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Reconstructing nineteenth-century english communities using censuses and parish registers; an exploratory study

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RESUMO

Este artigo considera a possibilidade de usar informação nominativa dos censos ingleses do século XIX e dos registos paroquiais de baptismos, casamentos e óbitos, para a reconstrução de populações de aldeias inglesas entre 1841 e 1881. Apresentam-se os dados e esboça-se um método para interligar a informação dos diferentes censos com os dos registos. Ilustra-se com a aplicação ao caso da aldeia de Wiltshire. Os resultados mostram que a técnica pode ser usada para obter perspectivas novas na demografia da Inglaterra rural do século XIX, incluindo aspectos como deslocação de populações, modelos de casamento e níveis de fertilidade.

Palavras-chave: Reconstituição de famílias; Inglaterra; Século XIX; Censos; Registos paroquiais.

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the possibility of using nominative information from nineteenth-century English censuses and ecclesiastical registers of baptisms, marriages and burials to reconstruct the populations of English villages between 1841 and 1881. The data are first described, and a procedure for sorting and linking records from different censuses, and for linking census records to registration records, is outlined. This procedure is illustrated using the example of a Wiltshire village. The results show that the technique may be used to obtain new insights into the demography of nineteenth-century rural England, including such aspects as population turnover, marriage patterns and fertility levels.

Key-words: Family reconstitution; England; Nineteenth-century; Censuses; Parish registers.

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INTRODUCTION

The technique of family reconstitution has been applied to numerous European communities in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure is at present reconstructing some 22 English communities during this period. As yet, however, the technique has not been applied to nineteenth-century English communities. Partly this is because the quality of the Anglican registers (by far the most important source in reconstitution work for the pre-censal period) is thought to have declined after 1800, and, any case, the growth of nonconformity reduced the proportion of the population which underwent ceremonies in the established Church. Partly, perhaps, it is also because English historical demographers still nurse fond hopes of gaining access to the civil registers, which cover the period since 1837, and which are at present unavailable by law to researchers.

But we are not confined to the Church of England registers for nominative information about Victorian communities, for the original census returns are available for the censuses from 1841 to 1881. In some ways, therefore, the data situation in the second half of the nineteenth century is better than that for earlier periods. Yet attempts even to trace individuals and families from census to census, or to link census information with ecclesiastical registers are few and far between (RAZZEL, 1972; WRIGLEY, 1975).

This paper reports an exploratory reconstruction of a small village in southern England using the census returns and the Anglican registers. The data and method are described, and some applications and potential applications of the technique are considered.

THE DATA

The nominative information available for England in the nineteenth century may be divided into three categories. The first two we have already mentioned: the census returns and the ecclesiastical registers. The third comprises a variety of other sources, for example poll books and apprenticeship indentures, which vary both in their content and their coverage.

The census returns, or enumerators' books, which are available for the censuses of 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, have by far the most complete coverage of the three groups of sources mentioned. In theory, they contain the following information about every person resident in England and Wales: address, Christian name, surname, relationship to the head of the household, sex, marital status, age, occupation, and birthplace (ARMSTRONG, 1978). In practice, some people were bound to have been omitted, and certain items of information (for example «address» in rural areas) were imprecisely recorded. Nevertheless, coverage is estimated to have been well in excess of 95 per cent, and «continued examination of the returns suggests very strongly that they

are reliable and that the extent of error...is slight» (TILLOTT, 1972, p. 83). The census returns, then, are the most important source of nominative data for the period between 1841 and 1881. An extract from them is shown in Table 1.

The ecclesiastical registers consist of the Anglican parish registers (that source used by E. A. WRIGLEY and R. S. SCHOFIELD (1981) in their monumental reconstruction of the population history of England), and the registers of various nonconformist churches. The Anglican registers survive for almost every parish in the country, but nonconformist registers are rather more difficult to locate, and are often missing. Thus, for many parishes, we have to rely upon the Anglican registers for information about baptisms, marriages and burials. Since one aim of this paper is to outline a method which will be of general application to the rural communities of England, only the Anglican registers will be used in this case study. These registers only gives details about those people who were baptised, married or buried by the established Church of England. The accuracy of any reconstruction using the method described below is likely, therefore, to depend upon the extent of nonconformity, as well as that of secularity (on the later, see ANDERSON, 1975).

The other sources mentioned earlier are much more scattered in their coverage (apprenticeship indentures deal only with those people who were apprenticed at some stage in their lives, and so on). So, although they may well be useful to fill out the picture painted by the census and the parish registers, they are unlikely to be of use in the early stages of a reconstruction.

