

THE RECONSTITUTION OF NINETEENTH CENTURY RURAL COMMUNITIES

Claire Jarvis

Dr Claire Jarvis was until recently Joseph Rowntree Research Fellow at the Age Concern Institute of Gerontology, King's College London, and tutor in genealogy and history of the family Birkbeck College

Introduction

The technique of family reconstitution is well known to local population historians. The first manual reconstitution of an English parish, that of Colyton in Devon, was undertaken thirty years ago, when it took nearly a year of full-time work to do one study. Despite the time-intensive nature of the work, several reconstitutions have followed, primarily because an astonishing amount of demographic information – ranging from age at marriage and fertility measures to infant and child mortality rates – can be extracted from such studies. More recently, attempts have been made at 'total reconstitution', whereby documents such as tax assessments and poor relief records are linked to the family reconstitution forms (FRFs).¹ The demographic history of an area can then be placed in its more general social and economic context. A list of most of the reconstitutions which have been done to date can be found in a valuable recent book, which also gives an accessible introduction to the technique itself.² Around a half of one per cent of all English parishes have now been reconstituted manually. With the advent of mainframe computer facilities, attempts have been made to computerise the family reconstitution process.³ Although family reconstitution will always be a relatively time-consuming technique which demands a considerable amount of informed historical judgement at every stage, reconstitutions of parishes with populations of up to 2,000 can now be done on personal computers in around a fortieth of the time that it would take to do them manually.⁴

Reconstitution studies, however, are overwhelmingly concentrated in the period between 1538 and 1812. There are several good reasons for this. Most register transcriptions end in 1812; and some nineteenth century registers are still kept in the parish, rather than at the county record office. Registers are also known to deteriorate in quality from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, and become increasingly inadequate as records of births and deaths in the population. According to the Report from Commissioners of 1845, which allows totals of baptisms and burials from parish registers to be compared with totals of births and deaths from vital registers for 1839-40, only 74 per cent of births and 85 per cent of deaths were listed in the parish registers of England and Wales.⁵ Finally, after Rose's Act of 1812, standard format register books were brought into use everywhere. Family relationships, of the form 'Margaret Taylor, aged 4, daughter of Stephen and Mary, buried 6 April, 1710' which are often found in

good early parish registers, are no longer given. After 1812, we would only be told that Margaret Taylor, aged 4, had been buried. This means that it is no longer possible to carry out a reconstitution in the conventional way, where a burial may only be allocated to an infant or child if the entry in the burial register records the relationship of the dead child to its parents, in the full form. Linking rules are explained in an early article on family reconstitution by E.A. Wrigley; this is still essential reading for anyone contemplating a reconstitution.⁶ Fairly strict rules are applied to ensure that all reconstitution studies are carried out in comparable fashion – if they are not, any differences found in the results of different studies may well be spurious. This is, incidentally, a powerful reason for preferring computerised to manual family reconstitution, as it means that we can ensure that the same stringent linking rules are applied to every link in every reconstitution; with manual reconstitutions it is very tempting for the individual researcher to choose the links which appear to be the most likely, with the attendant possibility of systematic bias.

It is unfortunate that the traditional source of the population historian appears to become useless at the beginning of the century that contains the most interesting and perplexing demographic event of all – the ‘demographic transition’ – and is not replaced by any comparably useful source.⁷ Although the nineteenth century saw the routine collection of demographic information for the first time, vital registration is not available to the researcher in a useful form.

