

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

SEASONALITY OF BIRTHS AND MARRIAGES IN A SEAFARING COMMUNITY BEFORE THE AGE OF STEAM

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Robin Hood's Bay, a settlement in Fylingdales parish in North Yorkshire, is commonly described as a fishing village, but there were many seafaring inhabitants. They used the facilities of the nearby port of Whitby, and traded mainly around the Baltic, the North Sea and the English Channel, frequently in the many vessels owned in the village. At any one time in the later eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth the settlement had some 200 sailors out of its population of nearly 1,000. Occupations are given consistently in the Fylingdales parish register from 1780, and great numbers of the sailors can also be found in the lists of crews contained in the Whitby Muster Rolls. By contrast, the number of deep-sea fishing vessels was in decline from around the middle of the eighteenth century until, by 1820, they could be manned by no more than a score of men.¹

The intensely maritime character of the place has implications for seasonality of vital events, which can be shown to be related to the customary sailing period. Most men went off to sea at the end of the winter, and the owner-masters thenceforth had to keep vessels in work until winter returned. Loss of life was formidable enough without risking the worst of the storms. Work in the North Sea might allow men to visit home occasionally, and masters could by custom take their wives on voyages, but generally the routine meant that families could be separated for up to nine months of the year, until steam power introduced a different regime around the middle of the nineteenth century.

Because the Fylingdales baptism register gives dates of birth and baptisms from 1780, the monthly distribution of births, baptisms and assumed conceptions in sailors' families can be illustrated: Table 1 shows that 44 per cent of their conceptions occurred in the three months December-February. The corresponding births in September-November were followed by the return of the fathers, and families then had three months within which to arrange baptisms before the shipping became active again. In the following four months (March-June) their conceptions fell to a mere 22 per cent and then rose slightly to 26 per cent from July to October.

The rhythm of the sailors' year becomes more emphatic when it is contrasted with that of the village's fishermen. Deep-sea fishing started in March, with men working weekly out of the village, until the major herring campaign began at Yarmouth, perhaps as early as August. November saw the fishermen home again.² Table 2 consists of the monthly distribution of conceptions, births

Table 1 Seasonality in sailor households, 1781-1840

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Total
conceptions (n)	179	125	57	36	48	58	60	71	61	46	70	101	912
%	19.6	13.7	6.2	3.9	5.3	6.3	6.6	7.8	6.7	5.0	7.7	11.1	100.0
births (n)	38	48	58	57	72	58	46	76	102	179	118	60	912
%	4.2	5.3	6.3	6.2	7.9	6.3	5.0	8.3	11.2	19.6	12.9	6.6	100.0
baptisms (n)	119	91	41	34	48	55	51	53	55	91	125	149	912
%	13.0	10.0	4.5	3.7	5.3	6.0	5.7	5.8	6.0	10.0	13.7	16.3	100.0

Table 2 Seasonality in fisher households, 1781-1840

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Total
conceptions (n)	29	24	28	28	13	28	12	17	11	11	21	37	259
%	11.2	9.3	10.8	10.8	5.0	10.8	4.6	6.6	4.3	4.3	8.2	14.3	100.0
births (n)	27	12	26	15	17	11	10	22	40	27	24	28	259
%	10.4	4.6	10.0	5.8	6.6	4.2	3.8	8.5	15.4	10.4	9.3	10.8	100.0
baptisms (n)	26	21	12	22	23	13	12	11	26	24	26	43	259
%	10.0	8.1	4.6	8.5	8.9	5.0	4.6	4.2	10.0	9.3	10.0	16.6	100.0

Notes: The row percentages in Tables 1 and 2 do not necessarily sum to 100 due to rounding.

and baptisms in the much smaller sample of households headed by fishermen in the period 1781-1840.

The fishermen's peak of births in September in Table 2 may be attributable to post-Yarmouth conceptions, but their conceptions for December-February comprised only 34.8 per cent of the total. In sharp contrast with the sailors they remained high at 37.4 per cent for the next four months and only fell to a trough of about 20 per cent from July to October, when the fishing was most active. The high summit of December baptisms and the greater monthly undulations within the annual cycle suggest that many baptisms were deferred until a great clearing could be made. This connects with the point that the birth and baptism peaks are a month further apart for fishermen than for sailors: the delaying of baptisms here may illustrate a large group of kin (revealed by family reconstitution) timing celebrations to enable as many people as possible to attend.³

An annual cycle for marriages is also identifiable, from slightly less reliable sources. Because many families were associated almost exclusively with employment in seafaring and shipping, it is possible to use their surnames as an indicator of maritime occupation. The efficacy of the tactic is suggested by Figure 1, which compares baptisms in households of which the head's occupation is registered as sailor or fisher with those chosen by surname, in 1781-1840.

