

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

AGE AT MARRIAGE IN THE-LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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Since it is unusual for marriage registers before 1837 to provide the ages of the parties, data from the parish registers of Selby in the late eighteenth century may well be of interest. Selby, a small river port in the West Riding of Yorkshire, had long been an outlet for the trade of the West Riding and after 1778 it prospered greatly and became, in effect, the port of Leeds. From March 1777 until Rose's Act came into force in 1813, the Selby Parish registers are in the Dade format. Both the baptism and burial registers are very comprehensive and, unusually, the marriage register gives the age of the parties to the marriage and, after some initial hiccoughs, the marital status of both parties. Table 1 shows the number of marriages between 1777 and 1803, and the mean age of the participants.

Table 1 Marriages at Selby, 1777 to 1803

Status of Bride or groom	Number of events		Mean age of man		Mean age of woman	
	Spinster	Widow	Spinster	Widow	Spinster	Widow
Bachelor						
Banns	287	24	24.8	30.3	23.0	31.9
Licence	85	10	25.9	27.3	23.4	33.1
All	372	34	25.0	29.4	23.1	32.1
Widower						
Banns	43	30	38.2	47.9	29.6	45.8
Licence	12	5	37.3	44.4	25.4	42.0
All	55	35	38.0	47.8	28.7	45.3
Not given						
Banns	20	3	26.2	35.0	25.1	36.7
Licence	2	1	30.0	22.0	24.0	48.0
All	22	4	26.5	31.8	25.0	45.3
All marriages	449	73	26.7	38.2	23.9	38.9

Note: Four marriages are excluded because of insufficient data.

Source: Selby Parish Register.

It will be noted that where it is the first marriage for both participants, i.e. a bachelor marrying a spinster, the mean age of a man marrying by licence was just over a year greater than one marrying by banns, whereas the difference in the age of the woman was slightly less than six months. The mean age of all bachelors who married a widow was 29.4, some four years older than a bachelor who married a spinster. The mean age of a widow who married a bachelor was 28.7, just over five and a half years older than that of a spinster who married a bachelor.

The wealth of information in a full Dade baptism entry is not always appreciated. The following entry from the Selby baptism register of 1778 is typical of the quality of the Selby entries:—

Infant's christian Name and seniority	Ann Second daughter
Infant's surname	Fisher
Father's name, Profession, descent, and abode	Stephen Fisher of Selby, joiner, son of Antony Fisher, Easingwood, joiner, by Rachel, his wife, dr of Wm Bell of Huby, gent
Mother's name, and descent	Mary, dr of Samuel Selby, labourer, by Mary his wife, dr of Michael Turner, of Castleforth, labourer
Born	July 3
Baptised	July 7

The full potential of Dade registers can best be achieved by record linkage. Thus if a marriage entry can be linked to the baptism entry for the birth of a child of the marriage, preferably the first child, one can identify the residence and occupation of the respective grandfathers of the child at the date of baptism. Table 2 gives the residence of the grandfathers (i.e. the spouses' respective fathers) as shown in baptism entries between 1777 and 1788 which have been linked to marriages at Selby between those years.

It should be stressed that the residence of the respective father in a baptism entry appears to be as at the date of the baptism, or at the date of death if he was then dead. It does not represent the place of birth of the respective spouse and a random check of those married at Selby who had resident fathers confirms this. Five of the 35 men who had non-resident fathers said that they were resident outside Selby when they married, for the other 30, a non-resident father is a strong indication that the spouse in question had migrated to Selby before his marriage. From Table 2 it would appear that when men who had migrated to Selby married women whose fathers were already living there, the mean age of both spouses would be lower than average, namely 23.7 and 21.2 respectively

Table 2 First marriages at Selby between 1777 and 1788 that can be linked to baptisms

Residence of spouses' father	Mean age of men	Mean age of women	Marriages n.
Both fathers resident in Selby	25.1	22.6	16
Man's father resident in Selby, woman's not	26.5	23.6	14
Woman's father resident in Selby, man's not	23.7	21.2	28
Neither father resident in Selby	26.4	22.3	7
All linked entries	24.9	22.1	65
All first marriages 1777 to 1788	25.1	22.8	121

From the research so far undertaken this combination seems to have more effect on the mean male age at first marriage than the occupation of the groom.

It would be unwise to draw any general conclusions from the data presented in this note, not least because the picture that emerges as and when the whole of the Selby Registers from 1777 to 1813 have been transcribed, and loaded into databases, could prove to be very different from that portrayed in this note. Nevertheless, two matters may prove to be important. It may be unwise to assume that data as to age at marriage drawn from marriage licences alone will not be significantly different from that obtained from parish registers and conclusions as to age at marriage drawn exclusively from statistics relating to non-migrants may well differ from those reached if statistics that include migrants are used.

NOTES

1. The Selby Parish Registers are deposited at the Borthwick Institute, York under the classmark PR SEL. Dade registers are to be found mainly in Yorkshire but there are examples elsewhere. The writer has identified over 180 possible Dade or Dade type registers but the quality of many of them is likely to be very poor. As to Dade registers generally see B. A. Holderness, 'Personal mobility in some rural parishes of Yorkshire 1777-1812', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 42 (1971), 444-54; M. Long and B. Maltby; 'Personal mobility in three West Riding parishes 1777-1812', *Local Population Studies*, 24 (1980), 13-25; A. Henstock, 'Genealogical register entries in Nottingham Parishes', *Local Population Studies*, 25 (1980), 57-8; T. J. Falla, 'Further material for eighteenth century mobility', *Local Population Studies*, 26 (1981), 46-7; C. Davey, 'A note on mobility in an Essex parish in the early nineteenth century', *Local Population Studies*, 41 (1988), 61-6 and R. A. Bellingham 'The use of marriage horizons to study migration', *Local Population Studies*, 44 (1990), 52-5.
2. Although Dade registers giving age at marriage appear to be rare, age at death is generally shown in Dade burial registers.