

## RESEARCH NOTE

### BIRTH-BAPTISM INTERVALS IN WHICKHAM PARISH, CO. DURHAM c. 1770–1820

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#### Introduction

The orthodox Anglican Church practice of baptism from the sixteenth Century required the parents to bring the child to church, on a day of public worship, where the ceremony would be conducted by an ordained clergyman. An upper limit of 14 days after birth was stipulated for this ceremony from about 1650 onwards. The urgency implicit in this rule related to the theological concern of the church for the fate of the soul of the child if he/she died before baptism. While the ecclesiastical practice appeared to place strict limits on the birth-baptism interval there is no evidence that any penalty was imposed on parents presenting after 14 days. This kind of 'misdemeanour' did not require an appearance before the church courts, as did adultery, for example.

Satisfactory explanations of the 'early' or 'late' baptism practices detected in a range of parishes, have eluded most, if not all, researchers and, generally, broad socio-economic factors are offered as possible causes for the secular changes in the statistics.<sup>1</sup>

#### Investigation of birth-baptism intervals

A major difficulty with all studies is that the registers rarely give the date of birth or, when they do, it is only for short periods of about 20 years: the baptism registers of Whickham Parish for the period 1750–1850 are typical of many parish registers from this period.<sup>2</sup> From 1750–1797 the birth date is not recorded at all, while from 1798–1819 the date is rarely omitted: after 1820 there are an increasing number of entries without birth dates. So the period 1798–1828 offered a 'window of opportunity' for a study of the birth/baptism interval. The numbers of children involved ranged from 110 to 190 per year and the data were

initially segregated into male and female, to check for possible differential treatment between the sexes.

There was also in the parish a dissenting congregation that followed the English Presbyterian tradition. This congregation kept a baptism register from 1733, even before a chapel was built in 1750.<sup>3</sup> The Presbyterian practice differed from the Anglican one in that baptism often took place in the parents' home. The ordained minister served an area that extended into several adjacent Anglican parishes: Ryton, Lamesley, Tanfield and across the Tyne to Newburn. His pastoral visits took him around this district and baptism took place on the day he visited: Sunday baptism was quite rare but by the end of the 18th century it did become more popular. The earliest entries in the baptism register do not give a birth date but by the mid-1770s this becomes a regular entry, a situation that continues until 1817. Because of the smaller numbers involved the data was grouped to give five-year aggregates of some 70–90 baptisms until 1800 and 30–40 thereafter. Finally it was considered worthwhile to examine, briefly, the attitude of the clergy and senior laymen in the Parish as demonstrated by the age at baptism of their own children.

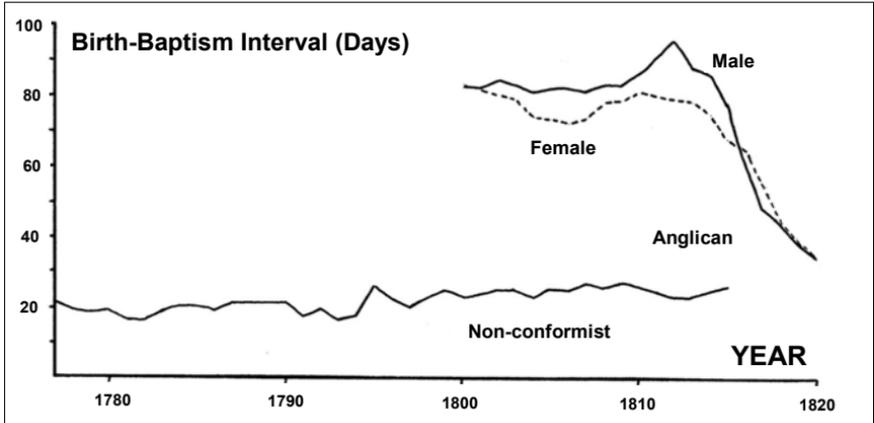
## Results

In respect of the Anglican records the general trend, shown in Figure 1, was for the interval between birth and baptism to decrease for both males and females. At the beginning of the period 50 per cent of both sexes were baptised within 80 days after birth: by 1826 the interval had fallen to between 30–40 days. There was little difference between the results for males and females indicating that both were treated the same. The longest recorded interval was 5,839 days which occurred when John and Margaret Ismay brought their son Ellison to the font on Boxing Day 1825 when he was 16.5 years of age. The results for the nonconformist congregation show a dramatically different pattern as, over a longer period, the birth-baptism interval remained fairly constant, at approximately 25 days.

