing the project.

This is my purpose in writing to you now. The project, quite simply involves the inputting of information from the 1891 census micro-fiche, into a computer database, from which searches can be made given any particular information.

Volunteers would assist in either:-

a) Transcribing from the micro-fiche onto paper copy.

b) Inputting from the paper transcription to the computer.

c) Inputting direct from the micro-fiche to the computer.

I think that the value of such a project, to both Local and Family Historians in Cheshire, will at once be recognised and I would ask that your Society or Group considers giving this project its full support.

My immediate requirements, in order to comply with conditions set and to release the initial half payment of the grant, are:-

1) An indication of your support as a Society or Group.

2) An estimate of how many volunteers might be forthcoming from your Society or Group.

Even though there may be no volunteers forthcoming, your support in principle, would be invaluable in helping to release the grant.

Further, as a major part of the project must be completed in 1993, I would request that you invite volunteers from your Society, Group or elsewhere to contact myself as soon as possible.

Additionally or alternatively, your members might perhaps consider sponsoring the purchase of sets of micro-fiche (£10 per Sub District), in order to complete the coverage of the 1891 Cheshire census.

I would be pleased to answer further queries if required.

Yours faithfully
Peter Chadwick (Chairman S.C.F.H.S.)

South Cheshire Family History Society, 208 Bedford Street, Crewe, Cheshire, CW2 6JL. Tel. (0270) 216628.