

Bridal Pregnancy in Earlier Rural England further examined

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A previous paper on bridal pregnancy in rural England in earlier centuries reported the results of a sample investigation of 3,876 brides married between the 1540's and the 1820's.¹ The sample drew on the registers of 77 parishes in 24 countries, but since the total number of marriages in rural England in this period must have been of the order of ten million, the number of brides in the sample represented only a tiny proportion of the total. While the similarity of results in parish after parish leaves little reasonable doubt as to their general accuracy and national applicability, the smallness of the sample justifies a further inquiry on the same lines. Moreover, the interpretation of the results in the previous investigation involved reference to various points of demographic experience and parish registration practice which had till then been little examined by historians, and on these points the conclusions accepted were necessarily tentative. In the present paper some of these points are either re-examined or procedures for their fuller investigation are suggested. It is clear that much of the further research will have to be done by local historians.²

We found that one-sixth of the brides in our sample were shown in the registers to have been pregnant at marriage; and we argued that when allowance has been made for the brides not traced to a maternity, and for certain other factors, roughly one-fifth of all brides in the earlier centuries (i.e. 1540–1700) and two-fifths of all brides in the later centuries were pregnant. Other scholars have recently published the following instances of bridal pregnancy incidence. In Clayworth parish (Notts.), 1650–1750, Laslett and Harrison report that 13% of 127 brides traced to maternities were pregnant at marriage. In Wylve parish (Wilts.), 1654–1783, Laslett reports that 34% of 76 brides were pregnant; and in Cartmel parish (Lancs.), 1660–1675, he reports that 18% of 173 brides were pregnant. In Colyton parish (Devon), 1538–1799, he reports that roughly half of 976 brides were pregnant.³ The average of these incidences is above the one-sixth which we suggested applied to the whole country and whole period. Comparing the incidences with the detailed figures in our previous paper, the Cartmel rate is low for a Northern parish in the seventeenth century, and the Clayworth rate is low for a period with a substantial eighteenth-century element: the Wylve rate is average for the particular period: the Colyton rate is high. In general, these rates are in agreement with our finding that incidence was higher in the later than in the earlier centuries.⁴ But since the Colyton brides include a substantial proportion before 1700, the rate there for the earlier centuries may have been a good deal higher than the national average we suggested.⁵ This has encouraged us to search for additional material on the earlier centuries, and in particular on the sixteenth century, which was poorly represented in our original sample.

¹ P. E. H. Hair, 'Bridal pregnancy in rural England in earlier centuries', *Population Studies*, 20, 1966, pp. 233–243.

² The previous paper pointed out that only a small proportion of parish registers are available in print, and that only a small proportion of the material in these is suitable for the investigation of bridal pregnancy. The investigations described in the present paper have often terminated inconclusively because of our inability to discover further suitable material. The procedures are, however, recommended to the growing band of local demographers who have readier access to manuscript records. It is not likely that many more studies of national, as distinct from local, demography will appear which are based on single-handed, non-computerized counting in the printed records.

³ P. Laslett, *The World we have lost* (London, 1965), p. 139.

⁴ This has also been shown to be true of an overseas Anglophone community: at Bristol, Rhode Island, in 1680–1720, there were 27 brides, none pregnant; in 1720–40, 42 brides, four pregnant (= 10%); in 1740–80, 58 brides, 27 pregnant (= 47%). See J. Demos, 'Families in colonial Bristol, Rhode Island: An exercise in historical demography', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 25, 1968, pp. 40–57, on p. 56.

⁵ That is, the national average for pregnancy among traced brides: in Table 1 of our previous paper, the pre-1700 rate calculated from birth dates was 22% and calculated from baptism dates 17%.

The table below, relating to a further 2,340 brides, gives the results of a number of separate investigations. We have not attempted to produce a new national sample, balanced regionally and chronologically. Nor have we been as rigorous in selecting material as we were originally. Most of the registers now employed give only baptism dates, some fail to give regularly the mother's name at baptism (which formerly we regarded as a *sine qua non* for selection), and some are unindexed. Of the 18 listed parishes (from eight counties), two were included in our original sample but are now examined over a longer range of years. All the parish samples are much larger than those previously investigated. Hence, it becomes possible to indicate for each parish (except the Northumberland set) the proportion of brides reaching maternity by various intervals since marriage. In general, this table confirms the findings of our previous paper – at the simplest, a substantial amount of bridal pregnancy shown in the registers of almost every parish examined. But line by line the table suggests some modifications in detail and some elaborations.

