

## RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

### OCCUPATIONS IN PARISH REGISTERS: THE EVIDENCE FROM NEWPORT, ESSEX

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Studies of the rural economy in the early modern period have been handicapped by a lack of occupational information to compare with the nineteenth century censuses. In 1977 Wrigley estimated that 'out of 280 parish listings by inhabitants known to the Cambridge Group fewer than 25 contain details of occupation adequate for reasonably precise study of occupational data'.<sup>1</sup> Most of these listings before 1750 rely on the assessments for the 1694 Marriage Duty Act. The most detailed source for the early seventeenth century remains the Gloucestershire muster roll for 1608, which gives the occupations of 88.5 per cent of the men aged between 20 and 60, and was published by the Tawneys in 1939.<sup>2</sup>

Evidence from parish registers is fuller for the eighteenth century and used by Wrigley and Pickles in their studies of Colyton, Devon and Wharfedale, Yorkshire respectively.<sup>3</sup> The only parish register for an earlier period with occupational data for a rural area known to have been published is that of Sedgley, Staffordshire, where occupations were densely noted from 1578-1625 and 1675-1685, although the proportion is not given.<sup>4</sup>

Although registers have been criticized for listing occupations too erratically and using terminology that is too ambiguous,<sup>5</sup> it is worth drawing attention to relatively rich sources where they occur. One that has not been noted before is the baptismal registers for Newport, near Saffron Walden in north-west Essex. This was a densely settled village, like many on the River Cam, with around 500 inhabitants in 1600 and containing 1,654 acres. The land was mostly arable with some pasture and woodland. Unfortunately for W.A. Cole's research, no probate inventories have survived for this area.<sup>6</sup>

For the period 1591-1636, the occupations of 89 per cent of the fathers are given (739 out of 831 events), and from 1698-1715, 92.5 per cent are given (300 out of 319). They are also included from 1726-1736 and 1746-1753 and occasionally from 1582-1589. The marriage and burial registers for these periods have similar information added but for slightly fewer entries. Until 1626 most of the occupations are described in a variation on classical Latin reflecting the education of John Brawherde, the vicar for 38 years between 1587 and 1625. This has led to a few ambiguous or uncertain meanings. The later English also presents problems of terminology, with the same individual described variously and meanings changing over a time, in particular the word 'farmer'. The

**Table 1 Newport, Essex: occupations from baptismal registers**

	1591-1636 %	1698-1715 %
<b>Food and drink</b>	(12.9)	(11.3)
Baker	2.0	1.6
Butcher, poulterer	9.5	8.7
Beerseller, maltster, miller	1.4	1.0
<b>Leatherworkers</b>	(20.7)	(8.0)
Tanner	7.8	3.3
Glover	8.3	0.7
Shoemaker, cordwainer	4.1	2.3
Collarmaker, saddler	0.5	1.7
<b>Clothworkers</b>	(6.5)	(15.7)
Weaver, webber	1.3	3.3
Fuller	0.3	-
Tailor	4.9	4.0
Woolcomber	-	8.4*
<b>Building, metal and woodworkers</b>	(6.9)	(13.0)
Carpenter	1.3	1.7
Bricklayer, plasterer	1.2	1.3
Thatcher	-	0.3
Glazier	-	2.4
Blacksmith, ploughwright	1.6	1.7
Locksmith	-	0.3
Cooper	1.8	3.0
Wheelwright, sievemaker	1.0	2.3
<b>Education, religion and health</b>	(2.4)	(2.6)
Schoolmaster	0.5	1.0
Notary, clerk	0.7	-
Clergy	1.2	0.3
Barber	-	1.3
<b>Farming</b>	(47.7)	(40.7)
Gentleman	4.1	-
Yeoman*	11.4	3.7
Labourer**	31.5	28.3
Shepherd	0.7	3.7
Farrier, horseleach	-	5.0
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	(3.0)	(8.6)
Chandler	1.9	-
Gardener	-	1.3
Soldier	-	1.3
Chapman	-	1.0
Other occupations	0.8	2.0
Beggar/poor/drunkard	0.3	3.0

