

THE REPOPULATION OF THE COUNTRYSIDE IN DEVON AND CORNWALL

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Population changes in Devon and Cornwall since the start of the nineteenth century can easily be summarised. In both counties population increased until the 1861 census, but less rapidly in Devon and, after 1831, less rapidly in Cornwall than in England and Wales as a whole. As a result the south-west peninsula included a declining percentage of total population (see figure 1). After 1861 the percentage decline continued, reaching a nadir for both counties in 1961. However, whereas Devon was increasing constantly in absolute terms, Cornwall declined absolutely as well as relatively. A slight recovery after 1931 was insufficient to alter the pattern of relative decline compared with England and Wales as a whole.

Figure 1a Size of population, Devon and Cornwall 1801-1981

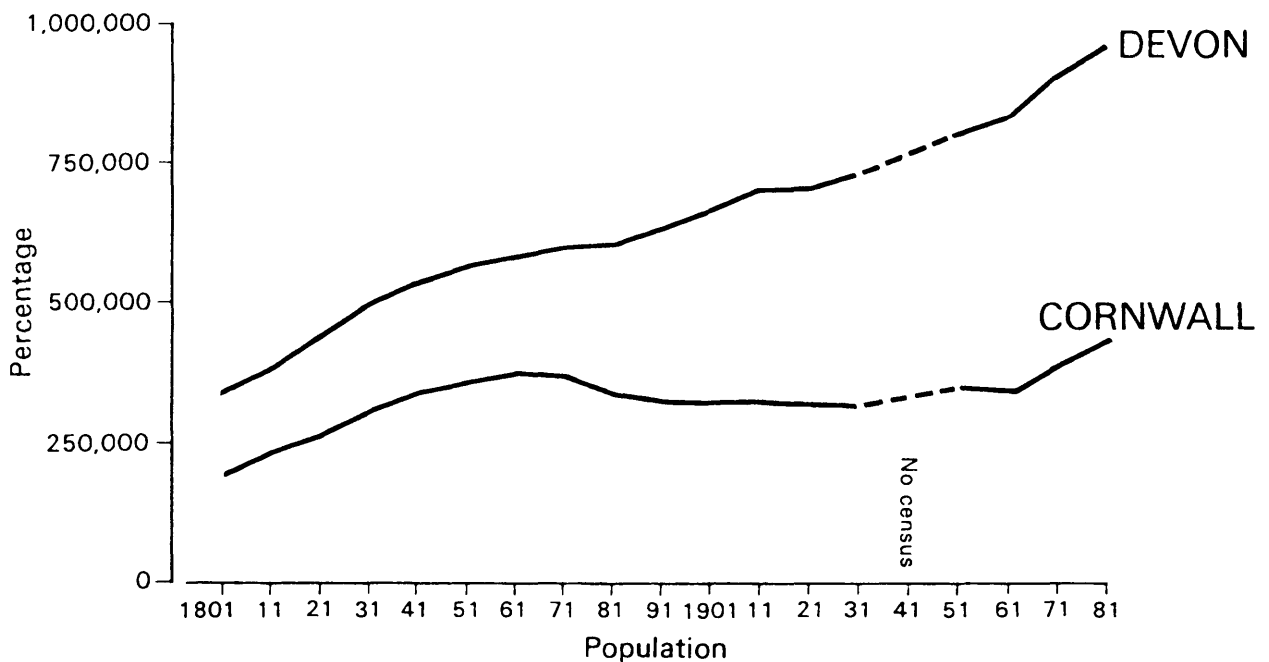
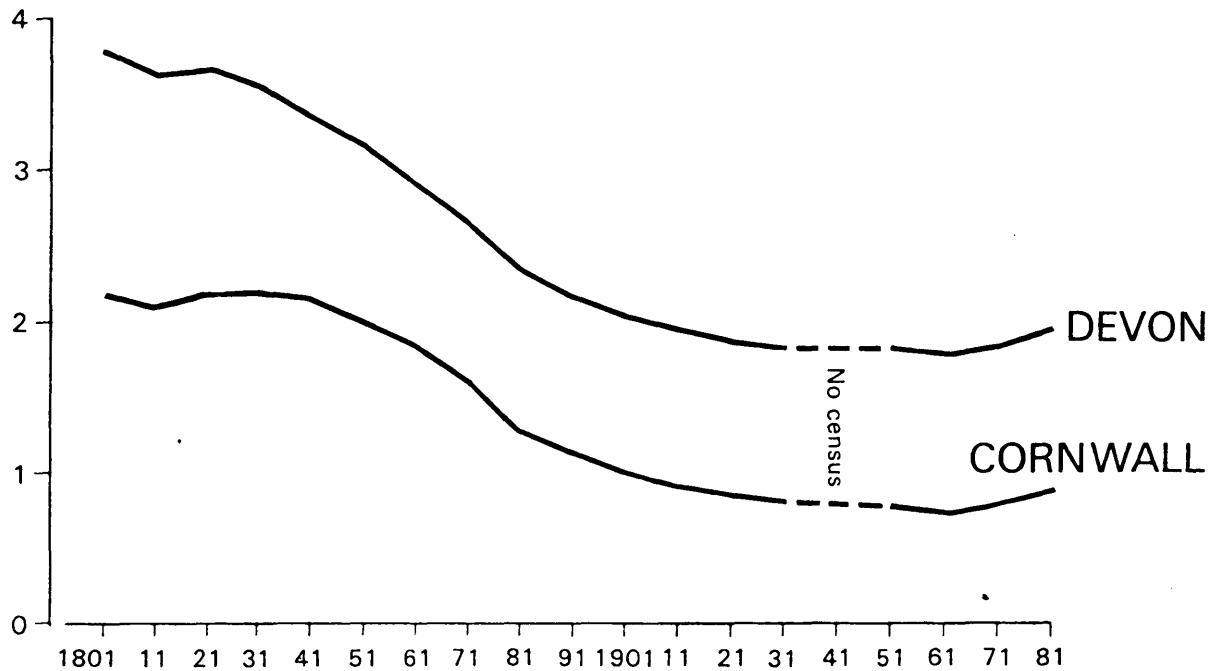






