

The Christening Custom at Melbourn, Cambs.

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Dr. Mills is staff tutor in the social sciences in the East Midland region of the Open University. This article on Melbourn is part of a larger study of the socio-economic structure of the village in the first half of the nineteenth century.

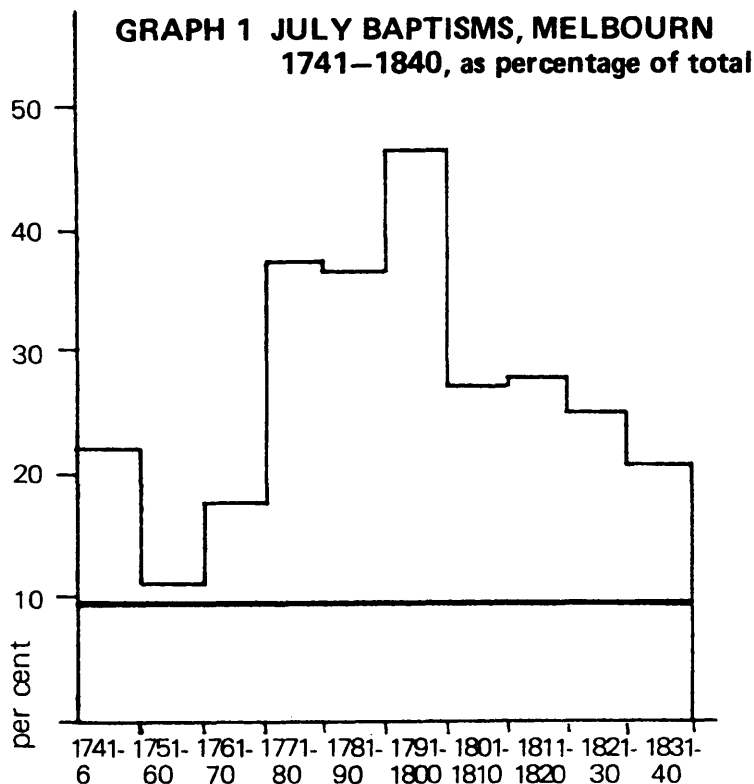
Until recently there was a generally accepted convention in English historical demography that children were usually baptised within the month after their birth and often within a few days. This convention has been seriously challenged by Berry and Schofield,¹ not only for the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the registers are known to be defective, but also for earlier periods. Moreover a marked seasonality of baptisms, which can only be explained in terms of long intervals between birth and baptism, has been demonstrated for certain Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire parishes by Bradley.² The present article offers further evidence on both seasonality and the birth-baptism interval based on the Anglican and Congregational registers of Melbourn, Cambridgeshire.

Using the rubrics of the Prayer Books of 1549, 1552 and 1662, Berry and Schofield summarise the official attitude of the Church of England as follows. It "encouraged universal baptism, with a delay of not more than seven days up to about 1650 and of not more than 14 days after that date".³ The article then goes on to draw together all the consistent evidence of birth-baptism intervals found in parts of forty-three printed registers.

This is shown in their table 2, where the data are presented in terms of earliest, median and latest baptising parishes in the three periods 1650–1700, 1771–1789 and 1791–1812. In the median parishes the birth-baptism interval was eight days or less for 50 per cent of the children baptised between 1650 and 1700. Comparable figures for the two later periods were 26 and 30 days, thus supporting the very broad generalisation that the birth-baptism interval increased with the passage of time. Much larger increases occurred in the latest baptising parishes, the actual figures being 27, 155 and 444 days, while earliest baptising parishes were still following the forms of the Prayer Book. The overall impression gained from the evidence gathered by Berry and Schofield is of very great geographical variation and many changes within individual parishes, quite often "back" to a shorter interval.

Melbourn is a large nucleated village on the arable chalk plain of south Cambridgeshire. In 1801 it contained a total population of 819, rising rapidly to a peak of 1,931 in 1851. Broadly speaking, the number of baptisms kept pace, rising from 297 in 1781–1800 to 534 in 1821–37, but under-registration was probably heavy because nonconformity, including a Baptist following, was well established by the second half of the seventeenth century. However, the registers were well kept and the marriage register shows that the curate was seldom absent from the parish for very long.⁴ The data used in this paper, therefore, would seem to be reliable for the Anglican population of the village and can be supplemented for a short period by data from a Congregational register.

