

AGES AT BAPTISM IN THE PARISH OF ALL SAINTS, SUDBURY, 1809–1828: A NEW APPROACH TO THEIR INTERPRETATION

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The period of time elapsing between birth and baptism has been the subject of several studies over a number of years. Berry and Schofield studied 65 parishes throughout England, of which half were within London, covering the sixteenth century until the end of the eighteenth century.¹ The seventeenth to nineteenth centuries have been particularly popular for this type of study, but often there has not been a sufficient number of baptisms for analysis of the data on a year by year basis.²

The interval of time between birth and baptism is of considerable importance to demographers since the accurate calculation of demographic indicators for the past depends on an accurate estimation of this figure. Most parish registers only record baptismal dates so that the number of births in a given period must be estimated. Bradley in his article on the seasonality of baptism notes that there is considerable variation in birth-baptism intervals at different periods and between different parishes and that there is a need for a comprehensive survey of parishes where both dates are recorded.³ This point is emphasised by Wrigley who states that in a survey for the period 1791–1812, in one parish 25 per cent of children were baptised within one day of birth, whereas in another parish, 48 days elapsed before this figure had been reached.⁴

Berry and Schofield described a method for the presentation of birth-baptism intervals, which has been widely adopted by later authors.⁵ According to this procedure, the interval after birth in days by which one quarter, one half and then three-quarters of the sample children had been baptised is calculated. The authors further calculated the semi-interquartile range, which determines the interval in days over which the middle quarter of the sample was baptised. However, this calculation suffers from the disadvantage that it hides the incidence of parents having their baby baptised on the day of birth, which may suggest a local disease epidemic. Furthermore, as will be demonstrated below, Berry and Schofield's method of presentation may cause misleading conclusions to be drawn.

An alternative method of presentation of the results in this form of analysis was used by Jackson and Laxton who, while following Berry and Schofield's

method, graphically displayed the cumulative proportion of baptisms in a given interval of days.⁶ In some cases, and at least for the data under consideration for this article, this graphical form of display would be inappropriate. In Jackson and Laxton's most extreme case, that of three Liverpool parishes between 1765 and 1769, 95 per cent of parents had their children baptised within 40 days of birth. For the Sudbury data, presented below, the cumulative number of baptisms rarely reaches 95 per cent within 150 days, and in some years only 80 per cent of all children were baptised within 375 days. Presenting the Sudbury data by Jackson and Laxton's method would require a very extended x-axis, and thus the procedure described in this article presents the figures in tabular form.

Sudbury, Suffolk is situated on the River Stour and is 55 miles north-east of London. In the 1820s the town was governed by a mayor, recorder, six aldermen, 24 capital burgesses and a town clerk. In 1821 the combined population of its three parishes, All Saints, St Gregory and St Peter was 3,950 and that of the parish under observation in this study, All Saints, was 1,129.⁷ The baptismal register of All Saints includes the dates of both births and baptisms during the period from April 1808 to 1841. For these years there are around 30 to 50 entries per year. This study is based on the 20-year period from 1809–1828.

The data used in this study is almost complete, with very few 'defective entries'. Berry and Schofield defined 'defective sample entries' as ones in which one of the two dates is missing. In their study these were treated as if the baptisms had occurred after the longest recorded interval in the sample. In this study, since there were only three such entries from a total of over 1,000 baptisms, these have been omitted from the analysis, lessening any distortion in the results.⁸

This article presents a different technique for examining the birth-baptismal interval. Here, Berry and Schofield's calculation is reversed, so that the fixed parameter is the number of days, and the body of the table represents the percentage of couples. For this study, intervals of 75 days up to a maximum of 375 have been selected as the most appropriate for this form of analysis, though other studies may require different intervals. The remainder of this article will present data for the birth-baptism interval for All Saints, Sudbury according to these two approaches and highlights the differences, noting the benefits of this alternative approach. Finally, this article will suggest some reasons for the particular birth-baptism interval regime present in All Saints, Sudbury.