Figure 1b Population of Devon and Cornwall as a percentage of total population of England and Wales



Within this overall pattern, both counties witnessed an increasing concentration of population, with progressive depopulation of the more rural areas. Between 1841, when the countryside was at its zenith, and 1961, Devon's total population grew by some 290,000, to a total of about 823,000, but the more urban areas grew by over 370,000, the difference being accounted for by a loss of over 80,000 from the villages. In Cornwall over the same period the net increase was small, only about 1,000 to a total of some 343,000. But again there was a population shift, some 55,000 people swelling the urban numbers with a similar loss from the declining areas, though in Cornwall's case these included losses from urban, former mining, areas. Figure 2 shows in black the areas which retained their peak nineteenth century population throughout the twentieth century to 1961. (This map may slightly exaggerate the geographic spread; for most of the nineteenth century rural towns and their hinterlands were not recorded separately, and it is very possible that towns which increased may have had depopulating hinterlands). All other areas (582 parishes out of a total of 623 separately reported towns and parishes in the 1981 census) were declining at the start of the twentieth century.¹

As figure 3 shows, most of these declining parishes had been in their heyday in 1841 (though some bias in the figures is possible, because the census that year was taken in June instead of the usual spring date, coinciding with summer fairs which the census-takers speculated might have resulted in extra numbers returning to their old homes for the festivities).² After 1841 a precipitate decline set in.

Figure 2 Areas of growth and decline

-  At or above 19th Century population peak throughout 1901-1961
-  Nadir 1901-1931. 19th Century peak regained by 1961
-  Nadir 1901-1951. Below 19th Century peak in 1961
-  Still declining in 1961

