

HOW ACCURATE IS THE METHLEY BAPTISMAL REGISTRATION?

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The chief concern of the present writer has been to investigate the relationship between industrialisation and population change. An attempt has already been made to examine the demographic implications of industrialisation for a village on the fringe of an industrial town in the old West Riding of Yorkshire. The demographic data for this were derived from a family reconstitution exercise on the parish registers. The extent to which the registers of the parish accurately recorded vital events was, therefore, crucial. This paper provides some material for a discussion of the deficiencies in coverage of the parish registers, by taking, as a case study, baptismal registration in the same parish (Methley) during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when, it has been argued, English parochial registration was at its worst.²

The accuracy of parish registration has been assessed in the following ways. First of all, to measure the completeness of the baptism coverage, the method developed by P. E. Razzell, and later refined by the Cambridge Group, has been applied.³ This involves checking the completeness of baptism coverage for people surviving to the census of 1851, by comparing the entries in the enumerators' books of the census, which provide information on the name, age and birthplace of an individual in the parish, with those in the baptism registers. The assumption that the statements of name, age, and birthplace as seen in the 1851 census would themselves be perfect, may be checked to some extent by comparing them with those of the people who survived to be recorded in the 1861 census.

As shown below (Table 1), of a total of 816 Methley residents identified in both the 1851 and 1861 censuses, 565 stated in 1851 that Methley was their birthplace.⁴ Some 45 of these (8.0 per cent), however, claimed in the 1861 census to have been born elsewhere, whereas 6.8 per cent of the people (17 out of 251) who stated other parishes as their birthplace in 1851 named Methley as their birthplace ten years later. For the same 816 people, 791 (96.7 per cent) may be

considered as more or less consistent in their age statements; the disagreement in stated age between the two censuses being within three years, as Table 2 shows. Although the 1851 census has been regarded as much more complete than previous ones,⁵ the above test of consistency in birthplace and age statements in the census indicates that it cannot be assumed to be perfectly accurate, especially in the birthplace statements, and that we should, therefore, be careful in using the information in the census to assess parish register reliability.

Cross-comparison of the census of 1851 with baptism registers reveals the following facts. Column 1 in Table 3 gives the number of people, divided into age groups according to their stated age in the 1851 census, who claimed Methley as their birthplace. As is shown in column II, as many as 87.8 per cent (947 out of 1078) of those who stated in 1851 that Methley was their birthplace have been found in the Methley baptism registers. Of 131 people who named Methley as their birthplace but who were not recorded in the baptism registers of Methley, thirty-seven have been found baptised in the eleven other parishes around Methley (shown in Table 4); the percentage of those who might have failed to register their baptisms is thus reduced from 12.2 to 8.7. In fact this overall figure of 91.3 per cent might be improved upon were the registers of other neighbouring parishes to be checked.

It is interesting to note that for the people born between 1782 and 1831 (who correspond to the 20-69 age groups in Table 3, the era with which we are primarily concerned), the proportion of those whose baptisms are not recorded in the registers is as low as 5.4 per cent, whilst the figures for the cohorts (1762-81) and (1832-51) are 5.9 and 10.5 per cent respectively. If we turn to other aspects of the changing adequacy of registration, especially the discrepancies in age between the census statements and the registers for those whose baptisms are found in the latter, we also find confirmation that the degree of deficiency in the baptism registration of this parish is much lower than that observed for other parishes.⁶ Furthermore there seems to be no sign of an increasing delay in baptising between 1780 and 1829; the percentage of the age agreement up to and including one year and eleven months between the census statements and baptism dates in registers being 92.0 (301 in 327) for 1780-1829, whereas for 1760-79, and 1830-51, the figures are 80.0 (12 in 15), and 97.0 (623 in 642) respectively (Table 5).

