

Staffordshire Historical Surveys : No. 3

Staffordshire People (The 18th century)

Aims:

'one task would be to collect figures for each decade in a given time-span, i.e. the total number of baptisms, marriages and burials. It would then be possible to make graphs, showing highs and lows, from which some conclusions could be made'.

making use of parish registers 'to provide more general information about family groups and their interrelationships and indeed about the whole community'

My aim was to study the parish registers of St. Lawrence, Biddulph, from 1700 until 1800, to transcribe and collate the information gleaned – adding it to a very simple spread sheet. From this, I hoped that I would be able to draw conclusions as to general population trends (as extrapolated from baptisms and burials) and to look at such trends in greater detail by using family reconstitutions.

Method:

To extract information from the parish registers I transcribed them from fiche. I decided that there were two possible ways of doing this; by transcribing all the details or by counting the events only. As I hope to be able to work on family reconstitutions, I decided that the best option would be to provide a full transcription. I also compared my transcription with the Bishop's Transcripts at Lichfield -which were a valuable resource when the parish register was illegible. The BTs on occasion also provided additional detail such as at the burial of Mary Hambleton in 1710 – described as a *'vagrant'* in the transcripts- but this detail is missing from the register. There were only a very small number of events recorded in the transcripts that were not recorded in the registers.

I worked on the registers in stages – firstly transcribing the details into a file and from there, adding the details to Microsoft Excel. I kept each event separate – thus having separate data bases for baptisms, burials and marriages. Total number of events entered is just over 6000.

I also entered the information as monthly totals onto printed sheets. The forms are quite dated and from C.G.P.S (I think this was the Cambridge Group for Population Studies). It is quite possible that there is a better form available.

I decided to also use the form because it provides an accessible way of collating the actual numbers of events and from this a nine-year rolling average could be calculated. It is possible using the form to consider seasonality in burials – which may suggest causes of high mortality as certain diseases were prevalent at certain times of the year. The form also allows the comparison of burials and conceptions by harvest year.

Sources:

S.R.O Biddulph St. Lawrence Fiche- D3539/1/3 D3539/1/1 D3539/1/5 D3539/1/12

L.R.O Biddulph St. Lawrence Bishop's Transcripts B/V/7/1/75/2 - /5

Counts had already been taken from the registers by Rev. Jonathan Wilson and an analysis produced from the resulting figures. Jonathan Wilson was Curate from 1775 – 1782 and Vicar from 1783 – 1810. Figures are at SRO along with his count of the inhabitants during 1779 and 1801. D3539/1/48. Population Growth & Change - to be found in *'Biddulph (By the Diggings) A Local History'* - Edited by Joseph Kennedy.

Identifying Problems:

The first query that I have is with regards to the size of the register – does the register record a sufficient number of events for the figures to be meaningful? If it is too small then do the resulting ‘ups and downs’ reflect chance variations rather than trends. The Biddulph registers never reach 100 events per year. Does this mean that it would be wise to combine with an adjacent parish, such as Horton, to provide a number of events that would be acceptable?

The next problem encountered was the start of the year. The modern calendar year begins on 1st January. This is the year used on the forms and Excel. Until 1752, however, the year began on 25th March. In order to conform to modern practice the early part of the year was converted: baptisms occurring in February 1701 in the register are recorded as taking place in February 1702. The period January 1st to March 24th is moved forward one year.

Fortunately the Biddulph registers have the different events recorded separately. I would envisage that where registers record baptisms, burials and marriages together, more time would need to be allocated for transcribing.

Multiple entries - Early on in the process I discovered that frequently more than one event was recorded in each entry. It was therefore not always the case that one entry in the register equals one event! For example:

Baptisms May 2nd 1718: *‘Hannah & Anne daughters of Thomas & Ellen Mellor’*

Burials Dec 12th 1721: *‘Francis & Ralph Stonier. Brothers’.*

Burials *‘Richard Hirdfield 28.2.1700 Richard Adderton 17.3.1700’*

Gaps

Use of the form allows gaps to be noted. For example, burials in 1765 – none were recorded Jan – April. Was it the case that the incumbent was negligent? Was he ill and someone else took over and failed to record in the registers? Or were there simply no deaths in that period? I used the Bishop’s Transcripts to check on such queries. Need to be cautious over gaps as they could mask events and affect rates of population change. Would frequent gaps infer that the register was ‘deficient’?

Stillbirths

Stillbirths were consistently recorded in the burial register up until 1776. As a baptism had not occurred then there is no corresponding entry in the baptism register. I opted to add such an event to the data base and the resulting figures - otherwise the figures for burials would be skewed. Rev. Wilson applied the same idea. After 1776, there were presumably still stillbirths occurring but for some reason these were no longer added to the burial register. I wonder how other parishes dealt with stillbirths.

