

AGE AT BAPTISM IN THE PARISH OF ST NICHOLAS, PEVENSEY, 1761–1800

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The age at baptism is of considerable interest to demographers, particularly during the period of the eighteenth century, in which as Jackson and Laxton point out there is little data at a time when the interval between birth and baptism was growing longer.¹ Furthermore, parish registers became less reliable as a record of the community towards the end of the eighteenth century, owing to a lower attendance at the parish church, particularly if a nonconformist church was present in the area. The incumbent of the parish church at Pevensey recorded the date of birth in the majority of baptisms between 1761 and 1802 and the data provides an insight into the life of that village in the late-eighteenth century.

Pevensey was described as a port in 1596 but by 1698 it could no longer be described as such due to natural silting. It is one of the Cinque Ports and is situated 5 miles from Hailsham and 60 miles from London. In 1834 it contained some 4,300 acres of marshland consisting of a mixture of black alluvial soil and stiff clay. Pevensey was a corporation until 1886.

Drake proposed a method to estimate whether a given church in an area is the only one in which children were being baptised: if on average there were more than 30–40 baptisms per annum recorded per 1,000 inhabitants, it was probably the sole church in the region.² For the period 1796–1802 there were 60 baptisms at Pevensey, giving an average of 8.57 per annum. With a population in 1801 of 192, a rate per 1,000 of nearly 45 is produced which suggests that St Nicholas was probably the only church in the area.

The data presented in Table 1 show the interval between birth and baptism according to the method adopted by Berry and Schofield.³ The columns represent the interval in days after birth by which 25, 50 and 75 per cent of the sample children had been baptised. The table also records the semi-interquartile range, which is the approximate number of days over which the middle quarter of the children were baptised.

During the period 1776–1780 there were only 14 baptisms of which two did not show a birth date, thus exceeding the 10 per cent defective entries normally accepted as the maximum allowable. Similarly for the period 1781–1785 there were only 17 entries, of which no date was given for two who were privately baptised, and there were a further two for which no birth date was listed. There was only one further defective entry, in 1761. For those entries in which one date is missing the procedure of Berry and Schofield was adopted whereby the interval is calculated as if the baptism had occurred after the longest recorded

Table 1 Interval in days (+0.5) by which the stated percentile of births were baptised over a period of 40 years

Period	25%	50%	75%	Semi-interquartile range
1761-1765	13	23	29	10
1766-1770	2	13	24	6
1771-1775	18	24	31	4
1776-1780	23	28	36	8
1781-1785	25	43	117	50
1786-1790	33	52	78	21
1791-1795	29	74	154	66
1796-1800	37	51	119	30

Source: Baptism register of St Nicholas, Pevensey, East Sussex Record Office, Lewes, PAR 4431/1/2

Table 2 Number of baptisms performed on different days of the week over a period of 40 years

Period	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1761-1765	9	3	2	2	0	3	2
1766-1770	6	0	1	2	2	3	1
1771-1775	7	1	0	0	3	3	4
1776-1780	8	0	1	1	2	2	2
1781-1785	2	4	1	2	2	2	2
1786-1790	15	1	2	2	3	2	3
1791-1795	16	2	4	4	3	3	4
1796-1800	22	4	1	8	2	5	6

Source: Baptism register of St Nicholas, Pevensey, East Sussex Record Office, Lewes, PAR 4431/1/2.

interval in the sample.⁴ As some of the intervals will have been shorter than this, incomplete entries will slightly exaggerate the birth-baptism periods. In January 1767 there was one anomalous entry, in which the vicar had inadvertently entered a date of birth after the baptism date; this has been excluded from the results.

Table 1 reveals that in the period 1761-1780 there was no significant increase in the delay parents were observing before baptising their infants, as shown by a semi-interquartile range between 4 and 10, but which increased to a maximum 66 in the remaining period up to 1800. In comparison with the rural parish of St Martin, Orgar, Berry and Schofield report a semi-interquartile range of 5 for the period 1776-1784 and 19 for 1796-1807.⁵

During the whole period there were six occasions when a child was baptised on the day of birth, all before 1780. Was this because the parents thought the baby was sick and would die unbaptised shortly afterwards? A search of the burial registers revealed that out of the six, only one died within a year. Mary, daughter of Richard and Mary Thompson was born and baptised on 23 June 1763 but was

buried on 1 October of the same year. There was also an entry in 1764 in which a 54 year old wife, Elizabeth Christian, was baptised in July and buried the following November.

Table 2 shows the distribution of days of the week chosen by parents to have their children baptised. According to the Anglican Prayer Book, children should not only be baptised as soon as possible, but also preferably on a Sunday or other Holy Day. The figures show that Sunday was consistently the most popular day from 1761–1800 which is in contrast to Bruton in Somerset where Wednesday was as popular as Sunday.⁶ St Nicholas's feast day is on 6 December, but during the whole 40 year period, there was only one baptism on that day.

Woodward, discussing Yorkshire parishes, has suggested that a delay in baptism might have been due to the remoteness of a dwelling from the parish church, whilst Abbott has proposed that families living in the Essex marshes might find the church difficult to reach.⁷ This probably did not apply at Pevensey, since over the 40 year period, January was somewhat more popular for baptisms than other months, at a time when travelling conditions across the marshes would have been the most arduous.

NOTES

1. S. Jackson and P. Laxton, 'Of such as are of riper years? A note on age at baptism,' *Local Population Studies*, 19 (1977), 30–6.
2. M. Drake and R. Finnegan, eds. *Studying Family and Community History. 19 and 20th Centuries. Volume 4. Sources and Methods: A Handbook*, (Cambridge, 1994), 75.
3. B. M. Berry and R. S. Schofield, 'Age at baptism in pre-industrial England', *Population Studies*, 25 (1971), 453–63.
4. B. M. Berry and R. S. Schofield, 'Age at baptism in pre-industrial England', 456.
5. B. M. Berry and R. S. Schofield, 'Age at baptism in pre-industrial England', 460.
6. D. M. McCallum, 'Age at baptism: further evidence', *Local Population Studies*, 24 (1980), 49–51.
7. D. Woodward, 'The impact of the Commonwealth Act on Yorkshire parishes', *Local Population Studies*, 14 (1975), 15–31; M. Abbott, *Family Ties. English Families 1540–1920*, (London, 1993), 172.