Research in progress

Victorian and Edwardian almspeople: Doughty’s Hospital, Norwich, 1837–1911

Nigel Goose

Introduction

The English almshouse is a sadly ignored facet of the ‘mixed economy of welfare’ that has been a feature of English history since at least the sixteenth century. Those familiar with popular publications on the topic, or with an interest in architectural features of the almshouse, might find such a statement surprising. But if we look beyond publications of this type, which are often dominated by photographs and bereft of serious historical context, it is hard to find much in the way of detailed, academic study of these institutions, despite their physical presence in both urban and rural communities to this day, and the continued vitality of the almshouse movement.¹

In the last issue of LPS, Clive Leivers introduced the Family and Community Historical Research Society’s Almshouse Project, and provided a valuable comparison of the occupants of almshouses and workhouses for the county of Derbyshire from 1851 to 1901 using the census enumerators’ books (CEBs). The present study, which arose from a Knowledge Transfer Partnership between the University of Hertfordshire and Norwich Consolidated Charities, is more modest in its scope, and employs information from extant admissions information recorded in the charity’s minute books and the CEBs to shed light on the changing composition of almshouse residents at Doughty’s Hospital in Norwich between...

1837 and 1911, an almshouse established by the will of William Doughty, gentleman, in 1687. These sources, which in theory should have been systematically compiled but in practice were frequently less than comprehensive, have been supplemented by further qualitative evidence gleaned from the almshouse minute books and related documentation. As such, this article is designed to shed further light upon almshouses and their occupants in the Victorian and Edwardian periods, to show how even a study of a single institution can make a worthwhile contribution to the history of philanthropy, and to encourage other local historians to conduct similar research of this kind.

Victorian admissions data

Doughty's Hospital, which is described by its founder variously as a 'hospital', an 'almshouse' and a 'hospital or almshouse', was established with a generous legacy of

---

I am grateful to Knowledge Partners East of England for funding the KEEP3 project from which this article arises.
Victorian and Edwardian almspeople: Doughty’s Hospital Norwich

£6,000, £600 of which was to be used for the building of a courtyard of 32 tenements in Norwich, the remainder to buy land to provide an endowment for the continued upkeep of the buildings and the payment of allowances to the inmates and its master. It was operational from an unknown date in the 1690s, and was initially designed to provide accommodation for 24 elderly men and 8 elderly women, defined as those aged at least 60, who found themselves in poverty in the later years of their lives. Until the reform of municipal corporations in 1835, almspeople were appointed by the aldermen of Norwich through a process of rotational nomination. In that year this system, which was deemed open to political abuse, was replaced by nomination by individual trustees, while further reforms in the 1880s and 1890s required, first, systematic enquiry into applicants conditions by an independent officer and, subsequently, application via newspaper advertisements and joint election by the hospital trustees.

No systematic information survives on its eighteenth or early nineteenth-century residents, but after the passage of the Municipal Corporations Act in 1835 Doughty’s was administered by a new group of trustees, and formed part of that group of Norwich’s charitable institutions known as the General List. Shortly after this date the clerk of the General List recorded the appointment of each inmate in the charity’s minute books, although the amount of information recorded fluctuated through time. Sometimes the clerk would record the applicant’s name, age and marital status, but at other times only the name of the new resident was entered. Between May 1837 and December 1897, 248 inmates were admitted to Doughty’s Hospital. Of those admitted 162 were men and 86 were women. Ages were recorded for just 142 of the 248 applicants: the average age on entry into the almshouse was 71 years, the ages of men and women being identical.

Between 1844 and 1890 the former occupations of some of the new residents were also recorded and these give an insight into the occupations and hence social status of people admitted to the hospital. During this 46-year period 135 men and 65 women were elected. Unfortunately, only two of the women admitted had their former occupation recorded: on 30 June 1890, Jane Leech was listed as a second-hand clothes dealer while Sarah Gibson was identified as a nurse. Of the 135 men admitted, 52 had their former occupations recorded in the charity’s minute books. Of these, 11 were involved in the manufacture of cloth, including eight former weavers, one former worsted weaver, one former dyer, and one former comb. The City of Norwich had been a centre for the

---

3 Norfolk Record Office (hereafter NRO), Case 20/14 William Doughty’s Will, 25 April 1687. A full history of Doughty’s Hospital will be published by the University of Hertfordshire Press in September 2010: N. Goose and L. Moden, A history of Doughty’s Hospital, Norwich, 1687–2009 (forthcoming, Hatfield, 2010).