TABLE I

Parish	Dates	No. of brides investigated/traced to maternity	Percentages of traced brides by intervals between marriage and maternity (in months)						
			3	6	8	8½	9	12	24
Dymock (Glos.)	1538–67	162/54=33%	2	20	28	30	30	55	87
Aberford (Yorks.)	1541–64	73/30=41%	0	13	20	20	30	47	73
Horsham (Surrey)	1541–52	133/89=67%	2	7	13	19	30	45	71
Standish (Lancs.)	1560–89	123/68=55%	7	21	24	26	41	47	66
Orwell (Cambs.)	1570–85	49/31=63%	0	7	10	10	10	36	77
	1586–99	44/29=66%	3	7	14	14	21	34	66
	1600–19	47/28=60%	0	0	3	3	3	32	75
	1620–43	52/26=50%	8	16	19	23	23	38	85
	1570–1643	192/114=59%							
Wimbledon (Surrey)	1600–50	73/27=37%	0	4	7	11	11	41	74
Cuckfield (Sussex)	1605–22	231/90=39%	1	8	17	21	22	39	71
Kirkham (Lancs.)	1622–28	129/41=32%	5	15	17	17	17	39	80
Conway (Caern.)	1627–34	33/10=30%	0	10	20	20	20	60	70
Angmering (Sussex)	1640–82	189/87=46%	2	4	8	13	18	53	86
Blackburn (Lancs.)	1653–54	46/19=41%	5	16	26	26	26	53	69
Medmenham (Bucks.)	1662–1749	89/33=37%	0	3	3	18	18	52	84
	1750–1836	196/91=46%	16	31	43	49	54	69	88
	1837–1887	96/50=52%	18	30	40	40	44	62	84
	1888–1927	68/24=35%	0	8	13	17	29	37	71
Conway (Caern.)	1698–1729	101/46=46%	2	7	9	15	20	52	83
Abinger (Surrey)	1750–98	198/108=55%	13	32	46	48	51	62	84
Lesbury, Ellingham, Embleton, Longhoughton, Belford (Northumb.)	1798–1807	208/89=43%	10	17	29	32	32	64	90
		2340/1070=46%							
Caen Protestants ⁶	1562–3, 1570–1	58/17=29%	0	0	6	6	6	42	94

⁶ C. E. Lart, *The Registers of the Protestant Church at Caen (Normandy)* (Huguenot Society, 1907): this item is included to show that the method can be applied to non-English registers. The years studied were years of confusion for Caen Protestants, so the results may be exceptional. More study of French Protestants would be of interest in view of Laslett's belief that 'Catholic France had a different record of bastardy and pre-nuptial pregnancy from that of Protestant England' (p. 140).

Taking the first column of figures, the proportion of brides traced to a maternity varies from 30% to 67%, and although the highest figure comes from one of the earliest sets, no clear chronological or regional trend is apparent: the position was the same in the original sample. Turning to the last column of figures, the figure for the percentage of brides traced to a maternity occurring within 24 months of marriage is a useful rough guide to the completeness of the figures for shorter intervals. When the 24 months' figure falls markedly below 85%, it may be taken that a number of what appear in the register to be long-delayed first maternities are in fact second or later maternities, and that, for one reason or another, the first maternity after marriage was not registered in the parish of marriage. These missing first maternities belong to one of the shorter intervals shown, and therefore a low figure on the extreme right of the table makes it likely that the figure at 8½ months should be higher. For technical reasons the figures at 24 months are lower in this table than they were in our original sample,⁷ and for this reason the figures at 8½ months may be more of an underestimate than those in the original sample.

As in our previous paper, we take the figure at 8½ months to be a reasonable index of bridal pregnancy. Attention must first be drawn to the five parishes with sixteenth-century entries. Here the figure at 8½ months ranges from 10% to 30%. In our original sample, roughly the same number of brides, but from the seventeenth as well as the sixteenth century, showed an incidence of approximately 20% of bridal pregnancy. The seventeenth-century rates in the new table, putting aside an aberrant 3%, range between 11% and 26%. (Since the parish samples are of different size, a single average might be misleading.) For the earlier centuries the new figures are broadly in line with our previous findings. But we now have fuller evidence of sixteenth century-rates, confirming what was in fact shown by the thinner evidence in our previous paper (though the point was not there made), that rates in the sixteenth century were not necessarily lower than those in the seventeenth. Since we have several relatively high rates from the 1540's and 1550's, it is now clear that the secular trend in bridal pregnancy incidence was not a simple even progression.

