

DEMOGRAPHIC FACTS AS EXPERIENCED BY A GROUP OF FAMILIES IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SHIFNAL, SHROPSHIRE

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A search of the parish registers of Shifnal for the purpose of making the month by month totals of marriages, baptisms and burials for the forms of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population led to the discovery that for the first quarter of the eighteenth century the registers consistently gave unusually full information, in that the occupation and area of residence within the parish was regularly recorded for each individual mentioned. The discovery led to the present enquiry to determine how much light this extra information could add to the type of data usually extracted from parish registers by aggregative and nominative analysis.

As Shifnal was a large and varied parish, analysis by area of residence and occupation gives a fascinating picture of the nature of the various settlements within the parish. Shifnal itself emerges as the centre of the parish with a wide variety of craftsmen serving the area. The older settlements, late Saxon or early medieval, and originally separate townships though within the same parish and manor, had a distinctive population of husbandmen and yeomen, while later settlements were mainly of labourers. In the west of the parish there were several settlements which were almost entirely composed of colliers and influenced more by the Coalbrookdale coalfield than the agricultural economy of the majority of the parish. By using nominative techniques it is possible to trace the individuals named in the registers in a variety of other documentary sources such as settlement certificates, lists of parish officers, apprenticeships indentures and a manorial survey of 1720 which gives details of individual landholdings at that date. Thus details of occupation and area of residence can illuminate many aspects of the social structure of the parish.

However it is here proposed to concentrate on the aspects most directly concerned with population and the further dimension that extra information on status or occupation can add. The intention was not to attempt to construct birth rates or estimates of population growth, but to gain an impression of the demographic facts of ordinary people's lives. Shifnal is now, as it seems to have been at the beginning of the eighteenth century, a large village or small town. It is still the centre of a prosperous agricultural area, though few people now work directly on the land. Despite the fact that some settlements in the industrialised west of the

parish gained churches of their own in the nineteenth century, it is still a large parish, typical of the north-west in that there are many townships within it (though many of these are now single farmsteads).

As a preliminary, it is useful to have some idea of the total population of the parish. Following a method proposed by W. G. Hoskins, which assumes an annual baptism rate of thirty-three per thousand, the annual average number of baptisms was calculated for a twenty-year period 1703-22 (see Table 1).¹ The resulting figure (53.05) was multiplied by thirty to give an approximate estimate of a population size of about 1600 for the whole parish in the early eighteenth century. Next, from the information in the registers of residence it was possible to form an estimate as to the proportion of this population living in Shifnal town itself, again by aggregation of the baptism figures. The total number of baptisms for a twenty-year period from 1702, when details of residence first began consistently to be noted was 1000, of which 495 (or 49.5 per cent) were in Shifnal town. It would therefore appear that about half the parish population of 1600 (i.e. 800 persons) lived in Shifnal town.

It is not possible to measure directly the occupational composition of the population, but it is possible to form an estimate of the proportion of the different social groups by analysis of the descriptions attributed to the parent, usually the father, in the baptism register. The total baptisms for the years 1703 to 1723 were divided into rough categories termed gentlemen, farmers, craftsmen, labourers and colliers. The term farmers here includes yeomen and husbandmen. The two were grouped together, partly because the numbers of yeomen were small, and partly because from 1717 the registers used the term farmer to describe individuals who had previously been described as yeomen or husbandmen. Though earlier use of the terms yeomen and husbandmen seems to have referred to status rather than occupation, the change to the word farmer seems to imply that yeomen and husbandmen were seen as naturally engaged in agriculture. All craftsmen were grouped together, though this may possibly obscure differences between them, as the range of crafts was wide so that the numbers in any finer subdivision would have been small. Incidentally, in as much as any group of crafts predominated it was the leather trades. Colliers were grouped separately from labourers, because although the numbers involved were fairly small, it was thought that distinction between the groups might reveal points of interest.

Table 1. Proportions of occupation/status groups in baptism register

	Baptisms 1703-12		Baptisms 1713-22	
	no.	%	no.	%
Gentry	7	1.4	11	1.9
Farmers	58	11.8	87	15.3
Craftsmen	151	30.6	209	36.8
Labourers	152	30.8	130	22.9
Colliers	17	3.5	44	7.8
Others/Unknown	108	21.9	87	15.3
Total Baptisms	493	100.0	568	100.0

There are changes in the proportions of the different groups between the two decades, but further investigation is needed to decide what conclusions to draw from this. The fall in the number of labourers is, however, partly due to the fact that there are several cases where the description of an individual's status/occupation is changed from labourer to collier. It is not possible to say definitely whether this reflects a real change or just more precise labelling, but the development of the nearby coalfield perhaps implies that the change is a real one.