4 A Digest of the Evidence Taken Before Two of his Majesty’s Municipal Corporation Commissioners at the Guildhall in the City of Norwich on Monday 25th Day of November 1833 and twenty one following days with an appendix (Matchett and Co: Norwich, 1834), pp. 170–1; NRO, N/CCH 113, 26 November 1884; 17 May 1893.

5 Not all applicants knew their ages, and some clerks failed to record ages regularly: NRO, N/CCH 110, 29 March 1848–28 September 1859.

6 NRO, N/CCH 110, 29 March 1848–28 September 1859.
manufacture of textiles, especially worsted cloth, for many centuries, and although the industry had been in slow decline in the area since the late eighteenth century it remained a significant employer down to the middle of the nineteenth century.\footnote{R. Wilson, ‘The textile industry’ and C. Clark, ‘Work and employment’, in C. Rawcliffe and R. Wilson eds, \textit{Norwich Since 1550} (London, 2004), 230–41, 385–8; M.F. Lloyd Prichard, ‘The decline of Norwich’, \textit{Economic History Review}, 3 (1950-51), 371–7.}

Seven of the men admitted to the hospital between 1844 and 1890 were former shoemakers and one was a former shoe mender. The shoe trade had come to rival cloth production in Norwich by the mid nineteenth century, with factories such as James Southall and Co. and Haldenstein & Sons employing large numbers of hands, both male and female.\footnote{Clark, ‘Work and employment’, 390–1, 394.} To a large extent, therefore, the occupations of Doughty’s male inmates reflected the occupational structure of the city. The majority of these new residents—34 out of the 52 whose occupations are known—were skilled tradesmen, including a cabinet maker, a glazier, a tin plate worker and three former coopers. There were also a small number of men who had earned their living from working the land, including two gardeners, a farmer and a labourer. In addition to this, a few of the inmates had worked in positions requiring a high level of literacy, for example a lawyer’s clerk and a land surveyor. This occupational information thus suggests that a wide range of applicants were admitted to the hospital, but also seems to indicate that they were not generally drawn from the very lowest socio-occupational groups.\footnote{NRO, N/CCH 110, 29 March 1848–28 September 1859.}

\textbf{Census enumerators’ books}

Further information on the profile of Doughty’s residents is provided in the decennial census returns, available from 1841 through to 1911, and the results of an analysis of these is presented in Table 1. Tracing Doughty’s Hospital in the census is less straightforward than one might expect. In 1841 the whole institution is listed together, and its inhabitants are easy to reconstruct. From 1851, however, the main part of the hospital is included in the census return for St Saviour’s parish, but another ten units are included in a quite different part of the census under the parish of St George Colegate, and hence both portions need to be consulted to get a complete picture. This practice continued in each census up to and including 1901, although by this date only two almsmen (in each case with their wives) were recorded in the latter parish.

We can immediately see from Table 1 that despite the fact that Doughty’s faced financial difficulties as a result of building work undertaken in 1868–9, which was in turn exacerbated by the impact upon Doughty’s rents of the agricultural depression which began in the 1870s, overall numbers held up fairly well until the 1880s.\footnote{NRO, N/CCH 111, 21 February 1868: 4 June 1868; 10 June 1868; 23 March 1869; 6 April 1869; N/CCH 113, 23 June 1881; 19 December 1882.} The number of places available had expanded from the original 32, due to small eighteenth and early
nineteenth-century extensions, and had reached 42 by 1847, so that at these snapshots provided by the decennial censuses (which, of course, counted the number of inhabitants on one night of the year only) Doughty’s was operating close to, but not at, full capacity. Uninhabited dwellings were supposed to be identified by the census enumerators, but none are apparent in the return for 1851, even thought the almshouse was not quite full.