The reconstitution of nineteenth century communities

It is far from certain, however, that all nineteenth century reconstitutions are doomed to failure. The nineteenth century hand is easy to read, and, even where registers are not kept in the county record office, most vicars are happy to allow bona fide researchers free access to registers still kept in the parish church. It is also clear that parish registers do not uniformly deteriorate in quality from the mid-eighteenth century: although only half of births were recorded in parish registers in Wales, in the south-eastern counties of England 91 per cent were reported.⁸ P.R.A. Hinde’s study of the very small parish of Berwick St James, and J. Robin’s study of Colyton indicate that studies can continue into the nineteenth century.⁹

This study aims to examine some nineteenth century registers carefully in order to discover whether the source material is good enough, in theory, to support reconstitution studies. If the registers are adequate, it is then necessary to find a legitimate way of linking events on each FRF so that we get results which are comparable with studies of earlier periods. If this is possible, we will be able to extend our knowledge of ‘microdemography’ right through from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the end of the nineteenth – and beyond. Three parishes, which had already been the subject of reconstitutions to 1799, were chosen for this exploration: Blackmore, Willingale Spain and Willingale Doe. The parishes are situated in central Essex, and had a joint population of nearly 1,500 in 1851.¹⁰

Table 1 People in censuses 'missing' from the parish registers

Type of person missing	1851	1861	1871	1881
1. children in families	12	7	7	10
2. all children missing	9	25	30	14
3. 'transitional' child	5	5	4	5
4. household head or spouse	15	7	7	6
5. stepchildren	7	1	2	0
6. only children	4	4	2	0
7. first child	8	5	6	3
8. lodger or servant	5	5	2	5
All	65	59	60	43
Total number claiming reconstitution parish as birthplace	742	656	667	614

Notes: 'Transitional' child: child in the middle of a family in which earlier children were born in another parish and later children were all found in the reconstitution parish registers.

It is immediately clear that, in one respect at least, nineteenth century studies have an advantage over earlier studies. Typically, we rely on parish registers that are good by certain rather subjective standards. The registers of a prospective family reconstitution study are checked for gaps and underregistration, and the burial registers, especially, must be detailed over long periods of time. However, the nineteenth century census enumerators' books may be used to give a good objective idea of how comprehensive a nineteenth century parish register is. For example, Sarah Phillips, aged 58, who was living in Willingale Spain in 1851, and who gave Willingale Spain as her birthplace, should be found in the baptism register of 1793. Everyone claiming a reconstitution parish as a birthplace may be traced in this way; if large numbers are missing, the baptism registers are clearly defective.¹¹ Seven hundred and sixty two people claimed one of the three Essex reconstitution parishes as a birthplace, and should therefore be found in the baptism registers. Of these, twenty were married women whose maiden names could not be found from the marriages registers, leaving a possible 742 people to trace.

The checking process is time consuming, but very useful. In the first search of the registers, 65 people (9 per cent) were not traced in the first search of the registers. This figure is high enough to cause concern, as it could lead to certain distortions in the reconstitutions, though it is lower than proportions found in some other studies; Wall, using this technique, initially found that 20 per cent of supposed Colytonians were missing from the baptism registers.¹² Yasumoto, however, found that 8.7 per cent of baptisms were missing when the 1851 census for Methley, in the West Riding of Yorkshire, was compared with the baptism registers.¹³ These 65 people may be put into eight different categories, and are shown in the first column of Table 1.

In twelve cases in 1851 one or two children are missing from a family that is otherwise fully registered. The nine people in category two were probably nonconformists, as all the children from two whole families were missing from the parish registers. (The first two of the nine were children of a couple who had baptised several earlier children at a nearby Independent chapel but, as the nonconformist registers stop in 1837, there is no way of tracing later children baptised in the chapel.) The twenty-one people in categories 1 and 2 were probably genuinely missing from the parish registers. There is more doubt, however, about the remaining forty four people, and the numbering of the categories in Table 1 roughly represents declining confidence in the belief that the people in question were genuinely missing from the parish registers. In category 3 the 'transitional' child is a child in the middle of a family where the older children of the family were born in another parish, and the younger children were all found in the present parish registers. The reconstitution is therefore one of the non-migratory population only. Such children may be genuinely missing from these parish registers; but it is more likely that they were actually born and baptised in another parish shortly before the family moved to the reconstitution parish.