More detailed insight into the demographic situation can be obtained from nominative techniques. Shifnal is very suitable for these methods, being a large parish with the main settlement near the centre of the parish. Furthermore, the 1676 Compton 'Census' gives a low proportion of Non-conformists and Roman Catholics in the area, the number of Nonconformists increasing only later in the eighteenth century. The method employed was to take the baptism register as a base on which to construct a population sample. The baptism register was used as the base because it always names three people in a definite relationship, which together with the details of occupation and area of residence gives the greatest possibility of identifying correctly the individuals recorded. The 1342 baptisms for the years 1700-25 inclusive were allotted to 500 families, with thirty-eight mothers of illegitimate children in addition. Then the baptism registers before 1700 and after 1725 were studied to trace any other children of the family; the marriage register was searched to try to establish the marriage date of the couple; and the burial register was searched to trace the burials of the children and each of the partners. In this way as full a picture as possible was built up of this group of 500 families, and it is hoped that calculations using this group as a base will provide valid points of interest.

Table 2 shows that the distribution of the families by social group is broadly similar to that obtained by aggregative analysis, as shown in Table 1. The 'other' or 'unknown' group, however, is somewhat smaller for several reasons, principally because using all three registers means that an occupation is found for most individuals; also the mothers of illegitimate children are not included, mainly because information about them is very difficult to trace and further investigation is needed. In the occasional cases where the description of an individual's status or occupation changes, the individual is assigned to the group in which he seems to have spent most of the relevant period. Labourers occasionally become colliers or craftsmen; other changes were rare.

Table 2. Social groups of 500 families

	no.	Fathers	%
Gentry	10		2.0
Farmers	83		16.6
Craftsmen	167		33.4
Labourers	132		26.4
Colliers	31		6.2
Others/Unknown	77		15.4
Total	500		100.0

Some indication of the importance of mobility within an area can be obtained by an analysis of the marriage register to determine the proportion of marriage partners from within and without the parish. When this is done by aggregative analysis, the marriages cannot be grouped by occupation as the marriage register does not consistently give these details.

Table 3. Total marriages 1700-25

	Marriages	
	no.	%
Both partners from Shifnal	174	45.3
One partner from Shifnal		
Woman from outside	71	18.5
Man from outside	30	7.8
Both strangers	109	28.4
Total	384	100.0

In her study of seventeen parishes in this area including Shifnal, Sogner found a higher proportion of marriages where both partners were of the same parish than was the case in Shifnal — 67.8 per cent as against 45.3 per cent.² She suggested that Shifnal was a transit parish or simply one with a church fashionable for marriages. Another finding of Sogner's relating to the area as a whole, was that there was a tendency for marriages to take place in the bride's parish if only one partner was from the parish. The Shifnal figures by both aggregative and nominative methods point in the other direction.

Table 4 shows the origin of the partners of the families studied by nominative methods. In fact marriage data could be traced for only 169 out of the 500 families, which is in itself perhaps some comment on the degree of mobility. Thirty-six per cent of the farmers' marriages could be traced, 35 per cent of the craftsmen's, 38.3 per cent of the labourers' and 50 per cent of the colliers'. As in all the following tables based on nominative methods, gentry have had to be included in the group of 'others', as the numbers are so small. In only three of these 169 marriages did both partners come from outside Shifnal. Naturally in a much higher proportion of cases than in the total marriages both partners came from Shifnal.

Table 4. Marriages of 169 of 500 partnerships

Occupation/ status	Both same parish		Man from outside		Woman from outside		Total	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Farmers	22	73.3	3	10.0	5	16.7	30	100
Craftsmen	41	69.5	9	15.2	9	15.3	59	100
Labourers	40	78.4	3	5.9	8	15.7	51	100
Colliers	8	50.0	1	6.2	7	43.8	16	100
Others	6	60.0	4	40.0			10	100
Totals	117	69.2	20	11.8	29	17.2	169¹	100

1. This total includes three marriages in which both partners came from outside Shifnal.

From Table 4 it appears that labourers were the most likely to marry locally, and colliers the least. It also seems that a particularly high pro-

portion of colliers married wives from outside the parish, but this may merely reflect the geographical fact of residence near the parish boundary. There are, however, problems in assessing differential mobility as between the sexes and the social groups by working backwards from baptism entries to find the parents' marriage dates, not least because of the different tendency between the two sexes for moving between birth and marriage, and between marriage and producing children.