## Discussion

Over a period of 33 years there have been numerous published studies of the birth-baptism interval that were conducted in parishes ranging from the large urban to the small rural. Explanations for the secular changes in the interval usually infer socio-economic factors as the cause. In the latest article published in *LPS* 70, Michael Saxby argues that parents tended to baptise their children early 'during hard times', which could include those occasions when high wheat prices and unemployment prevailed.<sup>4</sup> I think it is just as plausible to argue that parents would have their infants baptised early in good times: contented parents with a healthy child may wish to celebrate the fact as soon as possible. That many parents delayed baptism for weeks and months suggests that they had little concern for the theology of the baptism ritual but were happy to conform in their own time.

**Fig. 1 Comparison of Anglican and Presbyterian birth-baptism intervals (five-year moving averages).**



Source: A. Wright, 'Whickham Parish 1750-1850'.

The trouble is, of course, that we have no 'witting testimony' (as Prof. Michael Drake might say) by the parents, as to why they brought their children to the font on any particular date. For example, James and Ann Oxnett lived at Whickham Thorns Farm, a small mixed arable farm on the floor of the Tyne Valley where James was a husbandman.<sup>5</sup> The farm was less than a mile from Whickham Parish Church. The marriage was to last for 48 years and in the period 1810-1828 the couple had nine children, including one set of twins. They left no explanation of what factor(s) determined their choice of baptism date but their record was as follows:

Maria (b. 1810) - 264 days, William (b. 1811) - 129 days, James (b. 1813) - 221 days, Robert (b. 1816) - 21 days, John (b. 1818) - 23 days, Michael/Hallowell (b. 1820) - one day, Thomas (b. 1824) - 617 days, George (b. 1828) - 32 days.

Maria was an example of a pre-nuptial pregnancy: so was the late baptism an attempt to hide the 'short' pregnancy of 4.9 months or was it because the parents, having recently been married, were financially stretched at the time? With the next two children there was nothing to hide but the baptisms were still late, then suddenly the pattern changed as the following two children were baptised after only 21 and 23 days respectively. Was the change a result of improved finances or better weather or the reverse? The twins, Michael and Hallowell, came next and it is understandable that they were baptised immediately but both survived to 69 years and 75 years respectively. But with the last two children the 'early-late' baptism conundrum appears once again; Thomas was baptised after a lengthy delay of 617 days and George after a very much shorter 32 days. After waiting 616 days it may simply have been a matter of James saying to Ann, 'Let's get young Thomas done tomorrow'.

Whickham Parish is an early example of an industrialised community, and by the turn of the nineteenth century (population 3,659 in the 1801 Census) some 65 per cent of the occupations could be classified as 'trades/manufacturing'.<sup>6</sup> Over the period 1800–1830 some 30 per cent of baptisms recorded the occupation of the father as 'keelman' (involved in coal transport on the River Tyne), while in another 20 per cent the occupation was 'smith' (involved with Crowley's steel works in Swalwell). It has been suggested that the process of industrialisation in a parish resulted in alienation of the inhabitants from the established church. If the bonds of disaffected parishioners are simply weakened they may form a group of 'late-baptisers'; while if the bonds are broken altogether they may move out of the established church into nonconformity. The effect of the latter group would be to leave a core of loyal parishioners and should create a parish of 'early-baptisers'. While the Anglican data for Whickham do show significant reductions in the birth-baptism interval in the period 1810–1820, there is no evidence of any mass defections either to the Presbyterians or to the fledgling Methodist sympathisers in the area. While the Presbyterian registers do not record the father's occupation it is unlikely that their community differed to any great extent from the general parish population, although it has to be admitted that the Presbyterian catchment area extended into neighbouring parishes, albeit with similar social structures. The socio-economic environments must therefore have been nominally identical for both Anglican and Presbyterian parents, and yet the birth-baptism intervals show differing trends in the same period. The pastoral activity of the Presbyterian minister in paying regular visits to his church members may have been an important factor in reducing the birth-baptism interval.