In 1861, however, three units (identified as numbers 8, 12 and 14) were empty, which with the 39 resident inmates makes up the total number to 42. Similarly in 1871 five of the 44 units that are identified were uninhabited (numbers 33, 35, 36, 39 and 42), all of them in the part of the hospital situated in the parish of St George Colegate, and, as the two hospital nurses occupied a tenement each, with the 37 almspeople this again completes the requisite number. Even the seven-year embargo on new inmates that was imposed between 1877 and 1884 to deal with the financial crisis had a relatively limited impact on the figures in Table 1, for the 36 almsfolk resident in that year only suggests a shortfall of six (allowing for the nurses’ accommodation), although it is noticeable that the number of resident relatives fell by half, possibly a reflection of cost-cutting measures.11

Doughty’s attempted to resolve its financial difficulties by applying to the Charity Commissioners for permission to use the income of two Norwich loan charities—Luke Fisher’s and Cocks’s—for the benefit of Doughty’s Hospital. This allowed the trustees to elect four new residents from the parish of St John de Sepulchre in November 1884, and

---

11 Unfortunately, no information on uninhabited units is provided in any of the census returns after 1871.
each was paid for by an annual sum of £24 from the two loan charities.\(^\text{12}\) In 1892 and 1897 respectively, agreement was reached between Doughty’s on the one hand, and the Town Close Estate and two local friendly societies on the other, by which the latter organisations paid an annual fee to sponsor and elect a dozen almshouse residents between them. These agreements, all endorsed by the Charity Commissioners, appear to have resolved Doughty’s financial difficulties, at least for the immediate future.\(^\text{13}\) Despite these agreements, the year 1901 represents the nadir of Doughty’s fortunes in terms of the number of residents shown in the census. Even if two units are allocated to the one nurse listed and the laundress, this would still leave 12 of the 44 tenements unoccupied. Numbers recovered once again at the start of the twentieth century, however, no doubt assisted by the new relationships forged in the previous decade, although there was a reduction in resident married couples to its lowest ever ebb by 1911, when just six were present.

The range of relatives present at Doughty’s also narrowed over time, while the way in which spouses were described changed also. In 1841 seven spouses are listed at the bottom of the return as ‘Lodgers in the Hospital’: that they were wives or husbands of almshouse appointees has to be inferred from their surnames. In 1851 six of the eight spouses are again listed separately and identified as inmates’ wives, while the enumerator for that part of the almshouse in the parish of St George Colegate was less precise and failed to distinguish between almsfolk and their spouses. In this year, however, a 26 year-old unmarried daughter is present, as well as one Mary A. Robinson, described as ‘servant to Miss Tubby’. A Charlotte Tubby had been nominated to the almshouse in the previous year, but was not present in the census, and it is possible that she had died in the interim, leaving her servant behind pending a new appointment.\(^\text{14}\) Husbands and wives are again usually distinguished from inmates in 1861, but by now the range of relatives had expanded further, to include two daughters, two grandsons, a sister and a boarder, in addition to eight spouses. Among these was John Hedgeman, aged 83, a former carpenter, his wife Emily aged 46, and grandson John Nichols, aged 5, described as a ‘scholar’, all living cheek by jowl in one small tenement.

Perhaps there was a crackdown after this, for while in 1871 there were fully 11 wives and two husbands present at the hospital, there was now only a single daughter, and from this date relatives apart from spouses were rarely found at Doughty’s.\(^\text{15}\) From 1881 onwards the census enumerators described all residents, apart from staff, either as inmates, or failed to distinguish between appointees and resident spouses. Not all married inmates brought their partners with them into the almshouse, however, and through to 1891 a small number were clearly described as married while living at

\(^{12}\) NRO, N/CCH 113, 26 November 1884.

\(^{13}\) NRO, N/CCH 114, 17 August 1892; N/CCH 115, 14 July 1897.

\(^{14}\) The relationship of daughter to mother was inferred from relative ages and surname; NRO, N/CCH 110, 1 October 1850.

\(^{15}\) There was a single daughter in 1891 and an unspecified relative in 1901.
Doughty’s on their own. In the last two censuses this ceased, and all inmates were described as either single or widowed, or lived in the almshouse with their husbands or wives. Of these categories, those who were single was always the smallest, and those who were widowed the largest, the widows and widowers increasingly dominating the institution by the early twentieth century. It is clear, however, that resident spouses were treated on a par with those who had been elected. Following a report from the lady visitors to the hospital in December 1903, it was observed that the nurses of Doughty’s spent some of their time administering to the wives of inmates, who—because they were not strictly on the foundation—should not really have benefitted from such care. Nevertheless, in January 1904, the trustees resolved that medical care should extend to all the occupants of Doughty’s Hospital, regardless of their status. Dr Beverley, the hospital’s medical officer, wrote to the trustees explaining that he and the nurses had always considered the wives of inmates worthy of receiving care, but that the cost of medicine had by now far outstripped his salary. In consequence, Beverley’s wages were increased from £12 to £16 per annum, with a further increase to £20 to follow in 1906.