An attempt was made to find the average age at first marriage of the individuals recorded as parents 1700-25, but it was possible to find baptism and marriage dates recorded for only sixty out of a possible 1,000 individuals, forty-one men and nineteen women, again reflecting the greater likelihood of women moving out of their original parish. One reason for this low proportion traced is that the Shifnal registers only started in 1678. This sample is very small, but the figures for what they are worth, give an average age at marriage of twenty-five for men and twenty-four for women. The figures suggest a lower average age for farmers and their wives, but the numbers are too small for this to be more than an indication.

Table 5. Average age at first marriage

Occupation/ status	Men		Women		Both	
	no.	average	no.	average	no.	average
Farmers	1		3		4	23.3
Craftsmen	20	25.2	8	22.9	28	24.5
Labourers	11	25.3	5	24.4	16	25.1
Colliers	8	25.0	2		10	26.2
Others	1		1		2	
Total	41	25.2	19	24.2	60	24.9

The interval between the date of marriage and the baptism of the first child can be traced in 169 out of a possible 500 cases. The figures give an average interval of seventeen months between marriage and the first child, though these figures refer of course to baptisms not to births. Although the average interval of the different groups does not vary greatly (apart from 'others'), the pattern behind these averages varies considerably. Labourers had the highest rate of pre-marital conception and farmers the lowest. However, farmers had the highest proportion of children baptised between nine and twelve months after marriage, reflecting perhaps the greater chance of their first child surviving to the stage of baptism, or perhaps less pre-marital sex, or a longer birth-baptism interval.

Table 6. Average interval between marriage and baptism of first child

Occupation/ status	0-8	9-12	13-24	25 months	Total	Average
	months	months	months	and over		
	%	%	%	%	families	interval
Farmers	3.8	51.6	29.0	16.1	31	16.1
Craftsmen	18.0	37.7	22.9	21.3	61	16.7
Labourers	26.0	32.0	28.0	14.0	50	15.5
Colliers	6.2	37.5	43.7	12.5	16	17.0
Others	—	36.4	18.0	45.4	11	26.4
Total	15.4	38.5	27.2	18.9	169	16.9

To estimate the average number of children baptised per family only those partnerships of the 500 families where both the marriage entry and the burial record of one or both partners could be traced were used for analysis to increase the likelihood of having included all the children belonging to the family. These facts could be traced for 143 out of the 500 families. The smaller group used here, and in several of the following analyses, is similar in fact to the whole group of 500 families in its occupational and geographical distribution. The main difference is that Shifnal town is slightly over-represented, and so consequently is the proportion of craftsmen. Sixteen children included earlier in the total baptisms were produced by the second marriage of one partner of these 143 marriages, and are not included in this calculation of children per family. Second marriages, particularly of women, are difficult to trace and need further investigation.

This procedure does not, of course, yield an estimate of fertility, since working from the baptism register as a base means that childless marriages are inevitably excluded and, furthermore, only those children surviving to be baptised can be included. The figure of an average of 4.2 children per family given in Table 7 below is simply the average number of baptised children attributed to these most fully documented families; but the relative averages for the different groups still have an interest. Labourers had the least children and colliers the most, though the numbers of colliers are very small as a basis for generalisation.

The higher number of children in farmers' families and the lower number in labourers' families may reflect the lower age at marriage of farmers and the higher age of labourers, but the small group of colliers had the highest age at marriage and yet the highest number of children. Again the higher number of farmers' children and the lower number of labourers' relates positively to the age expectancy at marriage (see Table 10 below) which in turn is greater for farmers than for labourers, yet the colliers with the lowest life expectancy had the greater number of children.