In the original sample a breakdown by regions (which was perhaps unwise owing to the small numbers of brides involved) suggested that in the earlier centuries brides in the Northern region showed a much higher incidence than brides in the Central or Southern parishes. But in the present table a Gloucestershire parish shows the highest rate; and, more significantly, the average for four Southern parishes is 19%, as compared with an average of 22% for five Northern parishes. To sum up our new findings in respect of the earlier centuries: taking the sixteenth against the seventeenth century, and one region against another, the average incidence may have been fairly even, at least more so than was suggested and implied in our previous paper. However, none of the new sixteenth- and seventeenth-century rates rises above 30%, and the vast majority lie between 13% and 26% – and this is in marked contrast with the eighteenth-century rates in the table (and in the original sample), most of which are well over 30%. The steep increase in eighteenth-century rates, over rates in the earlier centuries, shown in our original sample, is confirmed.

The figures for Orwell parish (Cams.), 1570–1643, represent an attempt to make a detailed analysis of a single parish over a long period: few registers continue suitable for so long. The incidences of traced maternities are satisfactorily consistent (and high), but the incidences of bridal pregnancy are irregular. It seems likely that this irregularity arises mainly because the number of brides in each period is small (note also, however, that the figure at 24 months is often much too

⁷ The parish samples are mainly from earlier centuries, when the spelling of names was more fluid – hence, it is easier to overlook a baptism entry. Lack of mother's name in some registers similarly leads to some entries being missed. That first maternities were sometimes missed – unless they were not registered – is shown by the number of traced first maternities at intervals from marriage of over two years. When the figure at 24 months is low, often intervals of up to seven years are recorded, and some of these are unlikely to have been first maternities. An alternative explanation of the variation between parishes in the proportion at 24 months, that in some parishes substantial numbers of brides registered their first maternity in another parish but their second or later maternity in the parish of marriage is perhaps not very likely. But see note 10.

low). Analysis of the experience of a single parish, by short periods, is unlikely to be very meaningful unless the parish has a high 'turnover' of brides. The figures for Conway for two periods, 1627–34 and 1698–1729, represent another exercise of limited value. The intention was to see if in a single parish the take-off to eighteenth-century rates began far back in the previous century. But the small number of traced brides in the first period makes the bridal pregnancy rate not very meaningful, and the rate in the second period is aberrantly low at 15%: we can only conclude that the parish was exceptional.⁸ The figures for Medmenham parish (Bucks.) fortunately represent a more profitable exercise. We pointed out in our previous paper that printed registers seldom go beyond 1820, and we could therefore say little about later nineteenth-century experience. The register of Medmenham is well-nigh unique in that it is available in print for the period 1662–1927. We have analysed it in some detail, and our findings may be of use to those who subsequently analyse nineteenth- and twentieth-century parish registers.

Medmenham is a small parish: its population in 1801 was 280, it rose to 400 in 1851 and, after a fall-back to 310 in 1871, to 420 in 1931. Its eighteenth-century population was most probably 250–300. During the period 1662–1749 a sharp increase in the number of annual baptisms and marriages probably indicates some clerical neglect in the earlier decades; while the rates for the next period, 1750–1836, suggest, by their order and their ratio, that the registers were now recording a large proportion, and perhaps all, of the local marriages and births. What is of especial interest is that these higher rates were largely maintained in the subsequent period, 1837–1887.⁹ With the advent of civil registration in 1837, the parish registers might have been expected to show a steep decline in numbers. In fact, the villagers seem to have shown little disposition to desert the registers during this period, since baptisms increased and the small fall-off in marriages may have been largely due to the temporary decline in population around 1870. Only towards the end of the nineteenth century does it become clear that the village is beginning to ignore the Church. The period 1887–1927, during which the population was at least as large as in the previous period, showed a further decline in annual marriages and the first decline in annual baptisms during the periods surveyed. (Even so, probably as large a proportion of the villagers were using the registers as in the earliest period, 1662–1749). What this means is that, *if Medmenham was typical of rural England*, parish registers may be almost as comprehensive a record for the Victorian period as for any earlier period. For the period 1837–1887 the bridal pregnancy rate at Medmenham was high at 40% (although not as high as the 1750–1836 rate of 49%), and this may well show that the high bridal pregnancy rates of the eighteenth century continued through the nineteenth and into the present century – presumably until contraception came to be systematically practised by rural males. To repeat a figure given in the previous paper, in the agricultural parish of Gosforth (Cumberland) 40% of all brides between 1920 and 1951 were pregnant. At Medmenham, however, the rate fell to 17% in 1887–1927: this may have been due to contraception, practised earlier in the South, or to the fall-off in marriages, assuming that pregnant brides now made their way to the registry office.