THE CASE STUDY

In the case study we shall attempt to reconstruct the population of the Wiltshire village of Berwick St James between 1841 and 1881. Berwick St James lies about ten miles north-west of Salisbury, and is a small settlement nestling in the Till valley on the southern edge of Salisbury Plain, with a population at mid-century of just over 250. The census enumerator in 1841 wrote that «the whole parish is one continuous street, with the exception of a farm house called Asherton Farm and two or three detached cottages» (Census Enumerator's Book, 1841). Certainly, the windswept downland which surrounded the village did not encourage settlement, and even today the population of the parish lives chiefly along the main street. Apart from a few who worked in the usual village trades and crafts, employment in the parish was provided by two large farms: in 1851 Mr Jonh Tucker employed 12 labourers on his 500 acres, and 47 men worked for Mr Erlysmen Pinckney, who had 1,600 acres (Census Enumerator's Book, 1851).

One of the reasons behind the selection of a village in rural Wiltshire for this case study is that the Church of England was strong in that part of the country. It was felt that in an exploratory study of this nature, it would be helpful to use a community which should possess Anglican registers of a fairly good quality.

THE TECHNIQUE OF RECONSTRUCTION

The availability of the census listings as well as parish registers data means that the technique of reconstruction used here differs from previous applications for the pre-censal period. An advantage of using the census returns is that we are able to reconstruct the entire population of a community, and not only that portion of the community which is mentioned in the registers. Many residents, for example servants, moved into the village and then moved on without ever requiring the services of the local Church. Conventional family reconstitution is often unable to include these individuals.

One of the purposes of this study is to devise a technique which can efficiently link the information about named individuals given in the census with that in the registers. Ultimately, it should prove possible to automate the reconstruction procedure to a high degree, but in the present exploratory phases the computer was used mainly to sort and edit records, rather than to make links.

The procedure involves a number of stages. First, the data from the earliest census are placed in a computer file, with one line for each person. The second stage consists of linking to these census records the burials and marriages (in that order) which occurred between that census and the next. Any entries in the registers which cannot be linked to the preceding census are then added to the file. Stage three involves the insertion of all the baptisms which occurred between the first and second censuses. For each child baptised, the mother is then identified and an additional record inserted under her name. This is to facilitate the analysis of fertility rates.

At this point, the information given in the second census may be added to the file. All possible links between the census records and the records already in the file are made. The final stage (apart from a general check for inconsistencies), comprises the insertion, first, of «in-migration» records for those individuals who are mentioned in the second census, but not in the first, and are stated in the second census to be at least ten years of age; and, second, of «out-migration» records for those who were present in the earliest census but not in the subsequent census, and for whom an entry could not be found in the burial register. These «migration» records, it should be stressed, represent presumed migration, rather than actual moves. If there are omissions in the registers, then the procedure will tend to overestimate the amount of migration. The registers in the parish of Berwick St James are, however, felt to be of good quality.

This procedure produces a ten-year reconstruction in one computer file, part of which is shown in Figure 1. To extend this period, the procedure is repeated for subsequent inter-censal periods. It is possible to reconstruct a community over a maximum of 40 years, from 1841 until 1881. The enumerators' books for censuses before 1841 were destroyed in 1931, and those for censuses after 1881 are unavailable to researchers because of the «hundred-year rule», which forbids access to documents containing information about named individuals for 100 years after they were written.

POPULATION TURNOVER

The results of applying this procedure to the village of Berwick St James permit a detailed assessment of population turnover. In Table 2 we present the results for the period 1841-51. The figures in the first row show that, of 246 inhabitants in 1841, 158 (or 64.2 per cent) were still present in 1851. Of the remainder, 36 are known to have died in the parish; the other 52 are presumed to have moved away. From the second row, it is seen that there were 93 births in the parish between 1841 and 1851 of which 76 were still alive and living in the parish in 1851. Fifteen of the remainder had died (and appeared in burial the register), but of the other two we have no further record, and we have presumed that they moved out of the parish. In the third row, the figure of 53 is made up of those people who were aged 10 years and over who were present in 1851 but not in 1841, plus a few young children who were stated in the census of 1851 not to have been born in the parish. The figure of nine refers to those in the burial register who were stated to be living in the parish at the time of their death, but who were not mentioned in the 1841 census, and the figure of five refers to a small group of people who were present in neither census, but who, from information in the registers, seem to have lived in the parish for a period between 1841 and 1851.

It is readily seen that the growth of the population of Berwick St James between 1841 and 1851 was mainly due to natural increase. Net migration between the two census years was slightly positive, but there was an excess of 33 births over deaths. (In fact, if those individuals who were not listed in either census are not considered, net migration becomes negligible, and the population increase is entirely the result of the excess of births over deaths.)

