

RESEARCH NOTE

WHEN WERE BABIES BAPTISED? SOME WELSH EVIDENCE

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The *Book of Common Prayer* states:

The people are to be admonished, that it is most convenient that baptism should not be administered but upon Sundays, and other Holy-days, when the most number of people come together; as well for that the congregation there present may testify the receiving of them that be newly baptised into the number of Christ's church; as also because in the Baptism of infants every man present may be put in remembrance of his own profession made to God in his baptism for which cause also it is expedient that Baptism be ministered in the vulgar tongue. Nevertheless (if necessity so require) children may be baptised on any other day'.¹

This was clearly the ideal laid down by the church, but during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the majority of parents brought their children to be baptised within a day or two of birth.² The registers in Cerrigydrudion record both the date of birth and the date of baptism between 24 November 1685 and 14 November 1697. The baptism of 266 individuals were recorded during this time, of which 62 were baptised on the day they were born, 88 were baptised the next day and 63 were baptised the following day. This means that 213 children were baptised within two days of their birth – almost 80 per cent of the babies born. 25 more were baptised on the third day, leaving 28 who were baptised up to ten days later.

This small group sub-divides into four smaller groups. The first group are babies born in the winter, whose families lived a considerable distance from the church and may have had difficulty travelling if the weather was bad. David son of Hugh Davies and Mary who lived over five miles from the church in Llyn y Cymmer was baptised seven days after he was born on 16 November 1690. Margaret the daughter of Maurice Jones and Lowry who lived at least four miles away from the church in Cwmpennaer, was baptised on 2 January 1691, five days after she was born. Secondly, of the seven illegitimate babies born during this period, two were baptised four days after their birth and one 13 days later. Generally, the father of the baby and the

godparents made arrangements for the baptism and this may well have been the reason for the delay in these cases. The most obvious example is that of John, base son of William John and Alice John, who was born on 2 April 1694 and baptised 13 days later on 15 April. Thirdly, there were a smaller number of people who were less concerned about having their child baptised or whose family circumstances were difficult. We can only surmise that this was the case but it is a reasonable assumption. Lastly, 11 babies were definitely the children of local gentry and it is clear that such families delayed public baptism for a variety of reasons. Peter Morris, a gentleman of Hafod y Maidd, and his wife Gwen delayed the baptism of both their children: Margaret was born on 27 October 1690 and baptised four days later; Peter was born on 4 June 1693 and baptised a week later. John son of Evan Wynne and Barbara of Cwmein was born on 7 August 1696 and baptised aged nine days. Some may have had a preliminary baptism in the house before public baptism.

David Cressy, reminds us that "Higher status families often delayed their infants' baptisms in order to complete necessary social arrangements, and delays between birth and baptism generally stretched longer towards the end of the seventeenth century".³ Other registers from the area indicate this same pattern: In Ysbyty Ifan we see recorded the baptism of Jane Wynne daughter of Watkin Wynne, Honourable Esquire, of Voelas on 7 November 1747 almost a month after her birth on 11 October. The records from Hanmer on the English/Welsh border indicate that gentry families also delayed the baptism of their children. During the years 1730-40 the vicar, John Langford, baptised his own five children between the ages of two days and one month. Towards the end of the eighteenth century this was even more noticeable. Sir Thomas Hanmer, Bart. and Dame Margaret of Bettisfield Park, had five children between the years 1780 and 1786. All five had a private baptism at home within a few days of birth and then a public baptism some time later: John was born on 28 February 1784, privately baptised on 2 March and then publicly baptised on 28 April; George Edward was born on 28 August 1786, baptised five days later and then publicly on 3 October. The same pattern can be seen with the children of Rt. Hon. Lord George Kenyon and Lady Margaret Emma who had six children between 1803 and 1810. Stephen Friar describes how the priest, godparents and guests would be summoned when labour was under way and the child 'half-baptised' at home and taken to church at a later date.⁴ This might explain the baptism records of the children of James Price, rector of Cerrigydrudion 1784-1800. He was the son of James Price of Bedwas, Monmouthshire, Gentleman, and appears to have owned land in north Wales as well as building the elegant Georgian rectory in Cerrigydrudion. He had five daughters, four of whom were baptised some time after their birth. Frances was born on 23 February 1785 and baptised eighteen months later on 24 October 1786. Emma was born on 19 November 1786 and Mariann on 9 September 1788 – both were baptised on 3 August 1795 aged eight and nearly seven respectively. Harriet was born on 15 November 1795 and baptised almost a year later on 27 September 1796. No date of birth is given for Lydia Sophie who was baptised on 18 February 1797. It may well be that all his daughters were baptised at home when they were babies and a long time

elapsed before a public baptism. James Price had a number of domestic problems, his first wife died sometime after in 1788 and it is not clear what happened to his children. It is only after his second marriage to Margarett Bowry in 1793 that the children from his first marriage were publicly baptised.