Figure 1 Seasonality of baptisms in sailor-fisher and maritime-surname households compared, 1781-1840

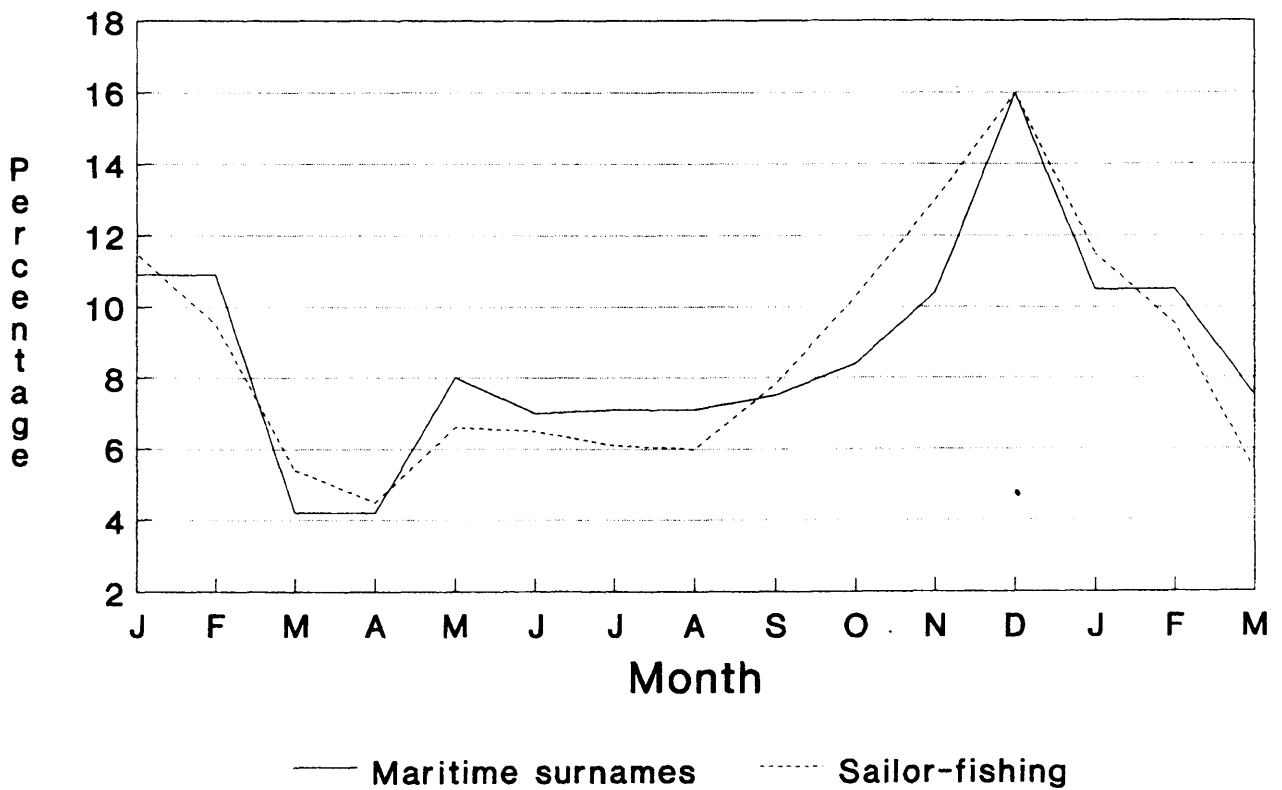


Table 3 Seasonality of marriages in maritime-surname households, 1781-1840

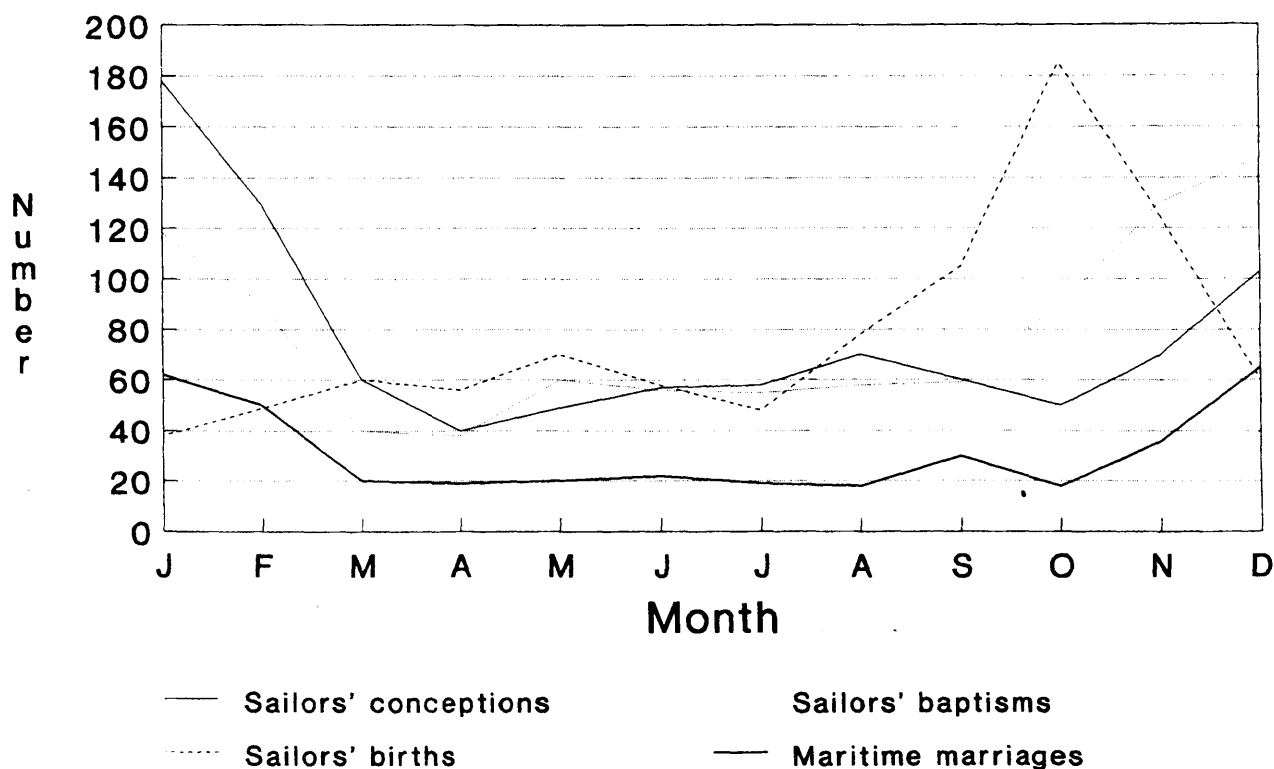
	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Total
marriages (n)	65	49	20	18	18	22	20	19	29	16	33	62	371
%	17.5	13.2	5.4	4.8	4.8	5.9	5.4	5.1	7.8	4.3	8.9	16.7	99.8

Table 4 Seasonality of baptisms of Robin Hood Bay (RHB) and the rest of the parish of Fylingdales (rest) compared, 1781-1840

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Total
RHB	146	146	81	67	98	103	75	91	107	125	171	230	1440
%	10.1	10.1	5.6	4.6	6.8	7.1	5.2	6.3	7.4	8.7	11.9	16.0	100.0
rest	108	169	101	105	122	102	119	98	100	117	131	107	1377
%	7.8	12.3	7.3	7.6	8.8	7.4	8.6	7.1	7.3	8.5	9.5	7.8	100.0

Notes: The row percentages in this table do not necessarily sum to 100 due to rounding.

Figure 2 General view of seasonality in seafaring households



This maritime-surname tactic had to be adopted for indicating the seasonality of marriages in 1781-1840 because the marriage register does not give places of residence or occupations consistently. The result, shown in Table 3, is a great peak of marriages in December-February of 47.4 per cent, when the men had returned from sea for an extended period. Timing of events goes well with the homecoming.

Seasonality of baptisms for all of Robin Hood's Bay and that for the remainder of the parish of Fylingdales – what might be called 'country' – are compared in Table 4. Remarkably few sailors came from the country, but the effect of their great numbers in Robin Hood's Bay is apparent. There is a peak in February for the country but its events are otherwise evenly spread. The general situation of the seafaring people in respect of seasonality is summarised in Figure 2.