Events noted in the register that involved people residing out of the parish:

This was a fairly common situation; it was as if the association with Biddulph parish was so deeply rooted that families frequently returned. For example, between 1720 and 1725 James and Mary Copland returned from *‘Astbury Parish’* to baptise three children. Likewise, burials were often of people living out of the parish: *‘Joseph Stanley of Buglawton’* was buried in 1705. Should such events remain in the transcribed figures or be removed? And what of the entries that record *‘died at’*? This does not necessarily mean the person was living out the parish – they could have been visiting relatives at the time: *‘Samuel son of John & Elizabeth Cottrell buried 27th November 1784 – died at Manchester.’*

Events noted in the register that involved Biddulph people but that took place outside of the parish: For some reason, events involving Biddulph people that took place at other churches (such as Horton and Astbury), were sometimes recorded in the Biddulph registers:

1740 *'Anne Gibson daughter of John & Sarah was baptised at Horton'*

1739 *'John Sherratt, Vicar, buried at Endon'*

Every attempt has been made not to include events at other churches. I'm unsure as to the implications of such events – how do they influence, if at all, the final figures? I suspect that as the figures for total events are low – then any such figures would have a great impact. And yet – even though they were baptised or buried elsewhere – presumably they were actually born or they died within the parish and in which case, should the figures be included?

Events recorded in the register which involve those who were 'passing through' the parish:

Note made occasionally of vagrants and also gypsies:

Burial of Ann Boswell on 23rd November 1776 – *'daughter of Robert & Ann – a gypsy'*

Baptism of Merrick Locke in 1782 *'son of George & Elizabeth Locke – gypsies'*

Non conformism

How does this affect the figures produced from the registers? There are a few examples in the registers that indicate that non conformism was a part of the Biddulph community: 1722 Burial of *'William Lees – Anabaptist'* and 1771 Burial of Dorothy Shrigley from Newbold Astbury who was *'the wife of Benjamin – Anabaptist.'* How important is it to discover the strength of non – conformity within the parish and the effect it may have had as under-registration in the registers?

Calculations:

Nine-year moving average

This is used to 'smooth out' fluctuations in the number of baptisms and burials within a parish. Details provided by Matthew Blake.

For Harvest Year

Using the baptism form- the harvest year begins August and runs to the end of July the following year. Use this figure when we wish to know the number of conceptions rather than the number of baptisms. The number of conceptions is related to the number of baptisms 9 months later. So, if it was a good harvest and food was plentiful- presumably couples would be better fed and more fertile and so baptisms would be higher in the 9 month period after. Thus: baptisms for Jan – April 1778 added to baptisms for May – Dec 1777 would equal the number of conceptions for the harvest year of 1776.

Year	Jan – April baptism total	May – December baptism total	Total conceptions by harvest year
1776	22	23	47
1777	26	32	
1778	15	21	

1776 produced a total of 47 conceptions by harvest year. Presumably spikes in these figures along with low burials would suggest that good harvests were an important factor in rates of growth.

Marriage & Burial forms: the total for the harvest year (August to the end of the following July) is obtained by adding the total for August to December of one year to the total for January to July of the next.

Year	Burials for Jan - July	Burials for Aug - Dec	Harvest Year Totals
1776	22	12	18
1777	6	11	
1778	14	6	

1776 produced a total of 18 burials by harvest year.

I haven't been able to find much about the use of the 'harvest year' – so maybe it's not thought to be relevant.

General Notes on the St. Lawrence Registers 1701 – 1801

Baptisms:

Until March 1702 a date of birth was entered alongside that of baptism and of the 33 entries, the average number of days between birth and baptism was 17 days. It must also be kept in mind that some baptisms were adults: 1747 – *'William Bowes baptised aged about 20'* and in 1734 *'Mary Filchatt baptised aged 10 years and 3 months.'*

Note was made of the baptism of children from outside of the parish and occasionally of baptisms of Biddulph children taking place at other churches. Other details sometimes recorded include abode and status of father eg. yeoman or husbandman. There was a short period when the baptisms were split into two with a separate column for the baptism of the children *'of poor labouring people'*.

Illegitimacy was recorded by the use of *'spinster'* and *'spurious'* and this seems to have been consistently upheld over the whole period.

It is not always possible to identify multiple births but in February 1703 the community must have been amazed at the birth and burial of triplets: *'Three female infants of John and Elizabeth Rowley de Mole were born and buried.'*

Burials:

Details of abode were often given especially if the deceased was from outside of the parish. Age appears to have been important particularly if the deceased was of a great age:

'Ann Eardley buried 12th Feb 1799. Widow of Moody Street aged 90' and in 1754 – *'Anne Baddeley buried...aged 110 years. Poor'*.

The term 'infant' was regularly used and the cause of death was often recorded where death was the result of an accident or unusual event: 1747 William Gater and Thomas Keen were *'killed in a coal pit'* and in 1782, Joseph Walley was *'killed by fighting'*.

Relationships and status usually recorded such as: *widow, wife of, son of, daughter of*. Occupations are sometimes recorded.