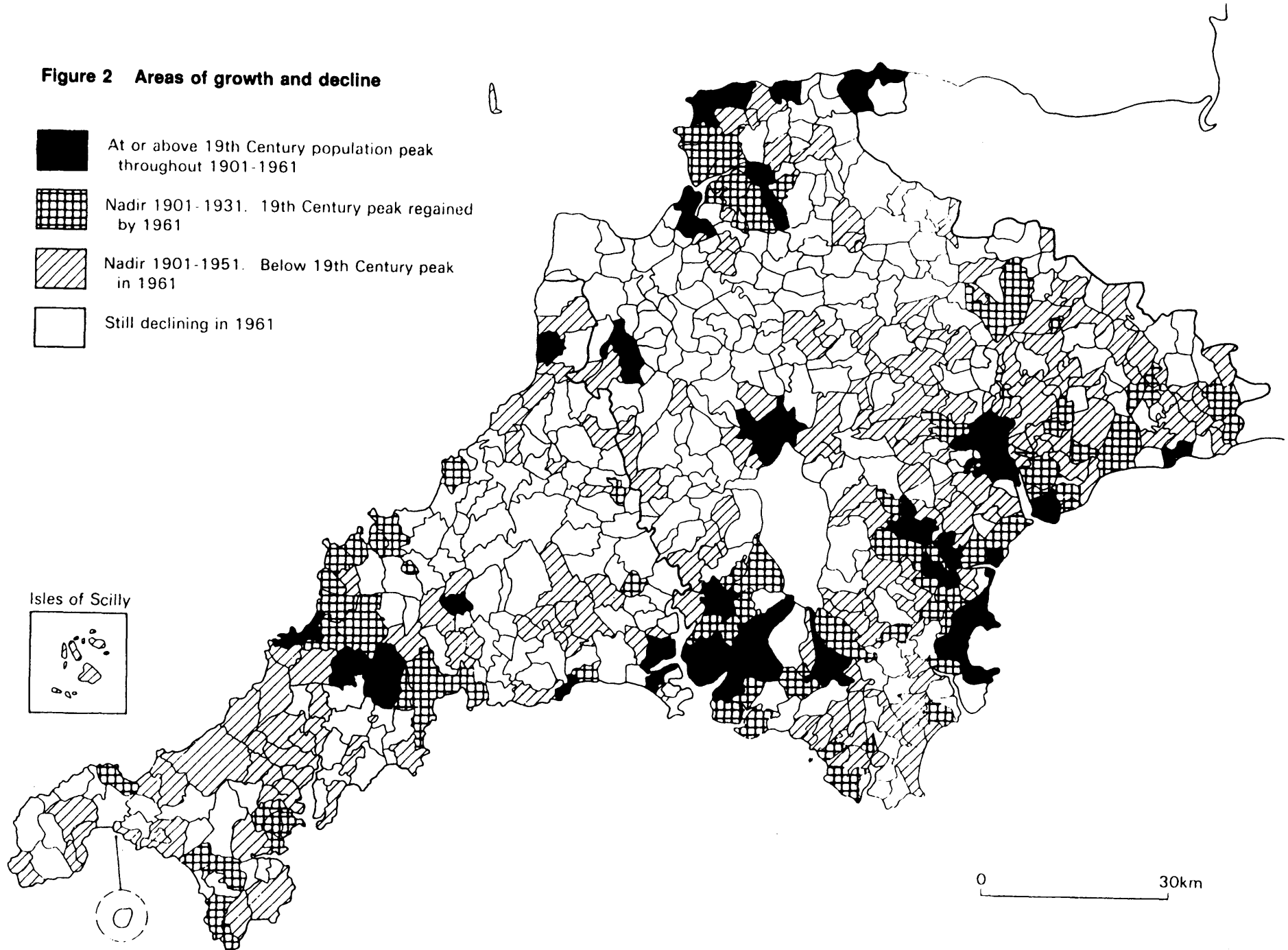
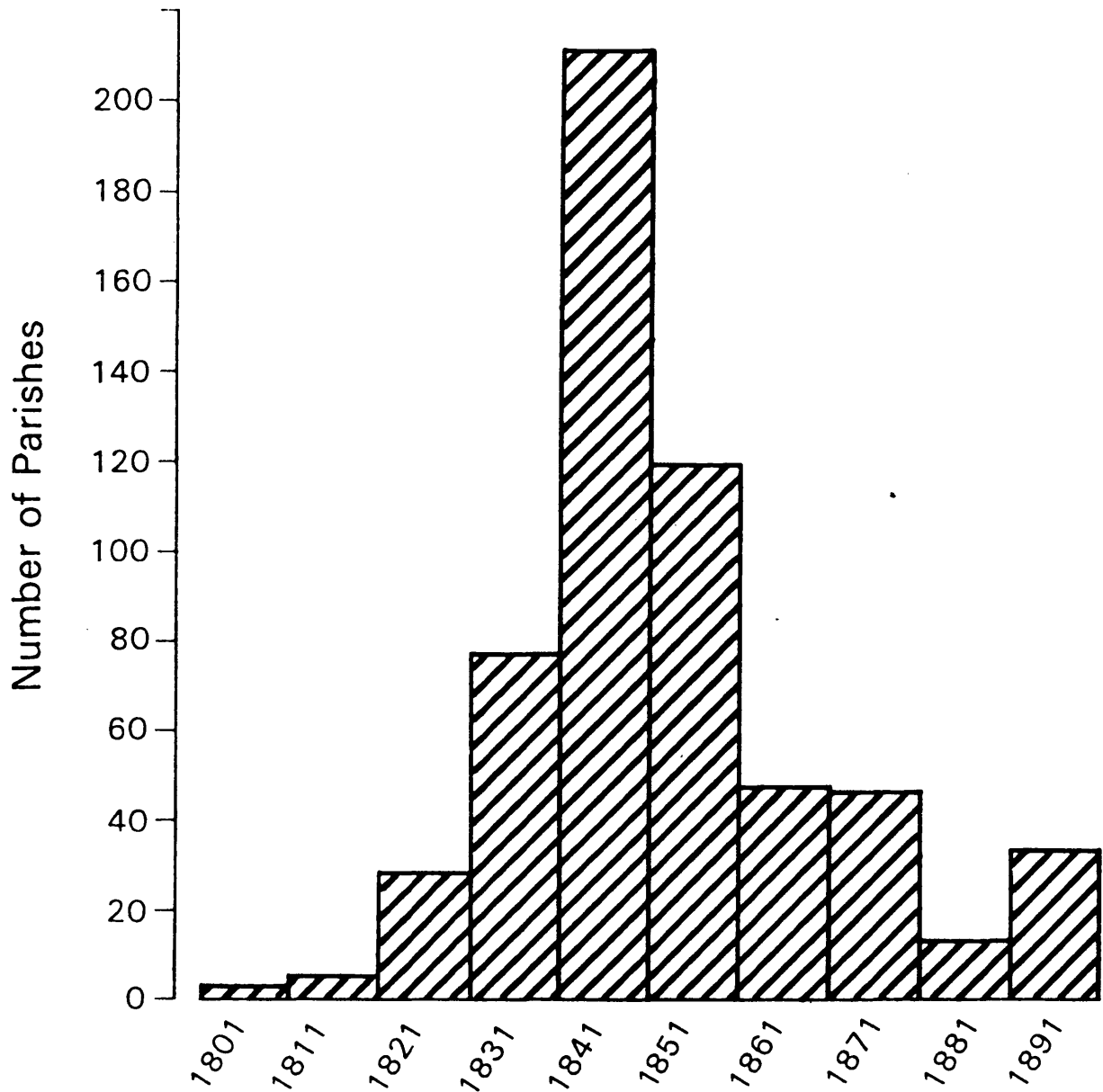


Figure 3 Date of maximum population in 582 parishes declining in the 20th century



The census takers of the mid-nineteenth century sought to account for the evident redistribution of the population. There were certain very localised occurrences – a parish near Devonport, part of which later developed into Torpoint, showed a marked increase in 1821 which was ascribed to the ‘residence of many naval officers in Antony Parish since the peace’.³ Several seaside parishes in both counties began to benefit from the Regency predilection for sea-bathing: Bude and Sidmouth were among towns developing as ‘watering places’.⁴ Mining brought people to certain areas of Cornwall early in the nineteenth century, while in Devon shipbuilding in Teignmouth and railway workshops in Newton Abbot were by 1861 promoting prosperity in these areas of increasing urbanization.⁵