The July maximum of baptisms emerges first of all in the decade 1741–50, virtually disappears in 1751–60, but re-appears in the next decade, rises to a peak in 1791–1800 and subsides gently into the nineteenth century, but is still persisting when civil registration of births begins. In addition to the July maximum, sub-maxima in spring and autumn can also often be discerned.



■ LEVEL OF BAPTISMS
IF EVENLY DISTRIBUTED
BETWEEN MONTHS

MELBOURN, CAMBS.

**TABLE 1
BAPTISMAL COUNT BY MONTHS 1561–1840**

Period	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
1561–80	42	22	30	33	30	31	37	36	36	39	42	33
1581–1600	42	28	33	43	34	33	38	37	28	39	44	38
1601–1620	39	35	37	40	34	36	22	36	39	39	41	53
1621–1640	47	37	50	38	35	17	19	19	27	37	39	38
1641–1660	29	27	31	28	22	21	17	22	16	19	27	33
1661–1680	25	20	12	13	13	20	21	12	21	35	15	21
1681–1700†	15	9	11	9	12	9	13	8	12	9	15	12
1701–1720	14	18	11	27	26	20	13	16	19	10	12	6
1721–1740	10	5	18	20	21	22	21	9	21	13	17	17
1741–1760	8	18	21	25	24	15	40*	12	18	14	24	13
1761–1780	15	31	20	18	13	5	73*	7	15	22	11	24
1781–1800	24	10	12	18	19	11	124	9	17	19	9	25
1801–1820	31	26	27	41	30	11	124	35	15	57	22	31
1821–1840	24	22	40	40	39	31	118	48	41	52	34	45

* There was a period of gradual emergence of the July maximum, e.g. 1743–4, 1744–6, 1746–10, 1752–4, 1771–1780 only three years less than 3.

† Register could be defective or baptisms not regularly carried out.

TABLE 2
MELBOURN JULY BAPTISMS 1741–1840

Decade	Total Baptisms	July Baptisms	
		No.	Per cent.
1741–1750	139	30	21.6
1751–1760	93	10	10.8
1761–1770	104	18	17.3
1771–1780	150	55	37.6
1781–1790	141	52	37.0
1791–1800	156	72	46.0
1801–1810	243	66	27.2
1811–1820	207	58	28.0
1821–1830	263	63	24.0
1831–1840	271	55	20.2

Comparison with Bradley's parishes is most interesting. There he found a persistence of spring and autumn maxima from 1600 to 1840 in Nottinghamshire and from 1600 to 1750 in Derbyshire. After 1750 in the six parishes studied in the latter county, there occurred a "concentration into one particular month of the year of a very high percentage of the total baptisms for the decade".⁵ Although the month varied from July to November, the six parishes shared the common feature of a gradual rise in the phenomenon, a peak decade occurring in 1801–10 in five of the six parishes, and a consequent flattening out by 1840. This is very similar to Melbourn where the peak decade was 1791–1800 (Graph 2). In two Nottinghamshire parishes a peak occurred in the decade 1781–90, rising and falling more rapidly than at Melbourn or in Derbyshire. We must obviously expect to find both long and short-lived christening customs, as the balance between religious and socio-economic circumstances would vary so much from parish to parish.

The lower part of table 3 shows that by comparison with baptisms, on the whole, the births were much more evenly spread throughout the year and, therefore the peaking of baptisms must be largely due to postponement. However, we should not pass over the observation that between 1795–1810 there was a modest peak of births in May, June and July, which could have made some contribution to the July peak of baptisms, when it was at its highest. In the next decade this peak of births had virtually disappeared and between 1821–30 the winter months were showing a maximum but this was not strongly marked.

TABLE 3

MELBOURN CAMBS DATA ON BAPTISMAL POSTPONEMENT

1795 - 1830

DATE AND PERIOD Jan. Feb. Mar. Apr. May. Jun. Jul. Aug. Sept. Oct. Nov. Dec. Averages

Median birth-baptism interval, by month of birth.

Figures (rounded) refer to whole months.