Could the changes in the Anglican data be the result of other socio-economic conditions? The end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 has been linked to an increase in general unemployment but the actual change in the Whickham birth-baptism interval began several years before 1815, so the date does not appear to be significant. The industrial base for the parish's economy has been referred to above and both sectors were generally in decline during the period 1800–30. Coal chutes had been devised to deliver coal direct into the holds of the ships from staithes, built out from the river banks, thus reducing the need for keels operating below the Tyne bridge.<sup>7</sup> (The presence of the old low-level bridge at Newcastle prevented ship movements upstream of the town.) Keels operating from Swalwell and Dunston, above the bridge, in Whickham Parish were therefore partially insulated from the unemployment caused by this development. Meanwhile the Peace of 1815 seems to have been the occasion for a reduction in Admiralty contracts for anchors, chains and nails and the Crowley (strictly Crowley, Millington and Company) factory in nearby Winlaton closed. Production was then concentrated in Swalwell, Winlaton Mill and Teams.<sup>8</sup> By 1816 the depressed nature of the iron trade resulted in the unemployed being given work on the roads, while others took their skills to Sheffield and Rotherham.<sup>9</sup> Apart from this anecdotal evidence there is no actual measure of unemployment in Whickham parish.

There are a number of other tests that can be made using the Parish registers to examine the possibility that living conditions deteriorated in this period and so, indirectly, influenced birth-baptism intervals. The results of two are summarised below:

- **Infant deaths.** The period 1801–20 was split into four consecutive groups of five years—1801 to 1805, and so forth. The aggregate numbers of infant deaths (children less than one-year-old) in each period was determined as: 1801 to 1805 (100 deaths), 1806 to 1810 (85 deaths), 1811 to 1815 (52 deaths) and 1816–1820 (72 deaths).<sup>10</sup> The annual burial rates per 1,000 baptisms for the years 1815 to 1818 were 68, 125, 123 and 69, so the rate nearly doubles between 1815 and 1816, while the reverse occurs in 1818.

- **Statistical Test.** Using the ‘F-distribution’ the birth-baptism intervals (only intervals of 84 days and less were considered) for the children of keelmen in two years—1805 and 1815—were compared. For the 23 baptisms in each group, the mean intervals were 55.4 and 39.8 days, with associated standard deviations of 19.3 and 17.3 days, respectively. The value of ‘F’ calculated was 1.24 which is less than the critical value of 2.03 at the 5 per cent level.<sup>11</sup>

Although it might be tempting to ascribe the change in burial rates for 1816–1817 to an increased level of unemployment in the parish, this would be rather premature, particularly since Wrigley and Schofield found, in a countrywide study, that general mortality changes were not closely linked to economic factors.<sup>12</sup> I suggest the causal link between unemployment and birth-baptism intervals is also rather weak and is not detectable from the present data. The statistical test, in fact, showed that no significance can be attached to the differences in the mean values of the two selected populations.

### **Same-day baptisms**

Michael Saxby draws attention to the practice of parents having infants baptised on the day of birth and attributes this to a) high food costs leading to poor nutrition or b) evidently a sick child.<sup>13</sup> He also limits his observations to only ‘same-day baptisms’ when it would seem reasonable to include those infants up to 28 days old as being equivalent to ‘same-day baptisers’. Another point is that because a ‘same-day baptism’ is not followed by a subsequent entry in a burial register does not rule out ill-health as being the trigger for the baptism; the child simply got better and survived. It seems highly unlikely that parents would be able to make, at the birth, any rational judgement of the future nutrition conditions which might apply to their newly-born infant. The most likely factor relates to circumstances surrounding the birth itself, possibly a difficult labour, which placed both mother and infant at risk and the Whickham registers record a number of examples where the mother and infant die within a few weeks of birth.<sup>14</sup> In 1802 Ann Armstrong aged three days died on December 6<sup>th</sup> as did her mother aged 40 years, while Matthew French died on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1805 aged 15 days while his mother, aged 41 years, pre-deceased him by four days. A difficulty with these entries is that

neither appear in the baptism register so we must assume that some form of lay baptism, by the midwife perhaps, took place on the day of birth because of the perilous condition of the infants.