But much more attention was focussed on the far more numerous areas of decline. Some of the explanations were transient: the failure of the pilchard catch which was held to account for population loss in Cornish fishing villages in the 1820s, or the cholera epidemic of the 1840s.⁶ The coming of the railway is noted ambiguously - its arrival was hailed as a means of expediting emigration, but its non-arrival was equally noted as a deprivation from which people removed themselves.⁷

Industrial decline played a big part, especially in Cornwall. The exhaustion of many Cornish mines propelled a considerable emigration. Many areas were in their prime during the same period that saw the agricultural heyday, St Agnes, Breage and Crowan for instance all losing a third to almost two-thirds of their populations between 1841 and 1961; others peaked two or three decades later, but the losses were just as dramatic in such places as Calstock (7,090 to 3,884), St Ives (2,952 down to 1,201) and St Just-in-Penwith (9,290 down to 3,642).⁸ In Devon, too, mines were closing, but the principal industrial decline pinpointed in the censuses was in the wool trade. Ashburton, Buckfastleigh and South Molton, Harberton, Ermington, Harford and the Chagford area were all reporting the closure of wool factories, the discontinuance of serge weaving, and 'the removal of wool combers'.⁹

For the majority of rural parishes though, the explanations centre on agriculture. In area after area 'the introduction of the system of large farms', the 'junction of small farms', and the employment of machinery for agricultural purposes is seen as the clue to rural depopulation, coupled with low wages and a 'lessening of demand for agricultural workers'. The 'removal of families', 'entry of young men into the Navy' and 'demolition of cottages' variously cited as other explanations of population loss are really consequences of these other changes.¹⁰

The checked areas of figure 2 show parishes which ceased to decline at some stage between 1901 and 1931, and by 1961 had regained their nineteenth century level of population. As figure 4 reveals, most of these areas of recouped growth are in or adjacent to long-standing urban areas, or are situated along the coast where tourism and retirement migration attracted development. Holidays on the Devon and Cornish coasts have, as the references in nineteenth century censuses to sea-bathing and watering-places bear witness, a long history, receiving added impetus from the coming of the railway. Retirement migration, though not, in the early twentieth century, on the scale it was to reach after the Second World War, appears to have been significant. Both in Devon and Cornwall the percentage of those of pensionable age has throughout the twentieth century been well above the national average. Between 1901 and 1931, the national (England and Wales) percentage of pensioners rose from 6.1 to 9.6; in Devon from 9.2 to 12.7 per cent, and in Cornwall from 9.5 to 13.7 per cent. In the expanding seaside resorts however, the increase has been much faster than for each county as a whole, and this is quite evident in a sample of resorts which at the start of the century had declined from their nineteenth century peak, but by 1961 had recouped their earlier losses. (Contemporary statistics are not available for individual parishes below urban district level). The percentage of elderly in Salcombe, for instance, went from 10.9 in 1901 to

Figure 4 Percentage decline from 19th century peak to 1961

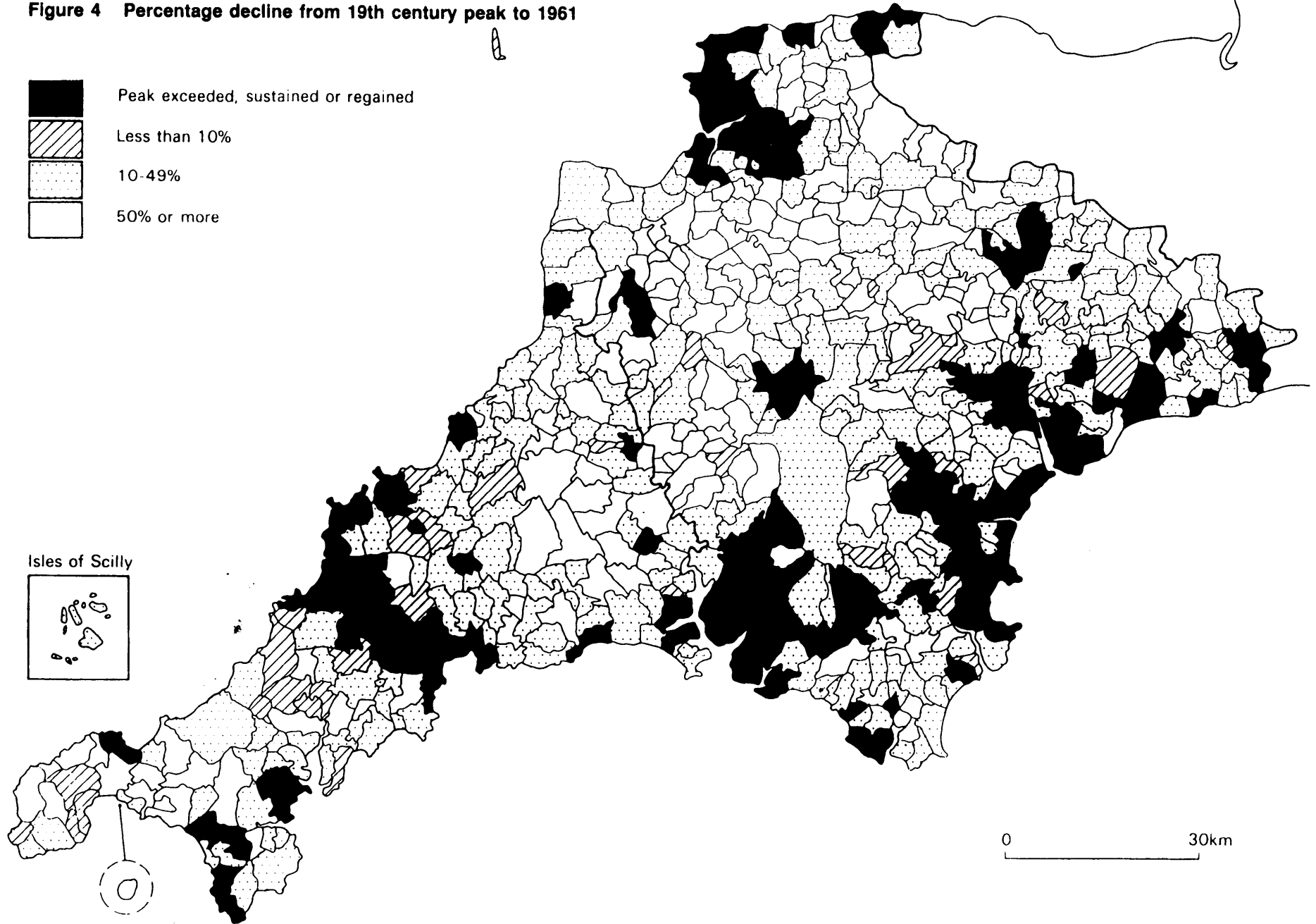
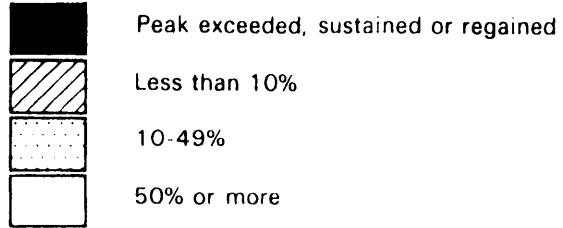