1795-1810	4	5	4	4.5	3.5	2	5	4	4	5	6	7	4.5
1811-1820	6	5	4	4	2.5	3.5	3	11.5	4.5	2	5	7	4.8
1821-1830	6	5	5	6	5	9.5	10	10	3	8	8	7	6.8
Average	5.3	5	4.3	4.8	3.6	5	6	8.5	3.8	5	6.3	7	5.4

Median interval by month of baptism

1795-1810	4	6	4	4	6	2	6	7.5	5	3	8	5	5.0
1811-1820	3	6.5	4	3	5	3	6	6	3	8	2	4	4.4
1821-1830	7.5	2.5	3	3	7	8	7	7	7.5	7.5	7	3	5.8
Average	4.8	5	3.6	3.3	6	5	6.3	6.8	5.1	6.1	5.6	4	5.1

Total children recorded by month of birth

1795-1810	21	20	29	26	32	34	37	18	22	20	35	30	27.0
1811-1820	18	18	19	17	22	20	21	12	14	15	16	22	17.8
1821-1830	32	16	29	25	23	18	17	14	12	26	24	24	21.6
1795-1830	71	54	77	68	77	72	75	44	48	61	75	76	67.3
Totals													

Total children recorded by month of baptism

1795-1810	22	16	19	27	21	9	105	22	11	33	14	25	27.0
1811-1820	14	10	11	15	20	7	56	17	15	28	9	12	17.8
1821-1830	6	2	15	15	22	20	63	27	22	30	23	15	21.6
1795-1830	42	28	45	57	63	36	224	66	48	91	46	52	67.3
Totals													

TABLE 4
MELBOURN CAMBS.

Marriages

Period	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
1781–90	0	2	1	2	5	3	6	2	7	17	2	4
1791–1800	3	5	3	4	2	1	2	4	2	25	3	7
1801–1810	1	7	5	5	3	2	6	0	1	24	15	5
1811–1820	7	8	5	7	5	1	5	2	4	19	11	11
1821–1830	5	9	11	12	6	3	3	6	8	17	21	8
1831–1840	4	7	2	1	5	5	10	1	9	14	13	9
1781–1840	20	38	27	31	26	15	32	15	31	116	65	44

One possibility is that the tradition of autumn weddings (table 4) might help to explain the midsummer maximum of births between 1795–1810, but as this tradition continued until 1840 without apparently continuing to produce a corresponding seasonality in births, not much reliance can be placed on its causality between 1795–1810. Although this represents the limit of analysis of birth seasonality, much more can be said about the seasonality of baptisms in Melbourn.

Returning to table 3, the upper half summarises the median values of the birth-baptism interval, in one part by months of birth and in the other by months of baptism. Whichever way the aggregation is calculated, it shows that Melbourn babies could expect to wait rather more than five months after their birth before they were baptised. This was certainly a very high figure, even for this relatively late period.

In Berry and Schofield's data the longest comparable interval occurred at Kempston, Bedfordshire in 1800–03 when 50% of the children were baptised within 114 days or less of birth.⁶ This represents a period of just under four months.

In York the highest known median interval between birth and baptism was 57 days in 1802–1812 in the parish of Holy Trinity, Goodramgate⁷. A further comparison can be made with Tranter's data for Bedfordshire, where a delay of over two weeks became about twice as frequent as a delay of less than two weeks in having the child baptised (table 5). Although these data are presented differently from those for Melbourn, the contrast between pre-1750 and post-1750 is supported, especially by Kempston where figures for either end of the period are available for the same parish.⁸

TABLE 5

Data on the birth-baptism interval in Bedfordshire

Source : *Tranter, 1966, p. 158–9.*

(A)	Median interval in Kempston :			
	1740–50	:	13 days.	
	1801–12	:	87 days, with none less than 10 days.	
(B)	Period and Parish	Length of interval (per cent of baptisms).		
		Less than 2 weeks.	2 weeks–2 months.	3 months and more
	Amphill			
	1695–1705/06	81	19	0
	1717	79	17	4
	Houghton Conquest			
	1760–72	38	53	9
	1782–90	30	52	18
	1791–1800	33	47	20
	Milton Ernest			
	1783–90	44	34	22
	1791–1800	48	29	23

So we have to attempt to answer two questions relating to the birth-baptism interval at Melbourn. First, why was baptism postponed; and second, why was July such a favourite month. It is important to consider these as separate, even if connected questions since children baptised in *all* months of the year were generally several months old (table 3) and not only those who were baptised in July. The separation of the questions also assists comparisons between parishes which had different favourite months, for they may well have experienced similar general conditions, although asserting some parochial individuality as to the choice of month. Melbourn fortunately has data on births, but much of what follows is still speculative.