### Response of establishment figures

Finally, what about the attitude of the clergy and senior laymen in the established church as demonstrated by the birth/baptism interval recorded for their own children. Surely this small group would be expected to 'toe-the-line' as regards the baptism rule and be less effected by economic factors. In 1818 the Rector of Whickham, Rev. Edward Grey, took 40 days before he baptised his child: while Rev. R. Hopper Williamson of Farnacres, waited 28 days for his child to be baptised. John Carr, of Dunston Hill, a substantial church benefactor and landowner, had several of his children baptised at Whickham with birth/baptism intervals ranging from one day to five years. Harriet Cheney (nee Carr), a sister of John Carr, also living at Dunston Hill, had children baptised with intervals of 50 days to greater than 300 days. Several church wardens, or their direct descendants (such as daughters) had children baptised aged three to four months old. Similarly examining the Nonconformist registers, both ministers who had oversight during this period, baptised their own children from 15 days to 126 days after birth. These observations suggest the clergy and senior laymen—'pillars of local society'—could not have held any strict doctrinal position to the 14-day period stipulated by the Anglican Church. If this group were indifferent to the rules one can hardly expect the average keelman or smith to be anymore concerned.

### Conclusions

The aggregate response by parents to the custom of baptism is influenced by a menu of possible socio-economic factors that can vary in relevance, time and importance. In the absence of quantitative measures relating cause and effect it is not possible to be definitive in giving explanations for the specific birth-baptism intervals determined for a parish. Perhaps it is only in cases where baptism occurs within a few weeks of birth, to be followed very quickly by the death of the infant, can there be reasonable certainty about the reason for the prompt baptism.

The results for the Parish of Whickham illustrate the diverse response of parents by showing the significant difference between the data derived from the Anglican registers and that derived from Nonconformist registers. To the author's knowledge this is the first occasion that Nonconformist registers have been used for the study of birth-baptism intervals.

### NOTES

1. B.M. Berry and R.S. Schofield, 'Age at baptism in pre-industrial England', *Population Studies*, 25 (1971), 453–63; L. Bradley, 'An enquiry into seasonality in baptisms, marriages and burials', *Local Population Studies*, 4 (1970), 21–40; R.W. Herlan, 'Age at baptism in the London parish of St. Olave Jewry', *Local Population Studies*, 24 (1980), 42–48; D.M. Macallum, 'Age at baptism: further

- evidence', *Local Population Studies*, **24** (1980), 49–51; I.G. Doolittle, 'Age at baptism: further evidence', *Local Population Studies*, **24** (1980), 52–55.
2. Durham County Record Office, EP/WHM.
  3. Durham County Record Office, Ref. No. M5/1–5.
  4. M.J. Saxby, 'Ages at baptism in the parish of All Saints, Sudbury, 1809–1828: a new approach to their interpretation', *Local Population Studies*, **70** (2003), 55.
  5. A. Wright, 'Whickham Parish 1750–1850, a demographic, social and economic study' (unpublished MA Thesis, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1986), 152, 58–96.
  6. A. Wright, 'Whickham Parish 1750–1850', 132–143.
  7. D.J. Rowe, 'The decline of the Tyneside keelmen in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century', *Northern History*, **4**, 111–31.
  8. M.W. Flinn, *Men of iron, The Crowleys in the early iron industry* (Edinburgh, 1962), 231.
  9. W. Bourn, *Annals of the Parish of Whickham*, (1902), 100.
  10. A. Wright, 'Whickham Parish 1750–1850', 114.
  11. The F-Test is designed to test the hypothesis that the variances calculated from the two samples are estimates of the same population variance; the null hypothesis. The ratio of the variances is termed 'F' and its sampling distribution depends on the degrees of freedom of both samples. Tables of the F- distribution are included in most statistics textbooks.
  12. E.A Wrigley *et al.*, *English population history from family reconstitution 1580–1837* (Cambridge, 1997), 350–3.
  13. Saxby, 'Ages at baptism', 53–55.
  14. A. Wright, 'Whickham Parish 1750–1850', 114–5