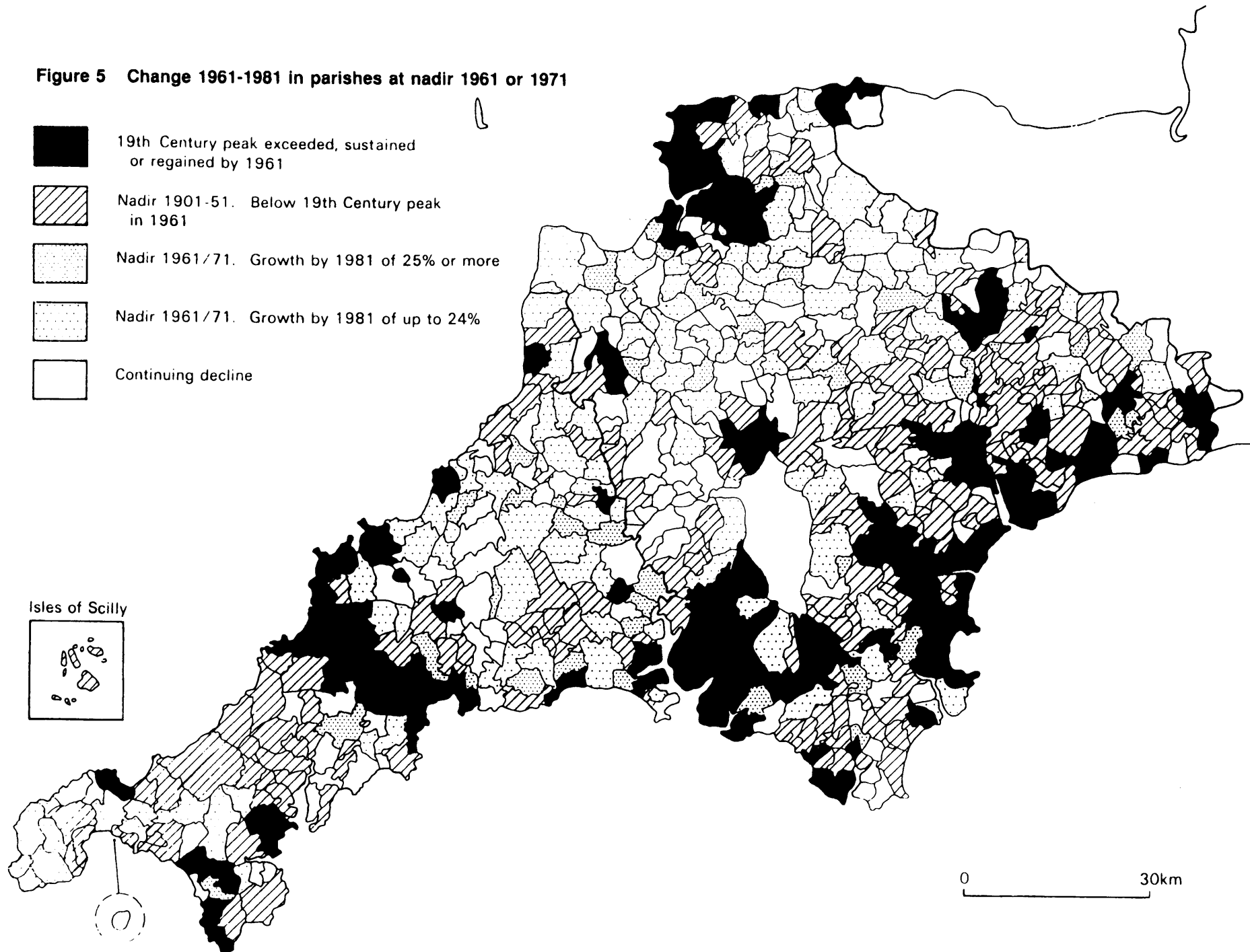


Figure 5 Change 1961-1981 in parishes at nadir 1961 or 1971

-  19th Century peak exceeded, sustained or regained by 1961
-  Nadir 1901-51. Below 19th Century peak in 1961
-  Nadir 1961/71. Growth by 1981 of 25% or more
-  Nadir 1961/71. Growth by 1981 of up to 24%
-  Continuing decline