For instance, how closely did Melbournians follow the Prayer Book rubric and “Baptise not Children at home in their Houses”? The 1662 Prayer Book covered this eventuality by requiring that private baptisms should be certified publicly.⁹ If what we see in the baptismal register is *only* public baptisms following upon private baptisms, then we do not have to explain a postponement of baptism in centuries characterised by heavy infant mortality. This is not completely beyond the bounds of plausibility, for in the 1740’s, when the July peak first appeared, children were baptised privately on a significant number of occasions in Melbourn. We can only speculate as to whether or not the practice ceased or became so common as to be unworthy of note in the register.

It is worth adding that the register of Chester Cathedral notes for each child baptised there between 1697 and 1812 the date of its birth and/or private baptism. Where all three dates are recorded, private baptism can be seen as occurring very soon after birth, generally the next day, while the interval between either birth or private baptism and the public

baptism was usually several months and occasionally over a year. Nevertheless, this is a record of a small number of children, mainly of privileged homes and cannot be likened safely to the ordinary parish register.¹¹

What advantage might accrue from delaying the baptism of a child? First, there may have been some reluctance to take a new-born child out of the house, especially if it was winter and the church was cold and draughty. This is a very general kind of argument and cannot be tested very easily, perhaps not at all; but it should be put in the balance against the presumed anxiety to have a child baptised before it was too late.

Another general argument, in an age noted for laxness in churchgoing, is that the clergy were unable to impress upon parents sufficiently well their duty to have children baptised soon after birth. The general decline in churchgoing in the eighteenth century, followed by a Victorian revival might have some bearing on the appearance and disappearance of baptismal delay in widely separated parishes at roughly comparable dates.

A further advantage of baptismal postponement arises out of the perception of the christening service as a social, as much as a religious occasion, as is so often the case in our own day. Are we to imagine that relations and godparents might be invited from distant parishes, that there would need to be a christening tea in the child's home, and so on? Winter was not a good time for travelling and entertaining, food would be less plentiful, fuel would be a problem and guests could not be dispersed into the cottage garden in that season. Melbourn had a preference for July and Bradley's parishes all preferred a month in late summer or in autumn, when food would be plentiful. Even if postponement to a winter month occurred, it gave the mother time to recover from her confinement and the father an opportunity to save a little.

TABLE 6

MELBOURN, CAMBS.

Nuclear and extended family baptisms

N = Nuclear E = Extended

(i.e. cousins baptised simultaneously)

	N + E =		All family baptisms	July N + E	Total baptisms	All family baptisms as % of total	July N + E as % of all family baptisms	All July baptisms No.	% of total
1781–1790	17	0	17	9	141	12.0	53.0	52	37.0
1791–1800	31	10	41	23	156	26.3	56.0	72	45.0
1801–1810	51	23	74	19	243	30.4	25.8	66	27.2
1811–1820	39	12	51	13	207	24.6	25.5	58	28.0
1821–1830	46	11	57	9	263	21.6	15.8	63	24.0
1831–1841	63	25	88	12	271	32.5	13.7	55	20.2

Moreover, if children were christened in batches, we can introduce economies of scale into the argument. Table 6 demonstrates that batches were a feature of Melbourn life between 1781 and 1841, a feature referred to here as family baptisms. A family baptism is defined as (a) when children of the same parents are baptised on the same day; and (b) when presumed cousins are baptised simultaneously. For purposes of this calculation children were presumed cousins if they shared the same surname. Although this assumption will have been false in some cases, on balance the number of cousins baptised simultaneously will have been underestimated, because there is a theoretical 3 : 1 chance *against* cousins sharing the same surname, but this ratio is unlikely to have applied in practice to a small community.