After about 1850 change began: steam tugs could help sailing vessels in and out of harbour in wintry conditions, and competition with steam for cargoes enforced a longer trading year for sail, until insurance associations would no longer cope with losses. Conservative Robin Hood's Bay still owned 90 vessels in 1867, and then quite quickly steam took over.

No other coastal settlement in the district has yet been investigated in this way, but there are several whose history and traditions are linked overwhelmingly with the sea, and which might yield similar results of the effect of occupation on seasonality. Then there are towns with a very substantial seafaring element like the much larger North Shields, up the coast in Northumberland, where in 1851 there were 8,882 inhabitants, and in 1857 the master mariners numbered 300, probably betokening the presence of another 1,800 seamen at least.⁴ Seasonality in a place like this must be influenced by the activity of the shipping to some extent. It is to be wondered what the effect on the general picture of seasonality would be if many coastal communities were included in a national investigation.

NOTES

1. Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society, Muster Rolls from 1747; North Yorkshire County Record Office [NYCRO], Fylingdales parish rate books; National Maritime Museum, Port Registry Transcript, Whitby; Robin Hood's Bay Ship Insurance Association lists in private collections.
2. Jacob Storm, **Memoirs**, c.1900, published 1993 in **Storm and Company**, by Caedmon Publications, Upgang lane, Whitby.
3. Writer's own Fylingdales family reconstitutions (unpublished).
4. Whellan & Co., **History, topography and directory of Northumberland**, 1867.