16.1 in 1931. Dawlish rose from 10.4 to 17.5, Budleigh Salterton from 13.6 to 18.2, and Sidmouth from 11.8 to 17.1 per cent. Towns in Cornwall with a similar history of decline and recovery include Helston, where the proportion of pensioners rose from 10.8 in 1901 to 16 per cent in 1931; St Ives, where the increase was from 9.3 to 15.6, and Falmouth, 9.4 to 11.4. These percentages were to be greatly exceeded in subsequent decades – Budleigh Salterton and Sidmouth, for instance, had both reached a proportion of pensioners exceeding 36 per cent by 1961.

By 1961 the hatched areas of figure 2 showed some increase in population over their lowest point, but were below their nineteenth century level. All other areas were, at the 1961 census, showing lower numbers than at any previous twentieth century census.

The extent of the losses is indicated by figure 5. Of the 623 towns and parishes (as constituted in 1981), 180 had populations reduced by 1961 to less than half their earlier peaks, a further 219 were down by over a quarter. Both counties were concerned at these trends, which presaged urban sprawl on the coasts accompanied by serious economic problems in servicing the diminishing communities which farming and forestry would still retain in the countryside.

Devon sought to cope with the trends revealed in the 1961 census by introducing a policy of key settlements which were to be focal points for the development of land for housing and industry, and where the authorities responsible for the provision of public services were to be encouraged to concentrate their facilities such as schools, libraries or health clinics, with public transport ideally aligning itself accordingly.¹¹ Sixty-eight such settlements were designated in 1964, amended to sixty-five in the planning revision of 1970.¹² Cornwall adopted a somewhat similar policy, a hierarchy of settlements classified as A, B and C which were deemed suitable for a greater or lesser degree of development.¹³ The far more numerous parishes which had not been selected objected strongly to the policy, considering themselves abandoned.

The 1971 census showed that not only were Cornwall and Devon increasing in population, their relative share of national population was also increasing; for the first time since records began in 1801 in the case of Devon, and since 1821 in the case of Cornwall. The increase was no longer so heavily dependent on the urban areas – a trend which the 1981 census was to confirm. As figure 2 records, a wide area of the countryside had ceased to decline well before 1961, but there had been little actual increase. Between 1901 and 1961 the hatched area of figure 2 only recouped just over 4,000 people in Devon and 2,000 in Cornwall, and most of that is accounted for by four towns in Devon (Crediton, Cullompton, Ottery St Mary and Tavistock), and by three Cornish parishes, (Truro, Feock and Perranzabuloe), none of the increases being sufficient to restore nineteenth century population levels.

Between 1961 and 1981 these areas increased by 23,000 in both Devon and Cornwall, with an additional 10,000 in the erstwhile static population of the urbanised Camborne/Redruth area in Cornwall. Not only were the 23,000 in each county scattered far more widely than was the much smaller increase of

1901-1961, but a further 10,000 increase (again, the number is almost the same for each county) is recorded by 1981 in parishes which registered their lowest-ever population totals in either 1961 or 1971. The spotted parishes in figure 5 illustrate the change. Of the 129 (ninety-three Devon, thirty-six Cornish) parishes shown white, i.e. declining parishes with 1981 totals below 1961, thirty-five in Devon and eleven in Cornwall began to increase between 1971 and 1981, though not enough to compensate for the 1961-1971 loss. Thus by 1981, of the total 623 towns and parishes, only eighty-three (fifty-eight in Devon, twenty-five on Cornwall) were at their nadir, still suffering unremitting population loss.

Various hypotheses are advanced to account for these changes. The physical quality of rural life has improved enormously with the expansion of rural infrastructure since World War II. Electricity supplies and piped water are almost universal, which was not the case four decades ago. During the 1960s Housing Improvement Grants were made widely available, in part as a boost to employment in the building trades, and as a result large numbers of village properties were upgraded by the installation of hot water systems, indoor lavatories, bathrooms and improved kitchens.¹⁴ Car ownership has become widespread, and television has brought cultural amenities even to the most remote areas, so that people no longer feel isolated from the mainstream of life. Furthermore there has indubitably been a change in perspectives over the last two decades, with increasing store being set on 'green' values, on country rather than town living, and on the supposed advantages in terms of friendliness and reduced stress of smaller communities, even at the cost of some sacrifice of career ambitions.

