RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

AGE AT BAPTISM IN RURAL HAMPSHIRE IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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There is at present increasing interest in extending family reconstitution and similar methods into the second half of the nineteenth century.¹ This interest has been fuelled by the recent debate about the nature of the fertility decline in England after 1850, and, in particular, the extent to which it was due to ‘stopping’ behaviour or birth spacing.² If fertility is to be analysed using parish register data for the period after 1850, it would be useful to have some indication of the distribution of the interval between birth and baptism for that period.

Previous studies of the age at baptism in England and Wales have concentrated on the pre-censal period, and have made use of the limited number of parish registers in which dates of birth were given as well as dates of baptism.³ These studies produced two main results. First, the median age at baptism rose slowly from about one week during the second half of the 17th century to about one month around the turn of the 19th century. Second, the variability between parishes increased greatly over the period. In particular, by the beginning of the 19th century there existed a minority of parishes in which birth-baptism intervals of several months were quite common.

Unfortunately, parish registers which give dates of birth are extremely rare (if they exist at all) after the early decades of the 19th century.⁴ Therefore the method used in earlier studies is not really possible. In order to study the age at baptism in 19th century England, we need to find a reliable alternative source of dates of birth for a large enough sample of births to enable meaningful conclusions to be drawn. Given a sample of baptisms recorded in a parish over a specific period, the civil registers could be used for this purpose, but obtaining dates of birth in the required numbers would be expensive and time-consuming. Therefore, we decided to experiment with using the information about ages given in the census enumerators’ books (CEBs) after 1851 for children aged under one year at the date of the census. For such children, ages are typically given in months (or in weeks for very young infants). We took a sample of such children from the CEBs for seven rural parishes in northern Hampshire for the five censuses from 1851 to 1891. The seven parishes were Cliddesden, Farleigh Wallop, Greywell, Nately Scures, Up Nately, Mapledurwell and South Warnborough. Assuming the ages in the CEBs to be accurate, all these children

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were born in the year preceding each census. We added to this sample children whose deaths were recorded in the burial registers for the seven parishes, and whose dates of birth (calculated from the recorded dates of burial and reported ages at death) fell within the same years.

For each child, we then searched the baptism registers of the relevant parishes for a period beginning at the child's (estimated) date of birth, until either a matching baptism entry was found, or five years had elapsed. Applying this method produced, for a sample of births taking place in the year preceding each census, an estimated date of birth and a date of baptism (provided that the child was baptised in the parish before he or she attained the age of five years).

Critical to the success of this approach is the accuracy of the ages reported in the CEBs and the burial registers. We took these ages at face value. Thus, for example, a child stated in the 1851 census to be aged '8 months' was assumed to have been born on 30 July 1850; similarly, a child stated in the 1851 census to have been aged '6 weeks' was assumed to have been born on 17 February 1851. If these ages were reported in completed weeks and months, rather than (as we have assumed) to the nearest week or month, then we shall systematically underestimate the length of birth-baptism intervals by an average amount which should not be greater than two weeks.

A total of 240 children were included in the sample, of which 19 were found only in a burial register (that is, they had died prior to the census). Of these, the baptisms of 176 were found in the baptism register of the parish in which their census entry or burial entry was made. Seven children were found in the baptism register of another of the seven parishes. The remaining 57 children were not found in any of the baptism registers we searched (it is likely that many of these were baptised outside the seven parishes studied).

We have only used data for the 176 children whose baptisms were found in the register for their parishes of birth in calculating birth-baptism intervals. In eight of these 176 cases, the dates of baptism preceded the estimated dates of birth. We made the assumption that these children had very short birth-baptism intervals (less than one day).

The distribution of the ages at baptism of the 176 births which did lead to baptisms within the parish of birth before the child was aged five years are summarised in Table 1. The median age at baptism for the whole sample was 34 days. Only eight of the 176 births had birth-baptism intervals in excess of six months, the longest being 901 days. There is some evidence that the upper tail of the distribution was becoming stretched in the 1880s and 1890s: that is, the longest ten per cent of intervals became even longer than they had been earlier in the century. Table 1 also includes the distribution reported by Berry and Schofield for their 'median' parish during the period 1791–1812 for comparison. The latter is very similar to the distribution of our 'pooled sample'.
Table 1  Ages in days by which given percentages of children had been baptised: seven Hampshire parishes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth cohort</th>
<th>n. of births</th>
<th>25th percentile</th>
<th>50th percentile</th>
<th>75th percentile</th>
<th>90th percentile</th>
<th>Semi-interquartile range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851–91 pooled</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Median' parish, 1791–1812</td>
<td>1791–1812</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** The semi-interquartile range is a measure of the spread of the distribution. It is the range of days occupied by the middle 25% of the recorded ages, when they are ordered from lowest to highest (or from highest to lowest).

