

CHRISTIAN NAMES IN SOLIHULL, WARWICKSHIRE, AND YARDLEY, WORCESTERSHIRE 1540-1729

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Little work has been undertaken by demographers on the fluctuations in popularity of christian names. Yet, systematically studied, they might well provide insights, not only into religious and cultural trends but, to some extent at least, into the ethnic characteristics of a given locality, and its position with regard to communications.

The present study is based primarily on an analysis of 5,665 boys' and 5,271 girls' names which were given at baptism in the two adjoining Central Midland parishes of Solihull and Yardley between 1540 and 1729. However, in order to provide comparative material, three supplementary analyses have been carried out, as follows:

- 1 An analysis of 174 men's and 171 women's names which are recorded in the Solihull marriage register between 1538 and 1560. This, it is felt, should provide some indication of the christian names in use in the Arden area immediately prior to the Reformation.

- 2 An analysis of 113 boys' and 126 girls' names occurring in the baptism register of Rempstone, Nottinghamshire, 1570-1609, as giving some indication of usage in the East Midlands.

- 3 A similar study of Pattingham, Staffordshire, over the same period (228 boys' and 231 girls' names) to represent the West Midlands.

Throughout the study, statements regarding 'the national trend' are derived from the **Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names**, Second Edition, which for brevity is hereafter referred to as 'the Dictionary'.

References to a name as 'uncommon' mean that it was given in fewer than 1 per cent of the relevant baptisms; from 1.0 per cent to 2.0 per cent, it is counted as 'rather uncommon!'

Popularity of 'Top Three' Christian Names

It was a feature of the whole period 1540 to 1729, both nationally and locally, that a small number of names — three for each sex — accounted for a high proportion of all baptisms. Of the boys, between 47.5 and 62.5 per cent were called **John**, **Thomas**, or **William** in the national table (see Dictionary, p. xxviii), and similar proportions obtained at Solihull and Yardley. Among girls, the top three names monopolized between 44.5 and 67.0 per cent. From 1600 these were invariably **Mary**, **Elizabeth** and **Anne**; but in the sixteenth century, because of the temporary eclipse of **Mary** (see below), the three female 'top runners' tended to vary from place to place.

Table 1 'Top three' girls' names, in order of popularity.

Nationally, 16th century	Solihull and Yardley, 1550-99	Rempstone, 1570-1609	Pattingham, 1570-1609
Elizabeth	Joan	Elizabeth	Elizabeth
Agnes	Elizabeth	Joan	Joan
Joan	Anne	Margaret	Alice

It will be noticed that all four lists include **Elizabeth**, which was to remain one of the favourites in the seventeenth century, and **Joan** which was not. The Arden list, however, is the only one to include **Anne**, which was destined to join the top three; whereas the others still feature, in **Agnes**, **Margaret** and **Alice**, names that were rapidly becoming outmoded. Although rural, the north Arden parishes of Solihull and Yardley were near to the historic towns of Coventry and Warwick, and the growing town of Birmingham. Two important roads to London ran through them and they were not far from 'the Welsh road'.

The Reformation

According to the Dictionary, **Mary** suffered an eclipse after the Reformation. However, locally it was only moderately popular among pre-Reformation names, accounting for three per cent of the women marrying 1538-60. During the second half of the sixteenth century, on the other hand, it became more popular at 6 per cent. It climbed even further, to 7.5 per cent, in the 1590s before, reaching the top three, where it was to remain, 1600-1729. This pattern suggests a lack of special devotion to the Virgin in the early sixteenth century; but a revival of interest in the name at the time of the Armada, when anti-catholic feeling might be expected to have been strong, and when to return to favour it surely must have divested itself to some extent of former religious and/or political connotations.

Another effect of the Reformation nationally is said to have been the eclipse of **Peter**, **Simon**, and certain non-scriptural saints' names — seventeen for men and six for women. All the male names in this category were certainly uncommon or unused from 1540 to 1729, except for **Simon** which qualified as 'rather uncommon' 1550-99. However, they seem

already to have been passing out of vogue in the early sixteenth century, for **Peter** does not occur at all in the pre-Reformation sample, while **Simon** and a mere three of the seventeen non-scriptural saints make only single appearances. Thus the subsequent neglect of these names does not seem to be entirely due to the break with Rome.

With the six female non-scriptural saints' names the picture is rather different. **Barbara, Cecily** and **Ursula** do not appear locally among the pre-Reformation names, and it is therefore hardly surprising that none of them rises above the 'rather uncommon' category thereafter. **Agnes** and **Margaret**, by contrast, rank as very popular in the pre-Reformation sample, taking third and fourth place after **Joan** and **Elizabeth**; while **Katherine** was popular, coming above **Mary**, with 4.5 per cent of the total of female names. The rapid decline of these three names after the Reformation is therefore striking.

Table 2 Agnes, Katherine and Margaret — percentage of female baptisms in Solihull and Yardley.

	Agnes	Katherine	Margaret	Totals
Pre-Reformation	12.5	4.5	10.0	171
1540s	11.0	5.5	6.0	286
1550-99	4.5	3.5	6.0	1,194
1600-49	-1.0	3.0	5.0	1,567
1650-99	-1.0	2.0	3.5	1,368
1700-29	unused	1.5	1.0	856

If, however, the negative impact of sixteenth century religious changes was limited mainly to a fall in the popularity of three non-scriptural female saints' names, the positive effects were rather more widespread. The 'eccentric' puritan names, like **Sorry-for-Sin, No-Merit**, which were associated with extreme religious fervour, are not to be found in the Arden parishes. Moreover, among the milder 'virtue' names, the only one to make much headway was **Grace** which rose to 'rather uncommon' at Solihull, 1650-99. On the other hand, increasing familiarity with the Bible does seem to have encouraged the rise in popularity of biblical names which had previously been unused or uncommon. During each of the twelve decades between 1550 and 1669, at least one new biblical boy's name was introduced into the two local parishes, treated as a single unit. The peak decade was the first of the seventeenth century — a decade, incidentally, when immigration was particularly high — which saw the introduction of five new names: **Jonathan, Joseph, Nathaniel, Samuel** and **Benjamin**. The range of female biblical names was more limited. Nevertheless, eight of the same twelve decades brought at least one new arrival, the peak of girls being the 1640s, with the advent of **Esther, Hester, Hannah** and **Deborah**. Eventually **Joseph** became the most popular biblical name for boys, Sarah for girls.