In eighteen cases in 1851 the household head or spouse of the household head claimed to have been born in the parish. Three of these cases were discounted immediately, as they changed their place of birth to another parish in the 1861 census. Some of the remaining fifteen may be genuinely missing, perhaps indicating special problems with the parish registers at the end of the eighteenth century. It is more likely, however, that they were born elsewhere and for convenience or genuine lack of knowledge, stated that they were born in the parish that they were living in at the time and had perhaps lived in for most of their lives.

By treating people in categories 1, 2, 3 and 4 as all genuinely missing from the parish registers, then, we are likely to overstate the problems of parochial non-registration, although there is no way of estimating by how much. People in the remaining four categories, however, are highly unlikely to be genuinely missing from the parish registers. Seven 'missing' people were stepchildren of the household head (that is, children of the wife from a previous marriage). In all of these cases the wife was not from the parish in question; neither could her previous marriage be traced in the marriage registers. It is likely that the children were born elsewhere, and were simply lumped in with children of the present marriage. In the same way, the four single children whose parents came from other parishes can also probably be discounted. Eight first children were missing from the parish registers; a little detective work reveals that all were born before their parents' marriage and baptised in their mother's name; they took the father's name when their parents eventually married. An extreme example of this is found in the 1871 census. In 1861 a William Scriviner, household head, listed Eliza Oakley as his housekeeper, along with several children baptised as illegitimate children of Eliza Oakley. In 1871, however, Eliza was described as the wife of William and she and all of the children took the surname Scriviner.

The final category, lodgers and servants, comprise an exceptionally mobile section of the population, and may also be discounted.

If we assume that only the first four categories, comprising 41 people in 1851, are genuinely missing, the percentage of missing baptisms falls from 9 per cent to 6 per cent. Even this is likely to be an overstatement. If only categories 1 and 2 are treated as genuinely missing, the real figure lies in the regions of only 2 or 3 per cent. This is a remarkable and quite unexpected finding: following the received wisdom concerning nineteenth century parish registers, I had expected to find substantial proportions missing from the registers. With such a small proportion of baptisms genuinely missing, the likely effect on the results from a reconstitution study will be minimal; and, as we will see later, the bias from the very small numbers actually missing can be directly assessed. The same procedure can be used to check baptism registers for as long as enumerators' books are available and Table 1 also shows people missing from the registers up to 1881 (this study was undertaken before the 1891 books became available). Categories 1-4 remain stable at around 6 per cent in all four censuses, with the total proportion missing remaining at around 9 per cent, with a small decline in the 1881 census. There is clearly little reason to suppose that a nineteenth century reconstitution will suffer seriously from increasingly large numbers of people missing from the parish registers.

It was noted earlier that the format of nineteenth century registers means that the conventional way of making links is no longer possible.¹⁴ Either the rules have to be adapted, or reconstitutions cannot be extended beyond 1812. Although family relationships are not given in nineteenth century registers, age at burial is always given, so we still have a field, apart from name, on which to link burials to baptisms. Burials may be linked to children, for example, if the age at burial agrees with the baptism date, although a reasonable margin of error – say two years – must be given. Thus, for example, the burial entry 'Annie Bailey, buried 19 March 1830 aged 3', is linked to both 'Anne Baily baptised 1 March 1827' and 'Ann Bailey, baptised 5 April 1825'. When the competing links on the family reconstitution forms are corrected, the burial entry will be allocated to the former baptism entry. Allowing such a large margin of error has the advantage of encompassing all the age at burial misstatements for children that are likely to occur. It is often the case that small infants died before baptism, and special rules are necessary to allocate 'dummy births' to FRFs. The conventional method of inserting these children into 'gaps' in births if the parents' names are given cannot be used with nineteenth century registers, but, because numbers are small, and the range of names in use was relatively large, it is still possible to insert burials without previous baptisms tentatively into family groups. All of the other links are made in the same way as for pre-nineteenth century reconstitutions.