Thus the estimates of family baptisms, ranging from 12 to 32 per cent of all baptisms, are likely to be a conservative figure. Even so, this is a substantial proportion of the total and although insufficient in itself to explain the July preferences, those family baptisms sustain an argument that baptism was seen as much more than a routine, religious event.

TABLE 7

MELBOURN CONGREGATIONAL REGISTER, 1825–37

Median Birth-Baptism intervals in 176 baptisms.

MONTH OF BIRTH	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Median delay (months)	6	7	7	5	5	3.5	3.5	10	3.5	8.5	10	7
											Average	6.33

Month-by-month distribution of births and baptisms

MONTH	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Total
Baptisms	1	3	4	2	14	47	5	14	34	20	17	15	176
Births	16	17	13	16	16	12	18	17	12	10	13	12	176

Source : PRO : RG4/155.

In the Anglican registers, the highest numbers involved in family baptisms were recorded by the Stockbridges in 1804, the Kings in 1805 and the Bakers in 1809, all with six children in the same nuclear family. A similar bunching is noticeable in the register of the Independent (Congregational) chapel, between 1825 and 1837 (table 7). Out of 176 entries, 49 children (or 28 per cent) were baptised on family occasions, 32 of them in sibling groups. Pairs were the most common number, but William Crole Carver and his wife baptised five offspring in 1828; and this gentleman was almost certainly the son of a former minister of the chapel!

While on the subject of this separate register, it is interesting to notice that the median birth-baptism interval was 6.33 months, a figure very close to that for the parish register at the same period (6.8 months). A significant number of baptisms were of children from neighbouring parishes in which there was no Independent Congregation; the necessity to travel

would influence the choice of season. Very large numbers of children were baptised on a few dates, perhaps at special services, so it is usual to find that all the baptisms for the year fell in two or three months. Over the period 1825–37 marked peaks occur in June (47) and September–October (54 out of the 176) and the cold months of December to April accounted for only 25 baptisms altogether.

Can we account for the different favourite months in different parishes, and even for different churches in the same parish? As Bradley has suggested one should consider the patronal festival as a suitable occasion, but this does not fit in with the peak for some of his parishes¹¹; nor does it suit Melbourn where the festival, being All Saints, falls on November 1st.

TABLE 8

MELBOURN FEAST WEEK BAPTISMS (2nd–10th July inclusive).