As stated above, this is a study of the experience of a particular group of people rather than an attempt to estimate fertility, but the figures can be refined somewhat by subtracting the children of those partnerships which were terminated by the death of either partner before the woman was forty-five. In most cases the age of the woman has to be guessed from the date of marriage. The percentages of the 143 marriages cut short by death in this way are of interest — 19.2 per cent for farmers, 24.1 per cent for craftsmen, 28.6 per cent for labourers and 21.4 per cent for colliers. When the children of these marriages are deducted, the average numbers of children per marriage are 4.5 for farmers, 4.9 for craftsmen, 3.7 for labourers, 5.9 for colliers and an overall average of 4.6.

Despite this high average number of baptised children, these 143 families had an average of only three children surviving to adulthood or, more strictly in the case of older children, until they passed beyond the observation of the register. At all ages of childhood more boys died than girls;

labourers lost more children than other groups, and farmers lost least. Overall, 60 per cent of all these families experienced the death of at least one of their children (in addition to any dying before baptism). In more detail: 46 per cent of farmers lost at least one child, as against 55 per cent of craftsmen, 60 per cent of labourers, and 64 per cent of colliers.

An estimate of the average interval between baptisms is possible for these 143 marriages, and results in an average of 33.8 months between baptisms, with labourers having the longest intervals, and colliers the shortest. But it must again be remembered that babies still-born or dying before baptism are not recorded, and the longer intervals recorded for labourers might conceal some of these babies. The factor that has been found most to determine the length of birth interval is the number of months for which a child was breastfed. At present nothing is known about local practice in the past, nor is it known whether there were any differences by occupation, for example whether colliers' babies were breastfed for a shorter period of time.

An attempt was made to estimate the likely length of a marriage partnership. Not all the marriages judged to be terminated for the purpose of child-bearing could be used for this purpose, since in cases when the death of one of the partners is recorded it cannot always be assumed that the death of the partner traced is necessarily the first to die. For example, the burial entry of some wives described them as widows when the husband's death had not been recorded earlier. Of the 500 marriages 133 could be used for this purpose, and from these an average length of marriage partnership of twenty-three years were derived. The farmers had the longest partnerships and colliers the shortest, though the differences between the social groups were not great.

The length of the child-bearing period of these marriages was investigated. Of the 143 most fully documented partnerships 86 had more than one child, and their marriages lasted at least twenty years, so that the possible stage of child-bearing was not prematurely ended by the death of one of the partners. This is a small sample again, but gives an average span from marriage to the baptism of the last recorded child of 12.9 years. The shortest span was that of labourers, with 12.3 years, and the longest that of farmers with 14.0 years.

It is possible to make only a rough guess at the average length of life of the individuals recorded as parents 1700-25, as it was possible to find baptism and burial dates for only sixty-nine of the one thousand partners. These were sixty men and nine women, again probably reflecting the greater likelihood of women marrying outside their own parish. This sample is very small but gives an average age at death for this group of people, who by definition had already survived to the age of marriage, of fifty-two years. The numbers are too small to show clear cut distinctions between social groups, but do indicate that the women of all groups were likely to live longer than men.

Table 7. Number of children per family

Occupation/ status	Distribution of family sizes										Average numbers		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total	Total	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	families	of children	
Farmers	7.7	7.7	23.1	15.4	11.5	7.7	15.4	7.7	—	—	26	120	4.6
Craftsmen	14.5	7.2	10.9	18.2	18.2	5.4	10.9	10.9	3.7	—	54	250	4.6
Labourers	7.9	23.8	19.0	21.4	16.6	2.4	9.5	—	—	—	42	147	3.5
Colliers	—	—	14.3	35.7	7.1	14.3	14.3	—	7.1	7.1	14	76	5.4
Others	28.6	28.6	28.6	—	14.3	—	—	—	—	—	7	17	2.4
All	10.4	12.5	16.6	19.4	15.3	5.5	11.1	5.1	2.8	0.7	143	610	4.2

Table 8. Child deaths

Occupation/ status	Children dying aged										Total of children dying			
	Under 1		1-4		5-9		10-14		15-19		20-24		Total	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	no.	%	no.	%
Farmers	4	2	4	1	4	—	2	—	14	3	17	14.2	17	14.2
Craftsmen	12	10	15	4	7	4	6	4	40	22	62	24.8	62	24.8
Labourers	11	7	7	6	4	4	3	1	25	18	43	29.3	43	29.3
Colliers	1	1	2	4	4	2	1	2	8	9	17	22.4	17	22.4
Others	—	1	1	1	—	—	—	—	1	2	3	17.6	3	17.6
All	28	21	29	16	19	10	12	7	88	54	142	23.3	142	23.3