Table 1 presents the results according to the Berry and Schofield method. This table should be read as follows: in 1809, 25 per cent of babies were baptised within 26 days of birth. It also shows that around 280 days elapsed after birth before 75 per cent of babies were baptised, giving the impression that parents were particularly slow in taking their children to the church. Table 2 presents the same data in an alternative format and shows that 57 per cent of the children were baptised within 2½ months, (that is, in the 0 and 1–75 day

Table 1 Interval in days (± 0.5) by which the stated percentile of births were baptised, 1809–1828

Year	25%	50%	75%	N
1809	26	55	280	36
1810	30	106	214	29
1811	23	37	163	40
1812	5	32	118	65
1813	9	25	37	29
1814	13	31	120	49
1815	4	23	86	44
1816	7	21	47	48
1817	12	25	75	43
1818	19	36	70	46
1819	13	25	47	57
1820	13	28	135	57
1821	10	26	48	46
1822	14	27	54	56
1823	18	42	207	67
1824	11	28	91	65
1825	17	33	102	66
1826	24	63	133	53
1827	12	28	89	47
1828	18	36	136	56

Source: Baptism register of All Saints, Sudbury, Suffolk Record Office, Bury St. Edmunds, FL 633/4/7 and 633/4/9

periods). The difference is due to 20 per cent of the couples delaying baptism for over a year, which distorts the interpretation by the first method. Furthermore, Table 2 shows that in 1814 nearly 23 per cent of parents delayed baptism of their infants by over a year, a fact which could not be ascertained from Table 1, which shows that 75 per cent of children were baptised within less than four months. Examination of Table 1 suggests that the pattern of baptisms in 1819 and 1822 were very similar, but when these years are compared in Table 2 it is seen that they are very different. It shows that in 1819

Table 2 Percentage of children baptised in the given year within the stated number of days after birth, 1809–1828

Year	Days						
	0	1–75	76–150	151–225	226–300	300–375	>375
1809	0.0	57.1	8.6	5.7	0.0	8.6	20.0
1810	0.0	42.9	25.0	7.1	7.1	3.6	14.3
1811	10.8	56.8	5.4	5.4	2.7	5.4	13.5
1812	6.6	59.0	13.1	1.6	1.6	1.6	16.4
1813	0.0	82.8	6.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.3
1814	4.2	58.3	6.3	4.2	2.1	2.1	22.9
1815	6.8	65.9	13.6	2.3	0.0	2.3	9.1
1816	3.9	80.4	11.8	3.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
1817	0.0	73.8	11.9	4.8	4.8	0.0	4.8
1818	0.0	78.3	8.7	6.5	0.0	0.0	6.5
1819	5.4	75.0	3.6	3.6	0.0	0.0	12.5
1820	1.8	63.2	10.5	1.8	0.0	1.8	21.1
1821	4.3	76.1	4.3	2.2	4.3	0.0	8.7
1822	0.0	82.1	14.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.6
1823	1.5	59.1	10.6	7.6	6.1	4.5	10.6
1824	1.6	68.8	12.5	4.7	3.1	1.6	7.8
1825	1.5	69.2	13.8	7.7	1.5	1.5	4.6
1826	2.0	54.9	25.5	3.9	5.9	2.0	5.9
1827	4.3	69.6	13.0	4.3	2.2	2.2	4.3
1828	3.6	60.0	10.9	10.9	1.8	0.0	12.7

Source: Baptism register of All Saints, Sudbury, Suffolk Record Office, Bury St. Edmunds, FL 633/4/7 and 633/4/9

over 5 per cent of the parents had their children baptised on the day of birth, whereas in 1822 there were none. At the other end of the scale, over 12 per cent of couples delayed having their children baptised for over a year in 1819, whereas in 1822 this figure was less than 4 per cent. The conclusion to be drawn is that Berry and Schofield's method tends to highlight stability

whereas the approach presented here highlights the extreme behaviour, and it is the extreme behaviour which warrants further examination.