Table 3 Joseph and Sarah — percentage of male and female baptisms respectively in Solihull and Yardley.

	Joseph	Male Totals	Sarah	Female Totals
pre-Reformation	unused	174	unused	171
1540s	unused	274	unused	286
1550-99	unused	1,340	(less than) 1.0	1,194
1600-49	2.0	1,722	3.5	1,567
1650-99	8.5	1,465	8.0	1,368
1700-29	13.5	864	11.0	856

A comparison of this table with Table 2 shows that both upward and downward trends in the popularity of certain names stemming from the Reformation persisted over some two centuries; thereby indicating that tendencies initiated by religious changes may later have been magnified by the 'snow-ball' effect of fashion.

'Rustic' or 'Vulgar' Names

According to the Dictionary, the names **Alice, Ellen, Humphrey, Joan, Julian, Parnell** and **Peter** were all coming to be regarded as 'rustic' or 'vulgar' immediately prior to or during the period covered by this study. True to their usual responsiveness to national fashions, the Arden parishes did indeed tend increasingly to shun these names. This may be illustrated by looking at the declining fortunes of **Alice** and **Joan**.

Table 4 Alice and Joan — percentage of female baptisms in Solihull and Yardley.

	Alice	Joan	Totals
1540s			
Pre-Reformation	6.5	15.0	171
1540s	11.0	18.0	286
1550-99	9.0	15.5	1,194
1600-49	7.0	4.5	1,567
1650-99	2.5	2.0	1,368
1700-29	(less than) 1.0	(less than) 1.0	856

Apart from the nationally recognized rustic or vulgar names, **Christian, Eleanor, Isabel** and **Nicholas** may have acquired a similar stigma locally, since all suffered a similar decline. Thus **Isabel**, the most popular of the four, slipped from nine per cent in pre-Reformation times to six per cent 1550-99, then to 2.5 per cent 1600-49, and was thereafter under one per cent — i.e., 'uncommon'.

Among the national rustic names, **Ellen** may have suffered from its connection with the non-scriptural saints; and so may **Nicholas**, which occurs among the local group. However, since **Bridget** came into use, and **Francis** into prominence, after the Reformation — both nationally and locally — a note of arbitrariness, or 'pure fashion' cannot be altogether excluded.

Surnames as Christian Names

One might have expected surnames to have been used at the opposite end of the social scale from the names in the last category since, according to the Dictionary, they were restricted to the nobility and landed gentry until the nineteenth century. But in Arden, although always uncommon, they were employed occasionally, not only by the rural aristocracy, but also — and more interestingly — among the lower orders, to advertise the paternity of an illegitimate child. The entry in the Solihull baptism register for 1602: 'The xxvth daie of Marche, Wheeler, sonne of Elizabeth Cumson, spurius' seems to be a case in point as does that for 1629: 'Russell Wheeler was baptized December 25', since no other child was recorded as baptized in 1629 or 1630 without a record of parentage.

Regional Names

The influence of the 'Welsh Road' can perhaps be seen in the seven Welsh or Celtic names which were used on twenty-nine occasions in the two Arden parishes between 1540 and 1729: **Arthur, Evan, Griffin, Lewis, Ludovic, Owen** and **Winifred**. Even if treated as a single name, these were always 'uncommon'. However, only one occurrence (Winifred) is found at Rempstone 1570-1609, and one (Arthur) at Pattingham over the same period.

It is interesting to contrast this situation with that relating to northern names. The Dictionary mentions **Brian** as surviving until the eighteenth century in several northern counties, and two per cent of Rempstone boys were given this name 1570-1609, while it was completely absent from Pattingham 1570-1609, and from the Arden parishes throughout the whole period under review. Another name which was 'formerly common in England', but later mainly confined to the north, was **Jean**. Again, although this was quite popular at Rempstone 1570-1609, with five per cent of female christenings, it is not to be found at all at Solihull, Yardley or Pattingham.

Local Variations

The Dictionary states that **Raphael** was always Jewish in England; but four sons of well-established local families were so christened between 1539 and 1631. In addition the Solihull register records the marriage of a **Raphael** from nearby Hanbury into the Solihull gentry in 1599, and the burial of a local **Raphael** in 1644.

It seems strange that **George**, the name of the patron saint of England, should be considered to have been 'rare' nationally until after 1714. At Rempstone 1570-1609 it is used only once, while at Pattingham it is 'rather uncommon'. But for some reason Arden people were more enamoured of this name, which scored 2.5 per cent in the first half of the seventeenth century and 4.5 in the second half.

If patriotism had anything to do with this, the same factor may also have contributed to the high popularity of **Henry** in Tudor times. According to the Dictionary, this was fairly commonly used during the medieval

period and has 'fluctuated very little since'. But locally it fluctuated itself into considerable popularity in the late sixteenth century, rising from 4.5 per cent in the 1540s to 8.0 per cent 1550-99, before moving down again to 3.0 per cent for the period 1650-99. Like **George, Henry** was less popular at Rempstone and Pattingham 1570-1609, accounting for 2.5 per cent of male christenings at the former, and under one per cent at the latter.