The interval between the date of birth and baptism, calculated from the Methley registers that record both, also suggests that the average interval between the two during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was generally fairly short by English standards (Table 6).⁷ Half the children had been baptised within a month or so and three-quarters within fifty days. It is also likely that behaviour in respect to the registration of baptisms during the period was more consistent than that seen in other parishes, as semi-interquartile ranges testify. Rather more important is the fact that the figures both for the interval and the range imply general improvement in registration in this parish from the 1790s. In general, then, it can be said that the accuracy of parish registration, on which the statistical data of the previous paper heavily depended,⁸ is fairly high so far as the coverage of baptisms is concerned. There also seems to be no reason to think that the registration carried out by the parish authorities noticeably deteriorated during the period under review.

Lastly, let us now look at Table 7 which compares the interval between the date of birth and baptism for those children who are found to have died before the age of one year with that for those who survived. The purpose is to check whether there is any association between early baptism and early death.⁹ If a tendency is found for the baptisms of those who died early to have taken place early, it would suggest that the parents tended to secure the early baptisms of those of their offspring who looked weak and seemed likely to die. The figures in Table 7 show the interval for those dying before the age of one year to be shorter than that for those who survived. This would have the effect of further reducing the birth/baptism shortfall and is yet further evidence to support the proposition that the registration of baptism in this parish may be regarded as an efficient form of birth registration.

Table 1. Consistency in stating birthplace

Birthplace 1851	Birthplace 1861		Total
	Methley	Other	
Methley	520	45	565
Other	17	234(29)*	251
Total	537	279	816

Sources: PRO Enumerators' Books, Methley, 1851, 1861. HO 107/2329, RG 9/3432 [hereafter given as Enum.Bks Methley]

*Number of persons stating different place in the two censuses.

Table 2. Consistency in stating age

(Born in Methley in 1851)				
Age disagreements (in years)				
	Under 2	2 – 3	4 – 5	6 +
	515	41	5	5
	91.2%	7.3%	0.9%	0.9%
(Born elsewhere in 1851)				
Age disagreements				
	Under 2	2 – 3	4 – 5	6 +
	193	42	8	3
	78.5%	17.1%	3.3%	1.2%

Sources: Enum. Bks. Methley.

Table 3. Entries in the baptismal registers and the census enumerators' books compared

Age	I	II	III	IV
0-1	67	56	1	10
2-4	185	160	1	24
5-9	189	167	2	20
10-14	153	143		10
15-19	100	89	2	9
20-24	76	71	4	1
25-29	61	54	2	5
30-34	40	36	4	
35-39	49	42	2	5
40-44	43	37	4	2
45-49	34	30	3	1
50-54	19	17	1	1
55-59	18	13	4	1
60-64	12	8	2	2
65-69	15	12	1	2
70-74	8	7	1	
75-79	3	2	1	
80-84	5	2	2	1
85-89	1	1		
Total	1078	947	37	94(8.7%)

Sources: Enum. Bks Methley.

G. D. Lumb (ed.), *The Registers of the Parish Church of Methley in the County of York, from 1560 to 1812* (Thoresby Soc. 1903). The original parish registers of Methley (now in Leeds City Library) 1813 to 1851 [hereafter given as Methley Registers].

* I: Methley-born population in 1851, excluding 91 married or widowed women whose maiden names are unknown, and two infants buried before baptism.

II: found in the Methley registers.

III: found in the registers of neighbouring parishes.

IV: not found in any registers.

Table 4. Methley residents in 1851 whose baptisms traced in the registers of other parishes

Parish	No. of baptisms
Leeds township	11
Armley	1
Hunslet	3
Wortley	1
Rothwell	12
Garforth	2
Kippax	2
Ledsham	2
Brotherton	1
Normanton	1
Swillington	1
Total	37