We have thus drawn from our new set of figures confirmation of our previous general findings, together with some additional, albeit tentative, findings relating to the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries – the experience of the former apparently being similar to that of the seventeenth century, the experience of the latter apparently similar to that of the eighteenth century. Our further remarks in this paper relate to problems of interpretation and procedure common to both investigations.

⁸ The obvious explanation, that it was Welsh, may conceivably be correct: we had few Welsh parishes in our original sample.

⁹ The figures, calculated from the registers, are: 1662–1720, 4.7 baptisms and 1.1 marriages p.a.; 1721–49, 7.2 baptisms and 0.9 marriages p.a.; 1750–1836, 10.5 baptisms and 2.3 marriages p.a.; 1837–87, 11.1 baptisms and 1.9 marriages p.a.; 1888–1927, 9.3 baptisms and 1.7 marriages p.a.

AREA INVESTIGATION

The basic procedure of our method is the investigation of the experience of a single parish. This creates a serious problem, that of assessing the experience of the large proportion of brides who cannot be traced to maternities recorded in the baptism register of the parish of marriage, most of whom, in our view, were migrants at or after marriage to a neighbouring parish.¹⁰ Clearly, an investigation of the experience of a number of contiguous parishes is a necessary next task: first, to check the hypothesis of migration, and second, if the hypothesis should prove correct, to study the pregnancy experience of the missing brides. Unfortunately, the parish registers have always been printed, within counties, on a random single-parish basis, and too few registers have yet been printed in any county to produce much prospect of discovering a set of three or more contiguous parishes. (The vast majority of parishes have at least three other bordering parishes, and boundaries are so irregular that some parishes have six and more neighbours.)¹¹

We have discovered a set of 16 registers from parishes in North Northumberland which were partly contiguous, and together covered the greater part of a small region. Not all the registers are in print, but the unprinted ones are available in typescript copy in one location. Investigation of these 16 registers for the period 1798–1807 has shown that some brides missing from the parish of marriage can indeed be traced to maternities in neighbouring parishes: against 99 brides traced in the parish of marriage, 18 were traced elsewhere (i.e. 18% more). Unhappily, North Northumberland proves to be an unsuitable region for the test, as shown by the fact that the 117 traced brides represented over 450 marriages in this period. The low tracing rate almost certainly indicates that the registers record only a small proportion of births, due to the local strength of Presbyterian nonconformity in an area bordering Scotland. It is possible that brides who left the parish of marriage were particularly unlikely to seek Anglican baptism for their infants, and hence that the proportion of brides traced to a baptism elsewhere is exceptionally low.¹² Perhaps all that the investigation indicates is that, to make up a similar set of parishes in a more suitable county, it will be

¹⁰ It has recently been stated that 'it was customary for the first child of a marriage to be born and baptized in the native parish of the mother' (D. J. Steel, *National Index of Parish Registers*, Volume 1 (Society of Genealogists, 1968), p. 147). No reference is cited and no evidence quoted for this statement. Presumably what is intended to be suggested is that the bride returned for her first maternity to her mother's house, in the parish of residence before marriage (which may or may not be her native parish). Since the vast majority of rural brides were married in their parish of previous residence (see the figures quoted on p. 238 of our previous paper), and since a large proportion of rural first maternities occurred in the parish of marriage, it is certain that many first children were baptized in the parish of the bride's pre-marital residence (i.e. in the mother's parish), and to this extent the statement is correct. But we do not know whether these maternities occurred at the conjugal residence or at the mother's house. The statement further claims that brides living away from the parish of pre-marital residence returned there for first maternity. A small proportion of brides (perhaps 10%) were married in another parish, and it is likely that most of these continued to reside after marriage away from the parish of pre-marital residence: evidence of the baptism of their first maternity in the pre-marital parish would indicate a return to their mother's house. We have investigated a small number of these brides in the registers of their parish of marriage and their parish of declared pre-marital residence, and we have found no instance of a baptism of a first maternity in the mother's parish. While further investigation of the point is needed, we are certain that it was not general for brides living away from their pre-marital parish to return for their first birth, and we have found no positive evidence that brides commonly returned to their mother's house. We conclude that the hypothesis of temporary return of large numbers of brides to their parish of marriage for their first birth is not sufficiently established to affect our suggestion that the missing brides of our investigation were largely those who took up permanent residence outside the parish of marriage between their marriage and first birth.