As well as providing an estimate of the comprehensiveness of the baptism registers, the accuracy of the link-making process in nineteenth century reconstitution studies can be checked by comparing FRFs with families in the census enumerators' books. The same checking process, incidentally, can also be used to gauge the effects of bias on the results of the reconstitutions from the people genuinely missing from the baptism registers. Consider, for example,

Table 2 Entry from the 1881 census enumerator's book for Willingale Doe

Name	relationship to household head	marital status	age	occupation	place of birth
Samuel Perry	head	married	53	agricultural labourer	Willingale Doe
Rebecca Harry	wife	married	51	-	ditto
	son	single	22	agricultural labourer	ditto
Sophia	daughter	single	15	domestic servant	ditto
Emily	daughter	-	12	scholar	ditto
Lydia	daughter	-	7	scholar	ditto

Table 3 Part of family reconstitution form for Samuel and Rebecca Perry

Event	name	date
marriage	Samuel Perry and Rebecca Prior of Willingale Doe	13.02.1851
groom baptism	Samuel Perry son of Samuel and Dorothy	12.08.1827
groom burial	Samuel Perry aged 68	24.02.1896
bride baptism	Rebecca Prior daughter of James and Sarah	15.02.1829
child baptism	Henry Perry son of Samuel and Rebecca	18.07.1858
child baptism	Sophia Perry daughter of Samuel and Rebecca	18.09.1865
child burial	Sophia Perry aged 20	06.10.1895
child baptism	Emily Perry daughter of Samuel and Rebecca	16.05.1869
child burial	Emily Perry aged 26	24.02.1896
child baptism	Lydia Perry daughter of Samuel and Rebecca	19.07.1874

the family listed in the 1881 enumerator's book for Willingale Doe, shown in Table 2.

By comparing the information on this family with that given on the relevant FRF, part of which is shown in Table 3, the accuracy of the links made in the family reconstitution can be checked. All of the information here tallies, which means that all of the reconstitution links have been correctly made (of course, only the links concerning people still alive and living in the parish at the time of the census can be checked). Overall, I was able to check nearly 2,000 reconstitution links, and found that 6 per cent of FRFs contained one error,

Table 4 Selected results from the nineteenth century reconstitution studies of three Essex parishes

	1800-49	n	1850-80	n
infant mortality rate (per 1000)	138	1322*	164	783*
age at marriage (women)	22.3	154	22.7	108
age at marriage (men)	24.9	149	25.8	99
proportion of pre-nuptial conceptions (1800-80)(%)	-	-	45	526
total marital fertility rate (1800-80)	-	-	7.0	103**

Notes: * Baptisms. ** Completed marriages.

either because a link was incorrectly made or a child was genuinely missing from the baptism register. The effect of these errors on the rates and measures derived from the FRFs was barely noticeable. It is fair to conclude that these nineteenth century reconstitutions are as historically correct as it is possible for them to be.

Results from nineteenth century reconstitutions

Table 4 shows selected results from the reconstitutions. The infant mortality rates are slightly lower than that of 165.5 per 1,000 which was found by Wrigley and Schofield for the second half of the eighteenth century; the ages at marriage for both men and women are similar to the English figure for the first half of the nineteenth century. Nearly half of first births were conceived before marriage. Again, this result is similar to those found elsewhere. Robin found that pre-nuptial pregnancies in nineteenth century Colyton actually outnumbered pregnancies conceived after marriage. The total marital fertility rate of 7.00 is slightly lower than the average of 7.39 found by Wrigley and Schofield for the earlier period.¹⁵

Although these results do not reveal any particular differences between this part of Essex in the nineteenth century and earlier dates (there is no evidence, for example, of the 'stopping and spacing' which is characteristic of populations limiting their fertility), they are very important from a methodological point of view. The very fact that a reconstitution can be done at all in the nineteenth century is a fact of considerable interest, as this opens up the possibility of doing other, larger reconstitutions in different areas. The use of an independent source to check registers and verify links made in the reconstitution process is also important: we can measure the accuracy of nineteenth century studies, which is a great deal more than we can ever hope to do in studies of earlier times. I look forward to extending this study, as the 1891 and 1901 enumerators' books become available, to the time when people first started using mechanical means of birth control to limit their families. Because family reconstitution depends on the strength of parish registers, it is unlikely ever to be of much use in areas that were strongly nonconformist, or in urban areas

where there was a high degree of mobility and non-attendance at any church. However, there is considerable potential for the use of family reconstitution studies to examine the process of family limitation in detail in small rural communities.