In his will Doughty had specified that accommodation should be provided for 24 poor aged men and 8 poor aged women. Expansion of the hospital by six units in 1791 allowed an increase in these numbers, but on census night in 1841 the gender balance remained heavily weighted towards men, just as its founder had prescribed, with 28 male and 8 female almshouse. During the course of the next 70 years that gender balance changed fundamentally, with—apart from an apparent blip in the year 1891—an ever-increasing proportion of female inmates. By 1901 women outnumbered men for the first time, while at the next census there were almost twice as many female almshouse at Doughty’s as there were men. Even this might be an underestimate for, as we have seen, it is impossible to distinguish appointees from their spouses in the census returns from 1881 onwards, and in compiling Table 1 it was simply assumed that the men (who were always listed first) were the inmates and the women their resident spouses. It is entirely possible, therefore, that the gender balance had shifted earlier than the statistics presented in Table 1 suggest.

The changing gender balance of residents in English almshouses in an interesting subject, both from a long-term perspective and across the Victorian period itself. The research of Marjorie McIntosh has suggested that more almshouse residents were men than women in her sample of 1,005 English institutions taken from the period 1350–1599. A nineteenth-century sample taken from census returns between 1841 and 1901, however, comprising 7,655 census entries in nine English counties, produced very different results indeed. Although the sample was heavily skewed towards south-eastern England (and

16 NRO, N/CCH 116, 16 December 1903.
17 Ibid., 17 February 1904.
18 Ibid., 16 March 1904; 16 May 1906.
19 Unpublished paper delivered to a conference entitled ‘English Almshouses Revisited’, held at the University of Hertfordshire’s St Albans Campus, 7 March 2009.
particularly the counties of Middlesex and Surrey), by this date almost 75 per cent of almshouse residents were women, and just 25 per cent were men. Even in Norfolk, the county with the least imbalance of the nine, almost two-thirds of almshouse inmates were women. At the local level there is also evidence from Worcester that it was increasingly difficult to attract male almsholders towards the end of the nineteenth century, and it is possible that in both Norwich and Worcester rising living standards and a growth in alternative strategies for relief in old age were rendering almshouse accommodation decreasingly attractive to men—a topic that clearly deserves further exploration.

The ages of men and women have not been distinguished in Table 1, simply because they were almost always very similar, apart from in 1841 when the men were on average four-and-a-half years older than the women, and in 1891 when the women were four years older than the men. In all other years there was barely more than a year between them. Nor was it thought necessary to present other measures of central tendency apart from the average, for calculation of the median (mid-point) age in each year produced results either identical with, or very close to, the average, indicating that the data was not skewed or distorted by extreme values at either end of the age spectrum. The average ages calculated from the census stand higher than the 71 years age at entry established from the minute books, as one would expect given that many of those in the census returns would already have been resident for a number of years. The age ranges also show that Doughty’s injunction to admit no-one 60 years or younger was followed to the letter, the youngest inmates found in any of the censuses being two individuals aged 63.

In 1856 it was decided by the trustees that the minimum age limit for nomination to Doughty’s Hospital should be raised, and now no candidate under 65 years old would be accepted into the hospital. Unfortunately, no explanation of this decision is recorded in the minutes. Clearly, however, one individual got through the net, for 63-year-old Samuel Stevens, a former dyer, was resident in tenement number 29 in 1861. After this date no-one below the age of 65 was found at Doughty’s, while some inmates were very old indeed, and others handicapped. The 1851 return identifies two individuals as ‘insane’, one as ‘blind’, and another as ‘deaf and dumb’—the latter being Charles Fulcher, former weaver, aged 92 years—which must have represented a significant challenge to nurse Harriet Stevenson. Two 91-year-olds were resident in 1891 and 1901 respectively, the first of these being Ann Love, widow, who had been there at least ten years in 1891, having featured also in the 1881 census. The other, in 1891, was Harriet Parish, widow, who entered the almshouse on 17 June 1880 and featured in the 1881, 1891 and 1901 census returns, and hence she was a resident at Doughty’s Hospital for at least 21 years.

