

CORRESPONDENCE

Letters intended for publication in **LPS** should be sent to **LPS**, Department of History, University of Essex, Colchester, CO4 3SQ

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.

Parish Registration

Dear Sir,

Dennis Ashurst is to be congratulated on his detailed and meticulous research on the quality of the Worsborough parish register (**LPS** 55). His comparison of Bishop Transcripts with parish registers indicates some very revealing inconsistencies and errors in the transcription of parish register entries.

Your editorial comment, quoting Steel's work on the reliability of parish registers, is also apt and appropriate. Steel's discussion of the rough note books kept by parish clerks and others is informative, and as a number of these books have survived in county record offices, it is obviously an area of potentially fruitful research.

One note of caution needs to be sounded however: in some cases the note books were used not for recording all baptisms, marriages and burials in a parish, but were a listing of all those yet to pay the fees for these ritual services. One of the witnesses to the **1833 Select Committee on Parochial Registration** noted the pitfalls in this regard. The parish clerk of Waldron, Sussex (a local blacksmith) described how he compiled a memorandum book listing baptisms, marriages and burials, fees for which were still outstanding. This listing was then used by the local Vicar as the basis for compiling his parish register at the end of the year. Consequently, those who paid their fees promptly were not included in the clerk's rough note book, and as a result were omitted from the parish register!

Dennis Ashurst also refers to Lynn Boothman's work on the comparison of poor law burials of paupers with their registration in the local burial register. She found a very significant omission of burials in the Long Melford parish register during the late sixteenth century (**LPS** 49). I have repeated a similar research exercise for the parishes of Whitchurch and Folkestone during the late

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and found that about a fifth of all pauper burials were omitted from the burial registers up to the middle of the eighteenth century.

Another way of evaluating the quality of burial registers is to compare people leaving wills and dying in a particular parish, with their entry in the local register. For ten parishes in Staffordshire, I found that 42.6 per cent of all deaths amongst the will-leaving population in the period 1538-1649 were not registered in the parish registers, a proportion that had fallen to 17.5 per cent by 1750-1837. Some of these burials were found in neighbouring parish registers, but this was only a very small minority of total cases (6.3 per cent for the whole sample).

The inadequacy of parish registration was not confined to 'poor' parish registers. I analysed the registration of 124 people who had left wills in the parish of Colyton between 1554 and 1797, and found 28.1 per cent unregistered in the parish register. I found similar levels of unreliability in other Cambridge Group reconstitution parishes from the comparison of wills with burial registers, a conclusion supported by the application of the 'same-name technique' to the reconstitution schedules of these parishes. (For full details, see my book, **Essays in English Population History**).

Parish registers have formed the basis of much research published in LPS, and at times, the findings have been interpreted in an uncritical way. In my view, what is required for all research using parish registers, is an initial assessment of their quality by comparing them (where available) with Bishops Transcripts, clerks' rough note books, wills, poor law records of pauper burials, census statements on birth, midwives records and any other local source which independently lists births and deaths. Only when this has been achieved, will we be in a position to generate reliable findings on births and deaths for historical demographic research.

Yours faithfully
Dr Peter Razzell