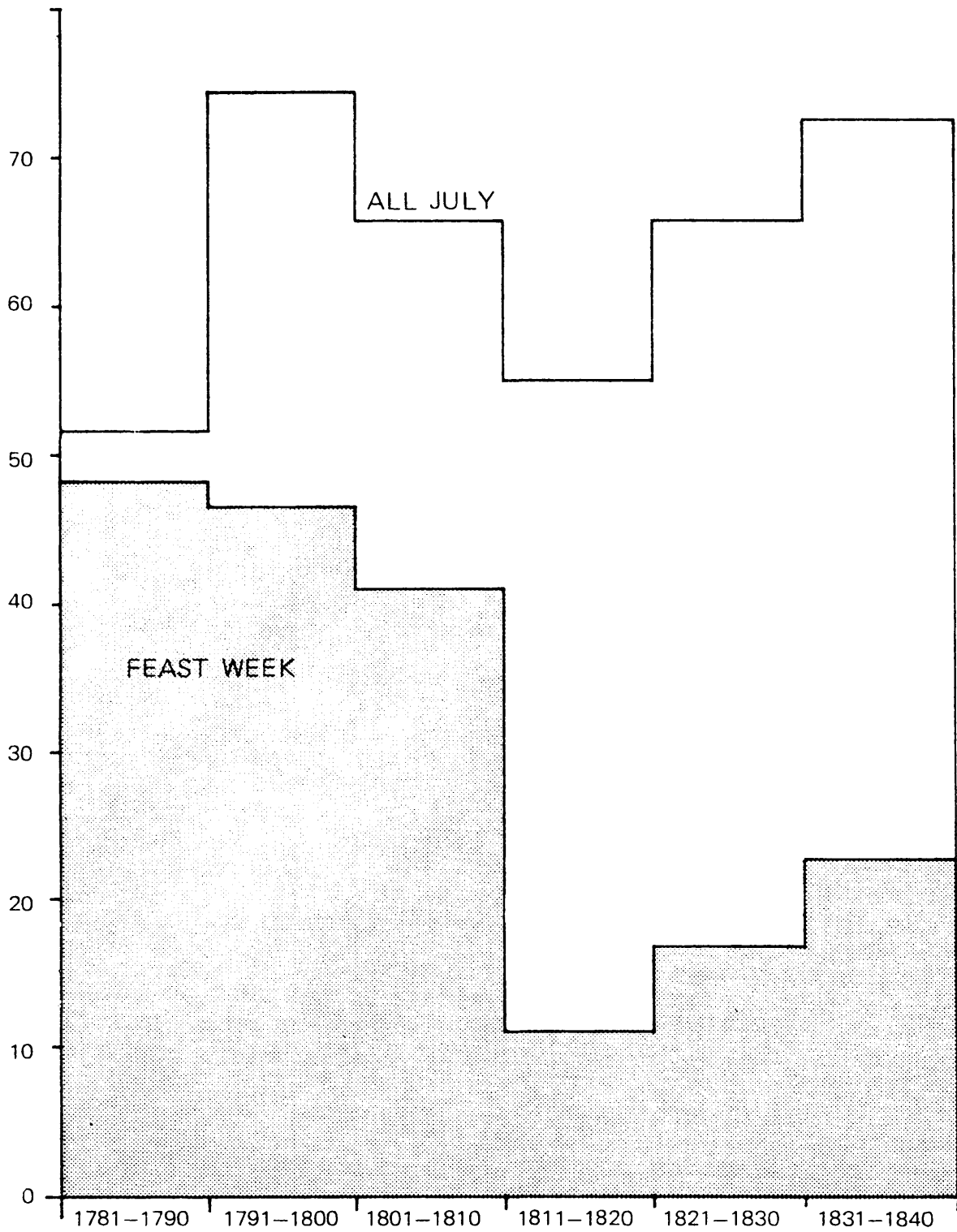
DECADE	FEAST WEEK	TOTAL JULY
1781–1790	48	52
1791–1800	46	72
1801–1810	41*	66
1811–1820	12	58
1821–1830	17	66
1831–1840	23	72

* The last year of large numbers of feast week baptisms was 1812.

However, other occasions could be equally significant, such as the Melbourn Feast which fell on “the day after the first Thursday in July”¹². This may well have been a generally recognised “home coming time”, as it came between the hay and corn harvests. (In Lincolnshire some villages, such as Metherringham, still retain the tradition of going home for Feast Week). The earliest possible date is July 2nd and the latest July 8th, but to include all Sundays following feast days takes in the period up to July 10th. The numbers of baptisms falling in the period 2–10th July inclusive are set out in Table 8 and Graph 2. These show that an overwhelming majority of July baptisms occurred in Feast Week between 1781 and 1810, when a sudden falling off occurred.

More precisely, the watershed date was 1812 and it is probably significant that this year marked the end of the long curacy of Claude Carter (1788–1812). There was no change of vicar until 1817, and Carter’s successor, John Flockton, served three incumbents between 1813 and 1831. During this time there were relatively few feast week baptisms, but if Flockton broke this tradition, he did not break the tradition of July baptisms as a whole, for they continued on a substantial scale after he had gone. (Alternatively, 1800 could be taken as the turning point in the total number of July baptisms, but whichever date is taken it does not coincide with the comings and goings of clergy). The coming of Jonathan Trebeck as vicar

**GRAPH 2 MELBOURN FEAST WEEK
BAPTISMS, 1781-1840
as proportion of all July baptisms**



in 1833, or perhaps the departure of John Flockton, may have been connected with the establishment of Sunday as the regular day of baptism, after a long period in which it was carried out on various days of the week.

In a similar way, the change of minister at the Congregational church may have *modified* a more or less secular or social tradition of christening. When John Medway became minister in 1824 there appears to have been a back-log of baptisms to work through, as the median birth-baptism interval for the first 25 children was 17 months; but by the time he had been in Melbourn for a decade this figure had fallen to 5 months (the median for the last 25 baptisms in the register).