22 NRO, N/CCH 110, 24 December 1856.
23 NRO, N/CCH 113, 17 June 1880.
Finally we can consider the occupations given in the census. Just as in the minute books, these are recorded erratically: none are given for inmates in 1841 or through 1871-1901, while in the three remaining returns the former occupations of men are generally recorded better than those of women. Only one female occupation is listed in 1851, that of dressmaker, a trade that also features at the next census along with two cooks, two laundresses, a charwoman, tailoress, baker, grocer and an annuitant—the latter being Ann Baker, a 71-year-old widow and, intriguingly, not described as “late” annuitant, as all others attributed with an occupational designation are. By the 1911 census Doughty’s similarly housed a number of women who had once been employed in what were usually fairly lowly branches of the service sector, including six former servants, two nurses, two charwomen, a laundress and a workhouse porteress, as well as a lodging house keeper—an occupation that was often of dubious moral rectitude in nineteenth-century towns. The traditional trades of the city are reflected in the presence of a boot closer and a shoe machinist, while the two caretakers—one in an office and one in a school—represent the emerging service sector. An unspecified factory worker, a shopkeeper and a woman formerly of ‘independent means’ make up the balance. While one can detect from these occupations a bias towards those trades that might be regarded as relatively lowly in the social scale, one must remember that it was to such occupations that women, in general, were largely confined. At the same time, far from all female almswomen at Doughty’s conformed to this stereotype. The grocer, shopkeeper, annuitant and woman of independent means among them clearly suggest otherwise, the two caretakers must once have carried a fair degree of responsibility and even among the servants one proudly described herself as a ‘lady’s maid’ and another as a ‘housekeeper’.

A wide range of male occupations are represented among the inmates at Doughty’s in 1851 and 1861, although of the 48 occupational labels attributed to them in these two years—unsurprisingly in view of the continued importance of textiles in the town and its extended decline—11 were former weavers, while a dyer and a hot presser feature too. The remainder are not easily categorised, for they cover a wide range of occupations, and only coopers (4), shoemakers (3), carpenters (2), cabinet makers (2) and hatters (2) feature at least twice, although the two carpenters, hatters and printers in fact refer to single individuals, John Hedgeman, James Orton and John Dawson respectively, who were all present in Doughty’s at each census. There were no common labourers, however, and the great majority of those listed were skilled craftsmen who may well have been of respectable social standing—a stonemason, a brazier, a tinplate worker, a plumber and glazier. Also included were a grocer, a publican, a maltster, a farmer, a gardener, a miller and a hairdresser, while perhaps the most surprising entry, found in 1851, was Levy Isaacs, an unmarried man of 75 years of age, ‘teacher of Hebrew’, who had been born in Holland. A similarly wide spectrum of trades was found among the 12 men present in 1911, ranging from a former railway navvy at one extreme to a hay merchant and an insurance agent at

Nigel Goose

the other. Although it is very difficult confidently to convert these bald occupational titles to socio-economic status, it is quite clear that the male residents at Doughty’s were generally respectable craft and tradesmen who found themselves in need of support in their old age, and certainly not the ‘underclass’ of Victorian and Edwardian Norwich.

Former employees often featured among almshouse residents, including Sophia Tuck, nurse to Doughty’s in 1881 but an inmate in 1891 and Sarah Thirkettle, who had served as laundress to the hospital in 1891 but appears as an inmate ten years later. Indeed, in 1866 the trustees had agreed that long-serving masters, on their retirement, should themselves be offered accommodation in the institution, further underlining the respectability with which it was associated. On 12 September 1928, it was reported that Benjamin Inwood, a former master of Doughty’s, had been knocked down by a car and was unable to continue his duties as inquiry officer to Norwich Consolidated Charities.25 The trustees resolved that Mr Inwood should be admitted to the hospital as a resident. It was also agreed that he would receive 7s. per week, and that these benefits were in satisfaction of his pension of £48 per annum. On 2 March 1929, Mr Inwood died at Doughty’s Hospital and, having spent 16 years as master to the institution from 1896 to 1912, special recognition of his service to the charity was recorded in the minute books by the trustees.26

Conclusion

It will be evident from the foregoing that even a well-documented institution such as Doughty’s Hospital, for which a range of evidence survives, can be frustrating to research. The quality of the available information on admissions which can be found in the minute books varies according to the diligence of the clerk for the time being. That contained in the CEBs is also incomplete and must be handled with care: it was only by chance that it was discovered that the entry for Doughty’s featured in two entirely separate enumeration districts. Furthermore, unlike in non-institutional CEB entries, relationships between inmates are often unspecified and have to be inferred from the evidence of surnames.