The figures in Table 2 may also be used to calculate the crude birth and death rates. If we take the average population of the parish over the period to be 266, then the crude birth rate is $(93/266) \times 100 = 35.0$ per thousand, and the crude death rate is $(60/266) \times 22.6$ per thousand.

It has been mentioned that this is an exploratory study; and one of its aims is to assess the completeness of ecclesiastical registration during the mid-nineteenth century, in view of a number of reservations which have been made about the quality of the registers for this period. It is possible to obtain some idea the completeness of the baptism registers by comparing the 1851 census population with the baptism register for the previous ten years. Out of 72 children aged under 10 years in 1851 and stated to be born in the parish, 70 were found in the baptism register. The two exceptions were, in fact, both members of the same family. On this evidence, doubts about the coverage of the Anglican baptism appear to be somewhat misplaced.

It will be noticed, however, that there is a discrepancy between this figure of 70 and figure quoted in Table 2 of 74 baptism between 1841 and 1851 of children who were still living in the parish in 1851. This arises for two reasons. First, there was one child who was baptised on 30th January 1842 but who was stated to be ten years of age in the 1851 census. Either this child was baptised some time after her birth, or her age incorrectly reported in the

TABLE 1. *Extract from the census enumerators' book for the parish of Berwick St James, 1851.*

N.º	ADDRESS	SURNAME	CHRISTIAN NAME	RELATION TO HEAD	COND.	AGE		RANK, PROFESSION OR OCCUPATION	WHERE BORN
						M	F		
4	Berwick Street	Gilbert	Jonathan	Head	Wid	63		Agric. Labourer	Wilts. Steeple Langford
		Gilbert	Silina	Daur.	U		27		Wilts. Berwick St James
		Gilbert	Ann	Daur.	U		25		Wilts. Berwick St James
		Gilbert	Mary A.	Daur.*	U		1		Wilts. Berwick St James
5	Berwick Street	Collins	William	Head	Mar.	64		Agric. Labourer	Wilts. Berwick St James
		Collins	Isabella	Wife	Mar.		60		Wilts. Fisherton Delamere
		Pretty	Jonh	Grandson	U	12		Errand Boy	Wilts. Berwick St James
		Pretty	George	Grandson	U	9		Cow Boy	Wilts. Berwick St James
6	Berwick Street	Harman	Thomas	Head	Mar.	37		Harness Maker	Wilts. Everly
		Harman	Elizabeth	Wife	Mar.		38		Wilts. Netheravon
		Harman	Sarah J.	Daughter	U	9		Scholar	Wilts. Berwick St James
		Harman	Mary	Daughter	U	7		Scholar	Wilts. Berwick St James
7	Berwick Street	Blanchard	Issachar	Head	Mar.	44		Agric. Labourer	Wilts. Berwick St James
		Blanchard	Isabella	Wife	Mar.		44		Wilts. Amesbury
		Blanchard	Caroline	Daughter	U	11		Scholar	Wilts. Berwick St James
		Blanchard	Harriott	Daughter	U	9		Scholar	Wilts. Berwick St James
		Blanchard	Fanny	Daughter	U	6		Scholar	Wilts. Berwick St James
		Blanchard	Harry	Son	U	3		Wilts. Berwick St James	

Note: * This is incorrect. Reconstitution analysis showed Mary A. Gilbert to be the granddaughter of Jonathan.

Source: Census enumerators' Books, Berwick St James, Wiltshire, 1851 (Public Record Office H. O. 107/1848).

TABLE 2. *Population turnover in Berwick St James, 1841-51*

STATUS IN 1841	STATUS EN 1851			TOTALS
	LISTED AS PRESENT IN CENSUS	DEAD	PRESUMED TO HAVE OUT-MIGRATED	
Listed as present in census	158	36	52	246
Yet to be born *	76(2)	15(2)	2(0)	93(4)
Presumed to have in-migrated	53	9	5	67
Totals	287	60	59	406

Note: * This line only includes those who are listed in the Berwick St James baptism register or who, if not listed in the register, were stated to have been born in the parish in the census of 1851. The numbers not included in the baptism register but apparently born in the parish are given in brackets.