**Sources:** Hampshire data derived from parish registers and census enumerators' books (CEBs) for the parishes of Cliddesden, Farleigh Wallop, Greywell, Mapledurwell, Nately Scures, South Warnborough and Up Nately. For the CEBs, see Public Record Office HO 107/1680 and 1681 (1851), RG 9/706, 709 and 711 (1861), RG 10/1229, 1235 and 1237 (1871), RG 11/1249, 1255 and 1257 (1881), and RG 12/953, 958 and 960 (1891). 'Median' parish, 1791–1812 taken from B.M. Berry and R.S. Schofield, 'Age at baptism in pre-industrial England', *Population Studies*, 25(1971), 458.

We are aware that the method of estimating the distribution of birth-baptism intervals described in this short note is only approximate, since it relies on estimating dates of birth from sources which are less than precise. Nevertheless, we feel that it is capable of giving a good indication of the distribution of birth-baptism intervals, and of providing percentiles which are probably accurate to within two weeks. Its advantage is its wide applicability: it can be applied to any parish in which the parish register data are of reasonable quality, and certainly to most of rural England. Although clearly inferior to the method which uses reported dates of birth, it is still capable of identifying parishes in which birth-baptism intervals were either very long, or exhibited a high degree of variability.

**NOTES**

2. For an extended discussion of this debate, see S. Szreter, *Fertility, Class and Gender in Britain 1860–1940*, (Cambridge, 1996).
Laxton, 'Of such as are of riper years? A note on age at baptism', 48–54; and D. M. McCallum, 'Age at baptism: further evidence', 62–4.

4. The introduction of standard forms for the baptism register probably discouraged clergymen from including dates of birth (as they had to be entered as marginal notes). We have not come across any baptism registers which give dates of birth for more than a few exceptional cases after 1820.

5. For example, in the case of the 1851 census, they were born between 31 March 1850 and 30 March 1851.

6. For six children in our sample, it was possible to cross-check the estimated date of birth with a date of birth written in the margin of the baptism register. These six cases did not suggest any systematic bias of this kind. Note that in the censuses prior to 1881, enumerators were instructed to write down the ages of every person enumerated 'as they were reported': see D. Mills and M. Drake, 'The census, 1801–1991', in M. Drake and R. Finnegan eds, Studying Family and Community History, 19th and 20th Centuries: Volume 4, Sources and Methods: a Handbook, (Cambridge, 1994), 38–47. Only from 1881 onwards was 'age last birthday' explicitly asked for. On the reporting of children's ages in the 19th century censuses, see also E. Higgs, Making Sense of the Census: the Manuscript Returns for England and Wales, 1801–1901, (London, 1989), 69.

7. The proportion of children who were not baptised in the parish where they were born is (64 out of 240, or 27 per cent) is within the range reported in P. Razzell, Essays in English Population History, (London, 1994), 82–118 (especially Table 6, 92–3). This chapter of Razzell's book is a reprint of 'The evaluation of baptism as a form of birth registration through cross-matching census and parish register data: a study in methodology', Population Studies, 26 (1972), 121–46. We did check the burial registers of the relevant parishes for five years after the estimated date of birth of each child in the sample to find out if any of those who could not be traced in a baptism register were buried. We located the burials of three of the 57 children who were not traced to a baptism register. Either these children were buried unbaptised, or they were baptised in another parish (or in a nonconformist chapel).

8. Using only these children has the advantage of rendering our results more comparable with those of studies which have taken a sample of recorded baptisms. We excluded the three children who were buried unbaptised.

9. This is a somewhat arbitrary assumption. However, since we report the distribution of birth-baptism intervals using medians and other percentiles, all that is really required is the assumption that the birth-baptism intervals of these children are among the shortest 25 per cent of the intervals we can identify. We think that this is likely to be true.