Table 9. Intervals between baptisms

Occupation/ status	Interval in months										Average	
	Under 12		12-23		24-35		36-47		48+		in months	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Farmers	—	—	18	20.2	42	47.2	16	18.0	13	14.6	14.6	32.4
Craftsmen	2	1.1	36	19.4	91	48.9	37	19.9	20	10.8	10.8	33.0
Labourers	—	—	21	19.1	43	39.1	26	23.6	20	18.2	18.2	37.7
Colliers	—	—	14	23.7	34	57.6	5	8.5	6	10.2	10.2	30.9
Others	—	—	1	14.3	3	42.9	1	14.3	2	28.6	28.6	37.3
All	2	0.4	90	19.9	213	47.2	85	15.5	61	13.5	13.5	33.8

The question of age expectancy was also approached in another, more indirect way, though again only a rough estimate can be reached. The marriage and burial dates are traceable for a larger number of individuals — 209 of the 1,000 parents, 115 men and ninety-four women. This method gives an average of twenty-nine years of life after marriage for individuals (see Table 10), who by the nature of the enquiry had already survived to the stage of marriage. For all groups except colliers (very small numbers) the average remaining span of life after marriage was higher for women. Colliers and labourers seem to have had the lowest age expectancy and farmers' wives the highest.

These results could be affected by variation in the rates of migration of different social groups in that the greater the propensity to move, the more likely it is that only the burials of those who died young were recorded in the parish. Thus colliers were perhaps the most mobile rather than the most shortlived group. This point can be checked by examining the proportion of traceable deaths since this provides some indication of mobility. In about 40 per cent of the 500 marriages the death of both partners is traceable, and this proportion is similar for all social groups. In about 25 per cent of the marriages the death of neither partner is traceable, and as this proportion is lowest for colliers (at 25 per cent), they do not seem to have been an especially mobile group. They may well, therefore, have experienced higher mortality.

Table 10. Years lived after marriage

Occupation/ status	Numbers			Average years lived			Implied age reached ¹		
	M	F	Both	M	F	Both	M	F	Both
Farmers	20	17	37	25.7	37.3	31.1	—	—	54.4
Craftsmen	40	39	79	29.1	31.6	30.4	54.3	54.5	54.9
Labourers	39	24	63	25.2	30.8	27.4	50.5	55.2	52.5
Colliers	9	10	19	24.1	23.8	23.9	49.1	—	50.1
Others	7	4	11	25.1	36.2	29.2	—	—	—
All	115	94	209	26.6	31.8	28.9	51.8	56.0	53.8

1. Average years lived plus average age at marriage (Table 5).

A further perspective on the impact of death on these families can be gained from Table 11, which shows that half of the 143 most fully documented families were broken by the death of one or both parents while some of the children were under the age of sixteen. Particularly high proportions of labourers' and colliers' families were broken in this way.

Table 11. Families affected by the death of one or both parents while their children under 16

Occupation/ status	Families affected by death		Total families
	no.	%	
Farmers	11	42.3	26
Craftsmen	22	40.8	54
Labourers	25	59.5	42
Colliers	11	78.6	14
Others	3	42.8	7
All	72	50.3	143

Table 12 presents this analysis from the point of view of the children involved, and shows that around 40 per cent of the children of the 143 families who survived to the age of sixteen had lost a parent by that age. Again there were marked differences in the experience of each social group.

Table 12. Children affected by the death of a parent

Occupation/ status	Children under 16 at death of parent		Total surviving children
	no.	%	
Farmers	30	29.7	101
Craftsmen	58	28.6	203
Labourers	50	45.0	111
Colliers	34	57.6	59
Others	8		10
All	180	37.2	484

It is hoped that further analysis of the registers will yield information on groups which are difficult to trace, such as the later life experience of the mothers of illegitimate children, partners of second marriages and partners in childless marriages. However, the figures presented in the tables above have shown that the demographic experience of individuals in the early eighteenth century, at least in this part of Shropshire, varied greatly according to their position in society.

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NOTES

1. W. G. Hoskins, **Local History in England**, 1972, p. 169.
2. S. Sogner, 'Aspects of the demographic situation in seventeen parishes in Shropshire 1711-60. An exercise based on parish registers', **Population Studies**, 1964, p. 133.