NOTES

1. See, for example, P. Sharpe, 'The total reconstitution method: a tool for class-specific study?', **Local Population Studies**, 44 (1990), 41-51.
2. C.D. Rogers and J.H. Smith, **Local family history in England, 1538-1914**, (Manchester, 1991).
3. See, for example, R.S. Schofield and R. Davies, 'Towards a flexible data management system', **Historical Methods Newsletter**, 7 (1974), 114-24; F. Nault and B. Desjardins, 'Computers and historical demography: the reconstitution of the early Quebec population', in P. Denley, S. Fogelvik and C. Harvey (eds), **History and Computing II**, (Manchester, 1989), 143-48; and K. Schurer, J. Oeppen and R. Schofield, 'Theory and methodology: an example from historical demography', also in **History and Computing II**, 130-42.
4. C. Davey and A.S. Jarvis, 'Microcomputers for microhistory: a database approach to the reconstitution of small English populations', **History and Computing**, 2, (3) (1990), 187-93.
5. **Reports from Commissioners, Prisons, factories, parish register abstract**, volume 12, session 4 February - 9 August 1845, volume XXV. See also D. Levine, 'The reliability of parochial registration and the representativeness of family reconstitution', **Population Studies**, 30 (1976), 107-22. The causes of the deterioration in the quality of parish registers are explained fully in E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, **The population history of England, 1541-1871, a reconstruction**, (London, 1981), chapters 4 and 5, 89-156.
6. D.E.C. Eversley, P. Laslett and E.A. Wrigley (eds), **An introduction to English historical demography: from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries**, (New York, 1966).
7. The transition to low fertility and mortality is generally accepted to have begun in the later eighteenth century in England, though the control of fertility by mechanical methods is not apparent until the later nineteenth century. For a full definition of the demographic transition see, C. Wilson (ed.), R. Pressat, **The dictionary of demography**, (Oxford, 1985), 52-54.
8. **Reports from Commissioners**, 571-2. The south-east counties comprise the non-metropolitan areas of Surrey and Kent, Sussex, Hampshire and Berkshire.
9. P.R.A. Hinde, 'The population of a Wiltshire village in the nineteenth century: a reconstitution study of Berwick St James, 1841-1871', **Annals of Human Biology**, 14 (1987), 475-85; J. Robin, 'Illegitimacy in Colyton, 1851-1881', **Continuity and Change**, 2 (1987), 307-42.
10. For the earlier reconstitutions, and for more detail on the nineteenth century reconstitutions see my thesis: C. Davey, 'Reconstructing local population history: the Hatfield and Bobbingworth districts of Essex, 1550-1880', (unpublished Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, 1990).
11. See P. Razzell, 'The evaluation of baptism as a form of birth registration through cross-matching census and parish registration data: a study in methodology', **Population Studies**, 26 (1972), 121-46.
12. R. Wall, 'Reconstitution and census: Colytonians in parish register and enumerators' book', paper v, **Population and marketing: two studies in the history of the south-west**, (Exeter papers in economic history II, 1976).
13. M. Yasumoto, 'How accurate is the Methley baptismal registration?', **Local Population Studies**, 35 (1985), 19-24.
14. The conventional methods of making links is explained by E.A. Wrigley in **English historical demography**, 1-7, and is further explored in C. Davey, 'Reconstructing local population history', 1-15.
15. For English results, see E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, 'English population history from family reconstitution: summary results, 1600-1799', **Population Studies**, 37 (1983), 157-84; J. Robin, 'Prenuptial pregnancy in a rural area of Devonshire in the mid-nineteenth century: Colyton, 1851-1881', **Continuity and Change**, 1 (1986), 113-24.