The information available on the occupations and hence social status of female residents is particularly fragmentary, and allows only tentative conclusions to be drawn. Nevertheless, it appears to indicate that while females employed in the more humble service trades feature regularly among the inmates, others of more elevated social status were to be found there too. The information on male residents is much more comprehensive, if never entirely so, and remains open to interpretation. It does, however, seem that Doughty’s Hospital catered in particular to respectable trades and craftsmen rather than to the lowest social echelons, even if a considerable social spectrum featured as inmates of the institution across the Victorian and Edwardian periods. The willingness

25 NRO, N/CCH 122, 12 September 1928.
26 Ibid., 13 March 1929.
of ex-employees, even those who had served as master of the almshouse, to take up residence there upon their retirement, and the alacrity with which local friendly societies and other charities sought to gain sponsorship at Doughty’s, further serves to emphasise its respectability and the esteem in which it was held. If Doughty’s is at all typical, Victorian and Edwardian almshouses formed a class of institution very different indeed in terms of status and respect to the union workhouse.

The Doughty’s evidence also shows that almshouses were subject to fluctuating fortunes, which could be the product of internal financial difficulties or the result of exogenous economic events that impacted upon their incomes. This in turn might find reflection in their ability to elect new almspeople, could affect their admissions policies and could also lead to the forging of marriages of convenience with other local charities and related institutions. It also seems likely that the narrowing of the range of resident relatives living in the hospital, and their subsequent disappearance in the late nineteenth century, was the product of financial stringency. This study demonstrates, therefore, that to fully understand such variations in almshouse policy and the changing demographic profile of almshouse residents requires recourse to qualitative information, and often to both the local and the wider historical context too, to explain the bare facts that admissions or census evidence provide.

With regard to the ages of residents the almshouse trustees appear to have conformed faithfully to the letter of the will of its founder William Doughty by admitting no-one below the age of 60. That said, they were prepared to raise the age limit imposed by their benefactor to 65 in 1856, and apparently without reference to the Charity Commissioners. Examples from the late nineteenth century indicate that some residents could be very long-lived indeed, and others in poor physical or mental health, both of which are problems that are presenting an increasing challenge to the almshouse movement in the first decade of the twenty-first century, but are clearly by no means new.27

With respect to the gender balance of residents the trustees were, however, quite prepared to deviate substantially from the original intent of the trust, and again do not appear to have needed to seek the Charity Commissioners’ approval so to do. Across the second half of the nineteenth century the gender ratio at Doughty’s changed fundamentally, until the predominance of almsmen that had been laid down by its founder and was maintained through to 1841 was replaced in the early twentieth century by a gender balance that was dominated by women. Whether this transformation was particular to Doughty’s, or was a general process in later Victorian and Edwardian England, will only become clear once further local research has been completed.

Sources and methods

This item considers a range of sources and methods commonly used in local population history. These vary in sophistication and complexity, but are intended to be of benefit to the broad LPS readership, and are accompanied by worked examples. Each item is written by an experienced population history practitioner, and will usually address both the possibilities and the pitfalls of the respective sources and methods under discussion. The LPS Board are happy to enter into correspondence on this item, which should be addressed in the first instance to the LPS General Office.

A review of methods for identifying mortality ‘crises’ using parish record data

Andrew Hinde

It is well known that in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mortality in most parts of Europe was subject to periodic surges, or abrupt temporary increases in the number of deaths, due mainly to epidemics of infectious diseases or short-term subsistence problems. These peaks in the numbers of deaths are often referred to as mortality ‘crises’ and their study during the parish register era has long been a concern of those interested in local population studies, reports of research on the subject regularly appearing in the pages of this journal.1 Although it is demonstrably untrue that after the fifteenth century most deaths in England and Wales occurred during periods of unusually high mortality resulting from epidemic disease and famine (probably fewer than one in ten of all deaths occurred at these times), most communities experienced periods of suddenly elevated death rates.2 These had a variety of effects on local populations: in the short-term came personal loss and sadness, and economic dislocation; in the medium-term the remarriage of widows and the consequent restructuring of familial relationships could change the social dynamics of the community.

A key stage in the investigation of mortality crises is identifying what exactly constituted a ‘crisis’. Researchers have used various rules of thumb in this regard. In the absence of base population totals the usual approach has been to work with annual burial totals, and to establish the existence of mortality crises by comparing the number of burials in each