In terms of birth-baptismal intervals the early nineteenth century has not been widely studied, although Doolittle examined the period 1801–1812 for St Magdalen, Colchester and showed that some 25 per cent of children were baptised within 12 days.⁹ Similarly McCallum found that at Brunton, Somerset, the same proportion of children were baptised within 23 days of birth in the period 1806–1812. This study has shown that for the period 1809–1812, the mean for 25 per cent of baptisms is 21 days, though by omitting the data for 1812 this is extended to 26 days.¹⁰

Same-day baptisms

It is notable from Table 2 that while the majority of children were baptised between 1 and 75 days of birth, in a number of years there were a small proportion of children baptised on the same day as birth. Most significantly, in 1811 and 1812, around 11 and 7 per cent respectively of parents had their children baptised on the day of birth, and a figure approaching 7 per cent was also recorded in 1815. These baptisms are particularly significant when considering multipliers for transforming births into baptisms for other purposes, and the cause of this behaviour is instructive. In each of the years 1810 to 1812 inclusive, the summers were wet, the harvests poor and the pea and bean crops failed.¹¹ In 1812, the average price of wheat rose to over 122 shillings per quarter, the highest annual average recorded during the Napoleonic wars.¹² It can be concluded that nutrition levels dropped and that mothers may not have been able to provide enough milk for their babies, consequently more same-day baptisms took place, because the parents were more cautious about the salvation of their child. Similarly, in 1821 when over 4 per cent of couples arranged to have their child baptised on the day of birth, there was a particularly poor harvest; snow fell in London on 27 May and there was a frost in June.¹³ No baptisms were recorded between 20 August and 27 November in All Saints, Sudbury and the vicar recorded that there was an epidemic of smallpox in that period. No doubt the incumbent considered it inadvisable to expose babies unnecessarily to the infection present in the town. There may be further reasons for parents having their child baptised on the day of birth. In 1811 there were four such christenings of which three children died within ten days, suggesting that these babies were indeed sick immediately after birth. However, in 1812 there were also four same-day baptisms, but burials for these named babies could not be found in the parish within the year. The contrary position can be observed in 1822 when no children were christened on the day of birth and the agricultural records reveal that it was a fine summer with an abundant harvest, so that the average price of wheat dropped to just 43 shillings a quarter.¹⁴

It cannot be concluded that the relationship between same-day baptism and agricultural conditions or sickness is the only explanation for this behaviour. In 1815 there were just two same day baptisms and in both instances the child was illegitimate (and had the same father, Thomas Dixey). In the first case, the

Table 3 Percentage of children born in the given year and baptised within the stated number of days.

Year	Days						
	0	1–75	76–150	151–225	226–300	300–375	>375
1809	0.0	52.8	11.1	8.3	5.6	2.8	19.4
1810	0.0	44.0	24.0	0.0	0.0	8.0	24.0
1811	10.0	62.5	7.5	5.0	5.0	2.5	7.5
1812	9.4	71.7	11.3	1.9	0.0	0.0	5.7
1813	0.0	68.8	9.4	3.1	0.0	3.1	15.6
1814	4.7	78.6	7.1	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.4
1815	7.1	64.3	14.3	4.8	0.0	0.0	9.5
1816	3.4	67.2	13.8	3.4	3.4	1.7	6.9
1817	0.0	84.8	4.3	2.2	0.0	0.0	8.7
1818	0.0	77.5	10.0	10.0	0.0	0.0	2.5
1819	5.5	74.5	5.5	1.8	0.0	1.8	10.9
1820	2.1	78.7	8.5	4.3	4.3	0.0	2.1

Source: Baptism register of All Saints, Sudbury, Suffolk Record Office, Bury St. Edmunds, FL 633/4/7 and 633/4/9

mother was Dixey's late wife's sister, Lydia and in the second, the mother was a spinster named Susanna Johnson. Perhaps the parents wanted their children baptised before the scandal broke. The practice of having illegitimate children baptised on the day of birth was repeated in 1816 and 1819 when William Gosling became the father of two children by his wife's sister, both of whom were christened immediately. This man was the father of a third child by his wife's sister in 1827, but on this occasion some five months elapsed before the baby was christened.