**Notes:** \* Those described as yeoman in the earlier register and husbandman or farmer in the later.  
 \*\* Those described as 'agricole', husbandman, farmer or labourer in the earlier register and labourer in the later.

occupations have been counted according to the 1989 guidelines of the Cambridge Group, which involves recording every event, and are analysed in Table 1.<sup>7</sup>

Use of the baptismal registers means that some occupations, especially servants, are unrepresented, and others such as licensed victuallers understated. Counting every entry rather than heads of households can also create slight distortions. For example between 1698 and 1715 the farmers made up about 7 per cent of the heads of households but only have 3.7 per cent of the children, whereas farriers formed less than 2 per cent of the household heads but had 5 per cent of the children. The figures therefore can only be treated as rough approximations. The general groupings could have been arranged in several different ways, the skills of a glover for example are similar to those of a tailor, but one which differentiated by craft according to materials, (leather, cloth, building) has been used. Gentlemen have been put under farming because they were large landholders around 1600.

Most of the occupations are those which one would expect to find in any medium sized agricultural community, and other sources such as manorial rentals give a clearer picture of land tenure.<sup>8</sup> However, a small but significant leather working industry emerges by the seventeenth century, which could not have been predicted. The leather industry has been considered to come second or third after cloth and possibly building as a source of employment in the Tudor and Stuart period, but thought to have been largely an urban feature or found in specialized regions elsewhere in the country.<sup>9</sup>

Previously, attention has been drawn to the importance of pastoral regions in attracting rural industry.<sup>10</sup> The example of Newport suggests that, even in a predominantly arable farming district, some degree of rural industry could be found and not just as a by-employment but as the main source of income. The location of any particular industry could be highly unstable, but, providing a suitable labour force remained available, some form of industry would remain. Thus, by the early eighteenth century woolcombing occupied the same percentage of the workforce as light leather work had a century before, reflecting the later spread of the cloth trade into the district around Saffron Walden.<sup>11</sup> It would be useful to know of other registers for rural parishes with equally rich occupational information for this period so that comparisons can be made.

#### NOTES

1. **Local Population Studies**, 18 (1977), 21.
2. A.J. and R.H. Tawney, 'An occupational census of the seventeenth century', **Economic History Review**, 5 (1939), 25-64.
3. E.A. Wrigley, 'The changing occupational structure of Colyton over two centuries', **Local Population Studies**, 18 (1977), 9-21. M.F. Pickles, 'Mid-Wharfedale 1721-1812: economic and demographic change in a Pennine dale', **Local Population Studies**, 16 (1976), 12-44.
4. H.R. Thomas ed., **Sedgley 1558-1685**, (Staffordshire Parish Registers Society, 1940-1). The evidence is analysed by A. Kussmaul in **A general view of the rural economy of England 1538-1840**, (Cambridge, 1990), 8-10.
5. Kussmaul, **A general view**, 4-5.

6. **Local Population Studies**, 49 (1992), 70-1.
7. The original registers are deposited in the Essex Record Office, Chelmsford; a transcript will be deposited there in 1994; the analysis forms are at the offices of the Cambridge Group.
8. Especially the detailed rental of Newport for 1613 in the Essex Record Office: D/DBy M161.
9. L.A. Clarkson, 'The leather crafts in Tudor and Stuart England', **Agricultural History Review**, 14 (1966), 25.
10. J. Thirsk, 'Industries in the countryside', in F.J. Fisher ed., **Essays in the economic and social history of Tudor and Stuart England, in honour of R.H. Tawney**, (Cambridge, 1961), 70-88.
11. A. Brown, **Essex at work 1700-1815**, (Chelmsford, 1967), 4.