Sources: Census enumerators's books, Berwick St James, Wiltshire, 1841 and 1851 (Public Record Office H. O. 107/1167 and 1848); parish registers of Berwick St James, of which the Bishop's transcripts are available in the County Record Office, Trowbridge, Wiltshire.

census (on the extent to age misreporting, see ARMSTRONG, 1978, pp. 34-37). Second, there were three children who were stated in the 1851 census to have been born elsewhere. These children may have moved into the parish between their birth and their baptism, alternatively their birthplaces were incorrectly reported in the census. In any event, the discrepancy highlights a potential problem with the data: that of the interval between birth and baptisms. It will be necessary to obtain some idea of the mean age at baptism in nineteenth-century England before we can resolve ambiguities of this sort.

OTHER APPLICATIONS OF THE TECHNIQUE

Space precludes a detailed discussion of other applications of the procedure outlined in this paper, but there are clearly a number of important areas in which it will be of value. In Figure 2 we chart the histories of six women Berwick St James between 1841 and 1851, in order to illustrate the kind of information which our reconstitution can furnish. If we assume that the interval between birth and baptism was constant, we can see that birth intervals were often short (sometimes under 15 months). Two of the women also clearly gave birth to illegitimate children, and one, Elizabeth Gilbert, was probably pregnant when she married.

It is clear that if a large enough number of these «biographies» can be assembled, very detailed measurements of marital (and non-marital) fertility can be obtained. These will enable us to observe changes in fertility levels,

and more importantly to assess whether or not fertility was being controlled within marriage. This is important, since it was during the second half of the nineteenth century that the great fertility decline in England began (TEITELBAUM, 1984; WOODS, 1982, p. 112-123; WOODS and SMITH, 1983).

Although the analysis of fertility seems perhaps to be the most important potential application of this technique, there are a number of other questions which reconstitution will help us to answer, relating, for example, to the extent of endogamy in English rural communities, patterns of migration, levels and trends in infant mortality, and the extent of bridal pregnancy (which was common in Victorian England (see HAIR, 1966; 1970)). There are technical problems still to be solved, notably that relating to the length of time between birth and baptism, but it is clear that nineteenth-century English communities can be successfully reconstructed by combining information from the census returns with that from ecclesiastical registers.

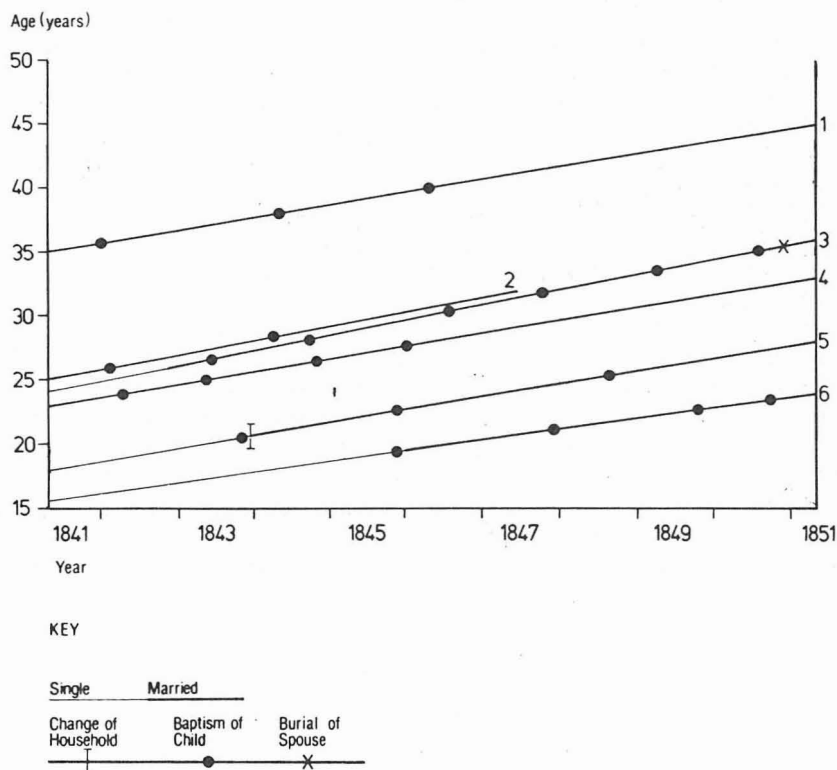


Fig. 2 — Histories of six woman resident en Berwick St James between 1841 and 1851

Note: The names of the women are as follows: 1 Mary Ann Humphries, 2 Elizabeth Pretty, 3 Elizabeth Gilbert (nee Witchell), 4 Catherine Blanchard, 5 Mary Ann Tuffin (nee White), 6 Diana Carter (nee White).

Sources: Census enumerators' books, Berwick St James, Wiltshire, 1841 and 1851 (Public Record Office H. O. 107/1167 and 1848); parish registers of Berwick St James (Wiltshire Record Office).

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