Table 5. Discrepancies in age between census and parish registers

Cohort	Years							Total
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1760-9	1 (25.0)*	2 (50.0)	1 (25.0)					4
1770-9	9 (72.7)		1 (9.0)	1 (9.0)				11
1780-9	13 (68.4)	2 (10.5)	3 (15.8)				1 (5.3)	19
1790-9	25 (75.8)	3 (9.1)	2 (6.1)	1 (3.0)		2 (6.1)		33
1800-9	54 (79.4)	10 (14.7)	2 (2.9)	1 (1.5)	1 (1.5)			68
1810-9	68 (78.2)	10 (11.5)	5 (5.7)	1 (1.1)	2 (2.3)	1 (1.1)		87
1820-9	111 (92.5)	5 (4.2)		2 (1.7)	1 (0.8)	1 (0.8)		120
1830-9	196 (89.9)	17 (7.8)	2 (0.9)	1 (0.5)	2 (0.9)			218
1840-9	340 (92.9)	13 (3.6)	5 (1.4)	5 (1.4)	2 (0.5)		1 (0.3)	366
1850-1	51 (87.9)	6 (10.3)		1 (1.7)				58
Total	868 (88.2)	68 (6.9)	21 (2.1)	13 (1.3)	8 (0.8)	4 (0.4)	2 (0.2)	984

Sources: Enum. Bks Methley Registers

*percentages in brackets.

Table 6. Birth-baptism interval data from the Methley registers recording date of birth

Period	No. of baptisms	% of incomplete entries	Interval in days by which stated percentage had been baptised			Semi-interquartile range
			25%	50%	75%	
1790-9	447	3.6	25	35	52	13
1800-9	603	0.3	25	31	48	11
1810-9	573	2.4	23	29	43	10
1820-9	563	9.0	23	28	41	9
1790-1809	1050	1.7	25	33	49	12
*1790s-1800s	—	1.5	18	34	95	38

Sources: Methley Registers:

*mean of the data for twenty-seven parishes derived from R. S. Schofield and B. M. Berry, 'Age at Baptism in Pre-industrial England', *Population Studies* 25,1971, no 3. p.457.

Table 7. Birth-baptism interval data from Methley registers (1790-1850)

	No. of baptisms	Interval in days by which stated percentage had been baptised			Semi-interquartile range
		25%	50%	75%	
Children who died before the age of one year	153	3	21	34	15
Others	2148	25	31	48	11

Sources: Methley Registers.

Notes

1. My thanks are due to Professor M. Drake for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
2. See for example, J. T. Krause, 'The changing adequacy of English registration, 1690-1837' in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (eds), **Population in history**, 1965, p.386.
3. P. E. Razzell, 'The evaluation of baptism as a form of birth registration through cross-matching census and parish register data', **Population Studies**, vol.XXVI, 1972, no.1, pp.123-34. E. A. Wrigley, 'Baptism coverage in early nineteenth-century England: The Colyton area', **Population Studies** vol.XXIX, 1975, no.2, pp. 303-13.
4. Calculated from PRO, Enumerators' books, Methley, 1851 and 1861, HO 107/2329, RG 9/3432.
5. See for example, P. M. Tillot, 'Sources of inaccuracy in the 1851 and 1861 censuses', in E. A. Wrigley (ed.), **Nineteenth-century society: essays in the use of quantitative method for the study of social data**, 1972, p.83.
6. For discrepancies in age between census statement and baptism date in registers for 47 parishes, see Razzell, p.126.
7. cf R. S. Schofield and B. M. Berry, 'Age at baptism in pre-industrial England', **Population Studies**, vol.XXV, no.3, 1971, p.435. As for the exceptionally short intervals between the date of birth and baptism, which have been found in the registers of north Shropshire parishes, see R. E. Jones, 'Infant mortality in rural north Shropshire, 1561-1810', **Population Studies**, vol.XXX, no.2, 1976, p.315.
8. cf. Minoru Yasumoto, 'Industrialisation and demographic change in a Yorkshire parish', **Local Population Studies** no. 27, Autumn, 1981, pp.12-14.
9. For further details regarding the implications for birth/baptism short-fall of the association between early baptism and early death in registers, see E. A. Wrigley, 'Births and baptisms; the use of Anglican baptism registers as a source of information about the numbers of births in England before the beginning of civil registration', **Population Studies**, vol.XXXI, no.2, 1977, pp.283, 296.