While ministers and vicars may obviously have had a temporary influence on tradition, the same is possibly true of other social leaders. For example, did the village midwives and/or doctors exert any influence on newly confined mothers? For instance, in the church porch at Langton-by-Spilsby, Lincs., there hangs the photograph of an old lady with a baby brought to the church for christening. It was the custom for this lady, and not the mothers of the village, to take babies to be baptised.¹³ If she was not the village midwife who was she; and did this custom have parallels elsewhere?

It is obvious that the question of christening customs is eminently suitable for investigation by local students of historical demography, as they will be able to relate data obtained from registers to more general knowledge of their locality. When a bigger picture of the subject emerges what will be revealed? Is it possible to investigate the balance between baptism as a religious rite and christening as a social occasion?

While postponement generally might be found responsive to national or regional changes in the social climate, postponement to a particular month or period may turn out to have been, on balance, more the result of a variety of local factors. These will probably include some of the following:

- (a) Patronal festivals
- (b) Local feasts, fairs, etc.
- (c) The social influence of the clergy and other leaders
- (d) Absence of the clergy from the parish
- (e) Religious leadership of the clergy
- (f) Prayer Book rubrics.
- (g) Local superstitions.

Further research will refine and extend this list. Any reader of this journal who has access to a register that consistently records birth dates should be encouraged to investigate the birth-baptism interval. However, in some parishes the seasonality of baptisms is so marked that it can be investigated to a worthwhile extent without the use of birth dates.

Finally, we might endeavour to relate to our problem the tradition of the churching of women, as newly-confined mothers were theoretically not allowed out of their homes until they had been churched. Consequently a public baptism could not take place with the mother present a few days after the birth, quite apart from the fact of her not being fit enough for the occasion. Is it possible to gather information on godsips (gossips), like the old lady at Langton-by-Spilsby, who took the place of the mother at the baptism? Did the use of godsips vary from time to time and place to place in such a way as to explain shorter and longer intervals between birth and baptism? Did some families use them and others not?¹⁴

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NOTES

1. B. M. Berry and R. S. Schofield, "Age at baptism in pre-industrial England", *Population Studies*, 25, 1971, 453–63.
2. L. Bradley, "An enquiry into seasonality in baptisms, marriages and burials: Part Two", *L.P.S.* 5, Autumn 1970, 18–35.
3. Berry and Schofield, *op.cit.*, p. 454.
4. The incumbents, however, appear to have been absent for very long periods.
5. Bradley, *op. cit.*, p. 19–26. The peak percentage of baptisms in the favourite month varied from 17 to 51; while in Melbourn it reached 46.
6. Berry and Schofield, *op.cit.*, p. 457.
7. Bradley, *op.cit.*, p.31. Where very small changes in the birth-baptism interval are sought after, measurement in days is necessary. The measurement was done in months in Melbourn largely because few children were baptised in less than 30 days from birth; these were counted as zeros. While on measurement, the reader should notice that medians have been used throughout this paper, in preference to mean values, as the latter are subject to considerable distortion by the baptism of relatively small numbers of older children, including teenagers and persons of even more mature years.
8. N.I. Tranter, *Demographic change in Bedfordshire, 1670–1800*, unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Nottingham, 1966, p.158–9.
9. Berry and Schofield, *op.cit.*, p. 454.
10. T. and T.C. Hughes, *The Registers of Chester Cathedral*, Parish Register Society, Liverpool, 1904. J.T. Krause also notes that "In some parishes the new-born was baptized privately, and registration was postponed until the later public ceremony was held" in "Changes in English fertility and mortality, 1781–1850", *Econ.Hist.Rev.*, 2nd Series, 11, 1958–59, p. 58.
11. Bradley, *op.cit.*, p.26
12. Edmund Carter, *History of the County of Cambridge*, London, 1753, 1819 ed. p.239. This is still the date of the feast, now marked by the coming of a pleasure fair. When the feast started is, of course, another matter. Did it start before 1740 or did the feast and the christening custom start together?
13. Information from Rev. J. Langton, Tinwell, Rutland and Mr. Terence Leach Dunholme, Lincs.
14. This final paragraph owes its inclusion to information from Mr. C. Charlton.