Occasionally, parents who delayed baptism for a few weeks suddenly realised that they should delay no further when their child became sick. Ann Maria, daughter of James and Susan Strutt, was born 21 September 1822, baptised on 15 October and died the following day. However, this practice does not appear to be very prevalent.

A new approach

As shown above the Berry and Schofield method analyses the data from the point of view of baptism and always looks back in time to the date of birth.

The tables presented above suffer from a potential distortion resulting from this practice, especially where a fair proportion of baptisms take place over one year. It should be obvious that the *initial* decision on when baptism occurs is made by parents at the time of birth, and the subsequent date of baptism is merely the result of this earlier decision. To illustrate this point, consider parents with a newly born child in a year of good weather and an abundant harvest. The mother is able to satisfy the baby nutritionally, so parents may not have the child baptised soon after birth. On the other hand, during the more difficult times, parents probably had their children baptised soon after birth, fearing the death of their child. As stated above environmental conditions are not the only reason for choosing when to baptise, but they surely play an important role. (Other possibilities, of course are illegitimacy, the presence/absence of a suitably qualified minister, and of course any birth defects or illness.) Whatever the possibilities, however, it should be clear that there is a strong argument for calculating birth-baptism intervals from the date of birth rather than the date of baptism.

Table 3 presents the data used to calculate Table 2 in a different format: here, the year of birth is used as the viewpoint rather than the year of baptism. Calculations beyond 1820 have not been made since there is the chance that a long-delayed baptism would be missed, distorting the results. This table demonstrates that over 90 per cent of parents brought their children for baptism within 255 days in the years 1812, 1817 and 1818. As previously stated, the price of wheat was very high in 1812; the summer of 1817 was very wet and although there was a good harvest in 1818, unemployment in agriculture rose to 60 per cent in the south and east of England.¹⁵ It is argued that parents tended to baptise their children early during hard times.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is suggested that the manner of presentation of these data provide a more detailed and more accurate portrayal of the birth-baptism intervals recorded in the parish registers. In the case of these data this method is also more practical than Jackson and Laxton's graphical method of presentation in units of single days. Furthermore, it offers an advantage over Berry and Schofield's procedure by manipulating figures according to the number of baptisms in a given period, rather than calculating the time taken to achieve a given number of baptisms, so that it shows years when parents took their children to church for baptism on the day of birth as well as when exceptional delays took place.

NOTES

1. B. M. Berry and R. S. Schofield, 'Age of baptism in pre-industrial England', *Population Studies*, 25 (1971), 453-63.
2. I. G. Doolittle, 'Age of baptism: further evidence', *Local Population Studies*, 24 (1980), 52-5.
3. L. Bradley, 'An enquiry into seasonality in baptisms, marriages and burials. Part 2. Baptism Seasonality', *Local Population Studies*, 5 (1970), 18-31.
4. E. A. Wrigley, 'Births and baptisms: the use of Anglican baptism registers as a source of

information about the number of births in England before the beginning of civil registration', *Population Studies*, **31** (1977), 281–312.

5. Berry and Schofield, 'Age of baptism'. The same method is used in, for example, D. M. McCallum, 'Age at baptism: further evidence', *Local Population Studies*, **24** (1980), 49–51. See also M. Cook, 'Birth-baptism intervals in some Flintshire parishes', *Local Population Studies*, **24** (1980), 56–7.
6. S. Jackson and P. Laxton, 'As such as are of riper years', *Local Population Studies*, **18** (1977), 30–6.
7. 1821 Census of England and Wales, *Abstract of the answers and returns*, 323.
8. Berry and Schofield, 'Age of baptism', 456.
9. Doolittle, 'Age of baptism: further evidence', 54.
10. McCallum, 'Age at baptism: further evidence', 49.
11. J. M. Stratton and J. H. Brown, *Agricultural records. AD 220–1977* (London, 1978), 96–7.
12. G. R. Porter, *The progress of a nation* (London, 1836), 156.
13. Stratton and Brown, *Agricultural records*, 96–7.
14. Stratton and Brown, *Agricultural records*, 96–7; Porter, *Progress of a nation*, 156.
15. Stratton and Brown, *Agricultural records*, 96–7.