The Cerrigydrudion records give no other indication of the number of days between birth and baptism but the neighbouring parish of Llangwm records the date of birth for a short period at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and these are presented in Table 1. The parish of Bettws Gwerfyl Goch also records both birth and baptism dates for two periods in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and these are presented in Table 2. These figures show a shift in pattern from baptism within two days of birth still being the norm in 1791, to a slight trend to wait three or more days by the early nineteenth century. Most of those who were baptised after six or seven days were described as the children of 'gentlemen'. These 'gentry' would have been lesser gentry than those mentioned in the Hanmer records and so less elaborate preparations would have been required.

Over two-thirds of children were baptised on the day of their birth or one day later between 1782 and 1791, with one-sixth baptised between three and fourteen days. By 1803 a quarter were baptised in the first three days of life, another quarter on the third day after birth, and the other half tapering off towards ten days or more. This may indicate a confidence that children were more likely to survive and so immediate baptism became less crucial. It may show the desire by the family to have some sort of celebration which needed a day or two to prepare and it may be that the clergy had a different approach to baptism: John Morgan became rector in 1800 and may have had a slightly different policy. This is a very small sample but would seem to indicate that by the beginning of the nineteenth century people were moving towards having their babies baptised on the Sunday or holy day after the birth. It may well be that this pattern was also true in neighbouring parishes although there is no written record to prove this.

Research done on a number of parishes in England over this period shows that the movement towards baptisms on 'Sundays and Holy Days' took place much earlier than in Cerrigydrudion and the neighbouring parishes. Berry and Schofield found that '...in the late sixteenth century children appear to have been baptised very soon after birth, but the interval had lengthened to an average of eight days in the late seventeenth century and 26 days in the late eighteenth century'.⁵ There are probably a number of reasons to explain why this area was only moving slowly towards the practice of baptism on 'Sundays and Holy Days'. People may have begun to feel more confident that their children were going to survive and so the urgency began to fade away slowly. Secondly, with the arrival of James Price as rector in 1784 and John Morgan in 1800 the clergy were more 'gentrified' and were probably more influenced by trends in England. Earlier clergy had employed numbers of curates who had not attended University and would have tended to emphasise the need for early baptism because it was the practice they knew. The influence of visitors

Table 1 Date of Birth and Baptism in Llangwm 15 July 1804 to 22 June 1806.

Age baptised	N	Age baptised (continued)	N
Same day	1	8 days	3
1 day	7	9 days	1
2 days	3	10 days	2
3 days	9	11 days	0
4 days	5	12 days	1
5 days	3	13 days	0
6 days	5	14 days	1
7 days	5		
Total No.			46

Table 2 Dates of Birth and Baptism in Bettws Gwerfyl 1783–1791; 1803–1810 and 1812.

1782–1791		1803–1810 and 1812	
Age baptised	N	Age baptised	N
Same day	51	Same day	7
1 day	43	1 day	29
2 days	18	2 days	26
3 days	6	3 days	56
4 days	3	4 days	27
5 days	4	5 days	17
6 days	4	6 days	14
7 days	0	7 days	0
8 days	0	8 days	5
9 days	1	9 days	2
10 days	0	10 days	3
11 days	1	11 days	0
12 days	1	12 days	3
13 days	0	13 days	0
14 days	1	14 days	1
		15 days	0
		16 days	1
Total No.	133	Total No.	201

and more incomers to the community as the eighteenth century progressed probably also changed people's attitudes. As nonconformity began to put down roots, people's attitudes to baptism too would have been questioned and may have changed in consequence. Whatever the reasons, the evidence available from the registers of Cerrigydrudion and the surrounding area again indicate the variability of local practice with regard to baptism, as well as confirming the existence of differences by social class.

NOTES

This is a small section from my PhD which details information about baptisms in Cerrigydrudion and the surrounding area 1662-1812. These are small Welsh speaking parishes situated between Llangollen and Betws y Coed in North Wales and show an enormous contrast to those described in the article by A Wright, 'Birth-baptism intervals in Wickham Parish, Co. Durham c.1770-1820' published in *LPS*, 71 (2003), 81-7.

1. *Book of Common Prayer 1623*. Rubric at the beginning of the Baptism Service.
2. For evidence for growth in the interval between birth and baptism, however, see E.A. Wrigley, 'Births and baptisms: the use of Anglican baptism registers as a source of information about the numbers of births in England before the beginning of civil registration', *Population Studies*, 31 (1977), 281-312.
3. D. Cressy, *Birth, marriage and death: ritual, religion, and the life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997), 101.
4. S.A. Friar, *A companion to the English Church* (London, 1996).
5. B.M. Berry and R.S. Schofield, 'Age at baptism in pre-industrial England', *Population Studies*, 25 (1971), 453-63.