Marriages:

Marriages of Biddulph people that took place at other churches are sometimes recorded – although this figure appears to be small and would suggest that these were marriages of people that held some social standing within the parish.

'David Sutton of Leek Parish and Ann Waller of Biddulph were married at Astbury. October 5th 1732' Place of abode seems to have been recorded when the couple resided outside of the parish.

Signatures appear from 1754 – along with those of witnesses. Later entries also include occupation of the groom and marital status.

Conclusion

I have enjoyed the exercise and have the added bonus of a searchable data base for any family history queries that the society receives.

Using Wilson's figures as a check, I investigated any discrepancies and sought explanations; most were due to either multiple events in one entry missed by Wilson or entries missed by myself on transcription. By comparing my figures with those of Jonathan Wilson and the Bishop's transcripts, I feel that accurate data has been produced.

It is obvious that the parish in the 18th century was anything but a 'closed community' – movement across the parish and the county boundary was frequent and patterns are undoubtedly complex. I think that the data gleaned can be used to further the understanding of such issues although I now appreciate that comparisons between parishes would be difficult due to the very different economic circumstances, customs and values that may occur and the difficulties encountered when attempting to construct crude birth and death rates, which would be necessary if any meaningful comparison between areas was to take place.

Understanding the resulting data

Help with interpretation of the resulting graphs – what is the cause of an increasing / decreasing population? What do they tell us and how much or how detailed an interpretation is required? What is the modern accepted view for population increases in the 18th century – Fall in mortality due to improved health & hygiene or increased fertility due to lower age of marriage?

Have I interpreted the 'harvest year' correctly? Are the resulting graphs set out as they should be?

Questions

What is the optimum number of events per year per parish register which would be necessary in order to produce reliable figures?

(I've looked at the transcribed copies of registers for Rushton – which are on the internet. Figures are very small. Astbury is of course in Cheshire and therefore out of the scope of the project and anyway – the registers are of a very poor quality. Still have Horton to consider).

How do I go about constructing crude birth and death rates and is it necessary? It would seem to be important to construct such figures if we want to compare different areas of the county?

Is there a need to clarify what entries to include or exclude from the final figures – especially if crude rates are to be constructed?

How do we find out about: disease, weather conditions, bad harvests etc within Staffordshire - Is there any way of finding out food prices or the cost of grain or crop yields?

What of 'Crisis years' – years of high mortality? How do we decide if it was a crisis?

Migration into and out of the parish: Would it be worthwhile looking at the appearance of different surnames within the parish register?

Query

I appreciate that the parish registers do not reveal the total population at any date – they can only provide a general trend, however, if the population of the parish is known at two particular dates: in this instance the population of the parish of Biddulph was counted by the Rev. Jonathan Wilson in 1779 and 1801, would it be possible, by deducting baptisms and adding burials from the 1801 figure to reach the count given in 1779? If the count is vastly different, how reliable would this be as a measure of migration?

Year	Baptisms	Burials
To date of 1801 census	10	4
1800	54	19
1799	44	21
1798	43	31
1797	51	29
1796	45	12
1795	51	26
1794	35	25
1793	58	32
1792	51	19
1791	39	25
1790	50	24
1789	59	14
1788	47	36
1787	53	20
1786	52	18
1785	49	41
1784	46	20
1783	44	32
1782	36	24
1781	43	11
1780	40	14
1779	41	28

Total 1041 bpts	Total 525 burials
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Population in 1801 = 1180

1180 + 525 burials = 1705 less 1041 baptisms

Population in 1779 = 1035

Difference = population of 664

Difference = 145

Therefore, was 371 added to the parish by migration?

Or is this more likely to be a combination of families moving to the parish, non conformity and under registration in the parish registers?

Developing the project:

Possibly consider the Horton registers and add to the Biddulph results – or keep separate?
Find out about 'crude birth & death rates' to enable comparisons with other parishes.

Once the questions and queries have been tackled and the results interpreted, I would love to be able to take this further by 'family reconstitution'.

Family Reconstitution

Compiling family histories for the residents of Biddulph parish in the 18th century has many appealing features. To begin with, it would enable us to look in greater detail at the general trends produced by the first project. Questions such as age of first marriage, the number of marriages, age at death, children produced within a marriage, illegitimacy and possibly even migration could be considered. These all have a part to play in explaining population increase or decrease and periods of stagnation.

Additional sources:

Wills

Bishop's Transcripts

Useful for clarifying details difficult to read in register and added some extra detail e.g: 'vagrant' at the burial of Mary Hambleton.

Parish accounts

Use of Overseer of the Poor Accounts. Can add detail e.g: Burial of William Copland in 1700. Register also details he was a 'coalgetter'. Overseer's accounts show that the parish paid for his interment.

Anne Bailey buried 5th June 1715. Overseer : Paid for a coffin for James Bailey's wife.

Martha Mellor buried 7th April 1714. Overseer : Paid burial charge – wife of Hugh