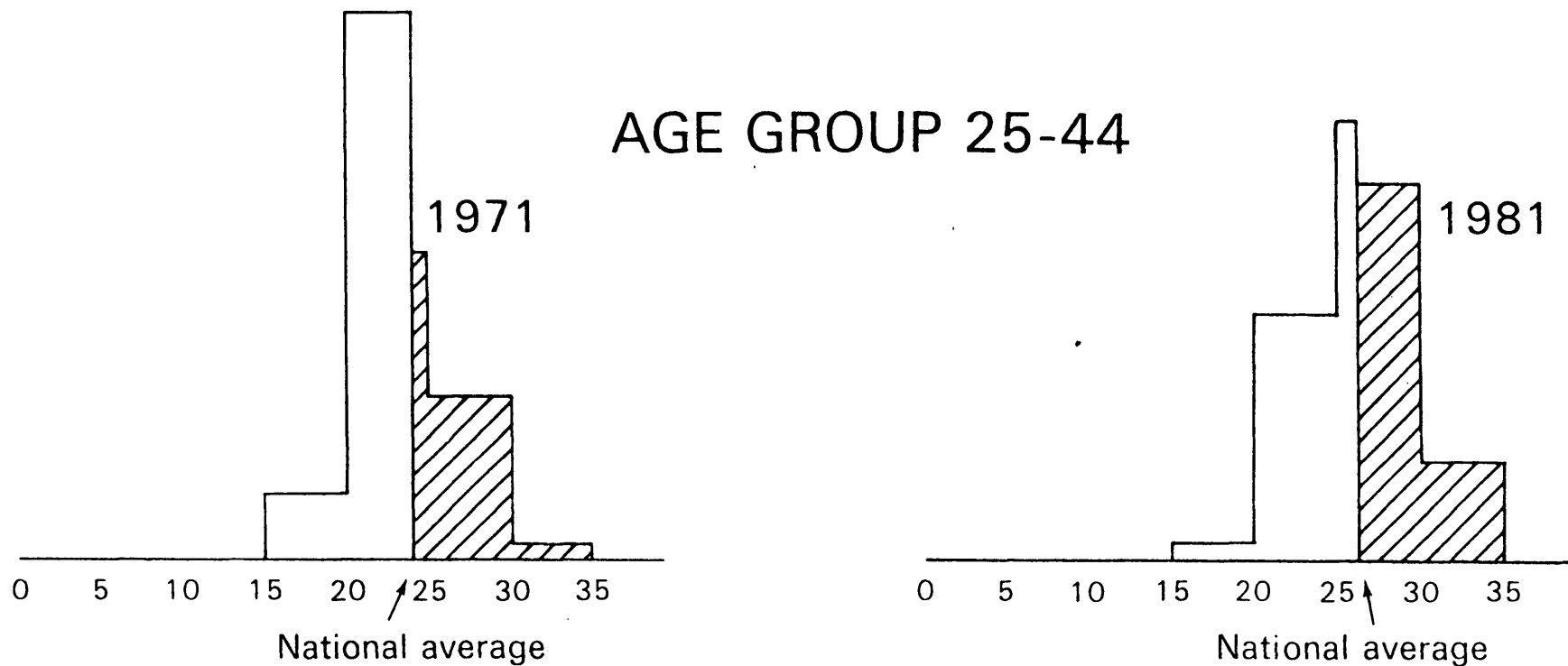
At first it was assumed that the repopulation of the countryside was probably attributable to retirement migration. The assumption is not easy to check. Statistics by age are not available for individual rural parishes prior to 1971, and though the data for 1971 and 1981 are available on computer, they are not in a comparable form, so that calculations have to be made manually and are very time-consuming. An analysis has been made of the forty-six parishes (twenty-eight in Devon, eighteen in Cornwall, shown densely dotted in figure 5) which, though in unremitting decline in 1961, turned the corner at some stage between 1961 and 1981, and had, by 1981, increased by not less than 25 per cent. Figure 6 displays the results in the form of histograms which show that although almost all these parishes (the four exceptions were all in Cornwall) had proportions of pensioners over the average for England and Wales in 1971, the subsequent direction of change has been towards, not away from, the national average. Since these were all expanding settlements, this is of course consistent with an absolute increase in the number of pensioners, but the increase was at a slower rate than in other age groups. The histogram conceals a marked difference between Devon and Cornwall; in Devon the number of parishes with an above-average proportion of pensioners was cut from the total twenty-eight to twelve, whereas in Cornwall the number fell only marginally from fourteen to twelve, and in many of these and other parishes the proportion of pensioners increased. On this evidence, the hypothesis that retirement migration may be of primary significance for the repopulation of rural areas may be true for Cornwall, but not for Devon.

Figure Parish profiles of 46 parishes declining to 1961 which increased by at least 25 per cent between 1961-81

PENSIONERS



AGE GROUP 25-44



The proportion of younger working-age people, those from twenty-five to forty-four, was also investigated. In 1971 only four of the forty-six parishes had as high a proportion in this age group as the average for England/Wales. Again the direction of change was towards the national configuration, with twenty-three parishes showing proportions at or above the national figure by 1981.

Since these parishes are by definition those with a long history of population decline, they are among the smaller settlements, and the actual numbers represented by these proportions are not large. Only four of the Devon and five of the Cornwall settlements exceeded 500 people in 1961. While this illustrates the fact that small rural communities are now attracting or retaining population, it would be wrong to describe these trends as counter-urbanization. The areas where historically population has either grown, been sustained or recouped, i.e. those black or checked in figure 2, areas which accounted for some 97 per cent of the population growth between 1901 and 1961, still accounted for over 65 per cent of that between 1961 and 1981. The distribution of the residual increase over the remaining, predominantly rural, areas appears not to correlate with the settlement patterns proposed by both county councils during the 1960s. Of the sixty-five key settlements designated in Devon's 1970 planning Review, thirty-seven had already passed their lowest recorded ebb by 1961. Of the twenty-eight still declining in 1961, twenty-three turned the corner and five continued to decline, but a similar pattern applied to the 182 non-key settlements, all but fifty-eight of which expanded.

