WOMEN'S NAMES: SOME PROBLEMS FOR RECONSTITUTION ANALYSIS

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In England, we are used to the tradition of women changing their name at marriage and abandoning use of the paternal family name in favour of their husband's name. While this appears to have been a cultural norm throughout the period when we are able to use parish registers for reconstitution purposes, there are instances where this name change did not occur and also when it occurred without a marriage having taken place. During completion of a 'total reconstitution' of Colyton in Devon, I was able to follow through the lives of some well recorded women quite closely and identify the reasons for this.

While the burial of a woman with her maiden name may indicate singlehood, this was not necessarily the case. In the seventeenth century when marriage age was late, death rates high and remarriage chances for women extremely low in the parish of Colyton, marriage was sometimes a very short lived episode in a woman's life and her 'town' identity appears to have remained with her maiden name. Several instances of widows who had once been married being referred to by their maiden name can be found in the Colyton record. For example, Alice Paul was born in 1632 and came from a family who were often in receipt of poor relief. When she was thirty two she had an illegitimate son. She married in 1670, at the age of thirty eight, to William Zalway, and bore him one son in 1673. Her husband died in 1679. In the 1682/83 list of those in receipt of poor relief she appeared as Alice Paul.\(^1\) There is no evidence that women whose husbands were still alive when they died were buried with their maiden names.

Similarly, women who were separated from their husbands often reverted to using their maiden names. The separation of Rose and George Farrant, who married in 1742, is well documented in Colyton's poor relief records.\(^2\) By the 1760's, when George was still alive but not living with Rose and their children, she was known as Rose Ford, her maiden name. Conversely, women in common law relationships would generally adopt their partner's surname. An overseer's letter of 1801, concerned the common law marriage of Hannah and William Harvey who had two daughters.\(^3\) Hannah called herself 'Harvey' even though she was married to John Lugg in 1787 and had had four children with him. Mary Anning was referred to as 'Mary Facey' in the 1820s when she had two children with John Facey.\(^4\)

This flexible use of surnames presents some linkage problems, for the reconstitution process. In the case of a return to the use of the maiden name for example, the likely result is the production of two FRFs (Family Reconstitution Forms) for the same woman, one with her birth and marriage details, the other with her burial date but no earlier life history. At the same time, these naming
practices give an interesting picture of how women were viewed by society. The examples of women reverting to use of their maiden names have all been drawn from seventeenth and early eighteenth century records. This was a period when, the demographic and economic details suggest, the single woman was a common figure in Colyton. As marriage became more usual, and was undertaken at an earlier age, for those who did not marry but lived with their partner, the practice of taking his name may have become more frequent. This is speculative, but what is certain is that name labels are significant indicators about how people viewed themselves and how others viewed them.

NOTES

1. Feoffees records 14/9a-b.
2. Devon Record Office 3483A/PO13 Overseers Account Book 1740–1770.
3. Devon Record Office 3483A/PO45 Miscellaneous correspondence 1798–1835.
4. Feoffees records 17/3 Accounts of feoffees funds 1825–1885.