In the late 1970s a further revision of planning policies was embarked upon. Devon's proposals involved a reduction from sixty-five to thirty-eight for the selected centres in the rural areas, but this was accompanied by a weakening of the inhibitions against development in other settlements. A comparison of the successive drafts of the Structure Plan shows that the influence of public consultation led to less stringent discouragement of provision of land in rural areas for housing, industry and tourism, and the Secretary of State's approved amendments to the final version tended towards greater permissiveness.¹⁵ During the 1970s the main responsibility for land-use planning passed from the county councils to the more local district councils, successors to the old district councils which had historically disliked the policy of limiting development to a predetermined hierarchy of settlements.¹⁶

Assessments since 1981 have been made by both Devon and Cornwall County Councils, based on such indicators as electoral rolls and housing stock, (neither of which, of course, can claim the accuracy of census statistics). Both counties report that there would appear to be few areas of continuing decline. Full clarification will only emerge when the results of the 1991 census can be assessed, but meanwhile it does appear that the century-long history of rural depopulation or stagnation has substantially ended. How this will affect the social and economic life of the countryside, and what challenges it will present to the authorities responsible for the provision of services, are matters that remain to be explored, both in practice and in theory. It appears, then, that the century-long history of rural depopulation or stagnation has substantially ended, although we shall have to wait for the findings of the 1991 census to clarify this. Despite this, the implications for the social and economic life of the

countryside, and the changing demands on the authorities responsible for the provision of services, remain to be explored, both in practice and in theory.

Acknowledgements

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NOTES

1. The parish boundaries used in these assessments are those current at the 1981 census. Extensive administrative reorganization has occurred over the almost two centuries covered by this analysis. Parishes have been aggregated at different times into hundreds, boroughs, county boroughs, urban and rural districts, and now the large post-1974 districts. Individual parishes have merged, bifurcated, and had their boundaries changed. Rural settlements have grown and been constituted into new parishes, parishes on the fringes of expanding urban areas have disappeared into the town. All these changes have been taken into account in making this analysis, which therefore does not equate directly with published census statistics. In the case of twenty-five (1981) parishes, it was, for various reasons including war-time destruction of records, impossible to distinguish their separate history. They are included in figures 2, 5 and 6 assessed in conjunction with the adjacent parish to which the boundary changes related.
2. **British Parliamentary Papers**, 1852-3, LXXXV, (1851 Census), Volume I Report; objects of census and machinery employed; results and observations; appendix of tabular results and summary tables of England and Wales, Divisions I-VII; area, houses, 1841 and 1851; population 1801, 1811, 1821, 1831, 1841 and 1851. Division V, Notes, pp.51, 53, 57, 61.
3. **1851 Census**, Notes p.59.
4. **1851 Census**, Notes pp.41 and 57.
5. **1851 Census**, Notes pp.61, 63, 65; **British Parliamentary Papers**, 1862, LIII, (1861 Census), Volume I Numbers and distribution, Division V, Notes p.400.
6. **1851 Census**, LXXXV, Division V, Notes pp.61 and 63.
7. **1861 Census**, Volume I, Division V, Notes pp.400, 402, 408.
8. For a detailed study of the impact on Camborne, Redruth and St Just-in-Penwith, see M. Brayshay, 'Depopulation and changing household structure in the mining communities of West Cornwall, 1851-1871', **Local Population Studies**, 25, 1980, pp.26-41.
9. **1851 Census**, LXXXV, Division V, Notes pp.47, 51; **1861 Census**, Volume I, Division V, Notes pp.401, 404, 405.
10. **1851 Census**, LXXXV, Division V, Notes pp.41-64 passim; **1861 Census**, Volume I, pp.397-412 passim; **British Parliamentary Papers**, 1872, LXVI, (1871 Census), Volume II, Registration or Union Counties; with an index to the population tables, Division V, pp.230-247 passim. Population tables in censuses subsequent to 1871 do not include explanatory analyses.
11. At the time these policies were promulgated, most of the relevant services were provided by county councils. The reorganizations of 1974, however, resulted in many county responsibilities passing to the NHS, whose planning policies did not necessarily accord with those of the county. See, for example, A. Glyn-Jones, **Rural recovery: has it begun?**, 1977, pp.57-66.
12. Devon County Council **Council Development Plan**, First Review, 1964; Second Review, 1970.
13. Cornwall County Council **Council Development Plan**, First Review, 1962.
14. The impact these grants had on Hatherleigh in West Devon is illustrated in Glyn-Jones, **Rural recovery**, pp.6-7.
15. Devon County Council **Structure Plan Phase IV. The Structural Options and Draft Policies/Proposals**, 1978, Policies 5A10, 5A11, 5B2, 5F6, 5F10; **Draft Written Statement**, 1979, Policies 5P7, 5P8, 5P9, 6P2, 6P7, 6P8, 10P7, 10P8; **Structure Plan**, 1981, Policies SE7, SE8, SE9, EM2, EM7, EM8, HD5.
16. Local Government Acts, 1974 and 1980.