¹¹ Far too few printed registers contain an introduction which describes the location of the parish and lists neighbouring parishes, or better still, a map. The assumption of editors, too, often seems to be that the registers will only be used by those who know the district intimately. It is particularly unfortunate that many registers fail to indicate which place-names are locations within the parish and which neighbouring parishes.

¹² For the record, of those brides traced elsewhere than in the parish of marriage, only 28% were pregnant at marriage. This is a low figure for the region and period: hence it suggests that brides did not migrate because they were pregnant.

necessary to utilize unprinted as well as printed registers.¹³ We have selected the five Northumberland parishes in which reasonable numbers of brides were traced¹⁴ (in some of the other parishes, not a single bride was traced), and list the compound results in Table 1.

PREGNANT WIDOWS ?

Apart from migrants, untraced brides included those who never had children, and among these were brides who were past childbearing age. Re-marriage was more common in earlier centuries, because the death of a spouse during the earlier years of marriage was more common: Christian folk practised '*polygamia successiva*'. Eversley has noted that in a Worcestershire parish, 1825-49, 17% of the men marrying were widowers.¹⁵ We have found that in Horsham parish (Surrey), 1541-52, 11% of the men marrying were widowers; and in the same parish, 1541-70, of the brides 27% were widows. Unfortunately, we do not know the ages of the widows. However, in this parish, in 1541-52, 70% of the brides in marriages involving previously unmarried persons could be traced to a maternity, for marriages of widowers the figure was 66%, for marriages of widows 57%, and for marriages of widowers to widows only 50%. While these figures show that many widows and widowers who re-married were still young enough to produce children, the fall-off in the tracing rate suggests that a proportion were elderly. (Presumably the likelihood of one partner being too old to produce children was greatest when widower and widow married; and presumably widows married old bachelors more often than widowers married old spinsters.) In our previous paper we suggested that as many as one-third of the missing brides were missing because they had never been pregnant, and attributed this partly to 're-marriage by ageing widows and widowers'. We now think that one-third may have been an over-generous proportion, for though there was indeed much re-marriage, a large proportion of the widows and widowers were not 'ageing' but young enough to produce children. Should we then visualize the pregnant brides as including a substantial number of pregnant widows? At Horsham, in 1541-52, the bridal pregnancy rate for widows was only 6%, very much lower than the general rate, and probably this was normal. Widows tended to be past the high fertility of youth: perhaps their social circumstances kept them chaste, or perhaps they were more skilled in holding their men off until safely married. As for the brides of widowers, the speed of courtship hardly gave them time to become pregnant. At Horsham in 1541-77, whereas the median time between the death of their first spouse and re-marriage for 20 widows was nine months, the figure for 16 widowers, no doubt harassed by child care, was only four months.

PREGNANT TEENAGERS ?

If it is confirmed by subsequent inquiry that widows showed a low incidence of bridal pregnancy, what other group can be indicted? To-day, the highest rate is among the youngest ('teenage') brides. Since ages are seldom given in marriage registers, investigation of the experience of younger brides is one of the many tasks to be left to the practitioners of family reconstitution. However, brides' ages were supplied at Medmenham for 1854-1927, and there we find that the median age of

¹³ A minor investigation on the same line relates to Abinger (Surrey), 1750-98: whereas 32% of brides were traced to maternities in the register of the parish church, a further 21% were traced in the separate register of the outlying Oakwood chapelry, and a further 2% in the register of neighbouring Wotton parish (conveniently indexed in the same volume).

¹⁴ Whether elsewhere (10) or in the parish of marriage (79). The eleven other parishes were: Chatton, Chillingham, Doddington, Edlingham, Eglingham, Ford, Howick, Ilderton, Ingram, Lowick and Wooler. Apart from the Presbyterian element in these parishes, there were also communities of Roman Catholics: see J. Bossy, 'Four Catholic congregations in rural Northumberland 1750-1850', *Recusant History*, 9, 1967-8, pp. 88-119; 'More Northumbrian congregations', *ibid.*, 10, 1969, pp. 11-34.

¹⁵ D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley, *Population in History* (London, 1965), p. 413.

39 non-pregnant brides was exactly the same as the median age of 11 pregnant brides – and the age being 23, bridal pregnancy was clearly not due to teenage innocence. Another inference from the Medmenham figures is that there was little teenage promiscuity. Even allowing for the possibility that female fertility in the late teens may have been much lower in earlier centuries than to-day, it is not possible that girls could have become sexually active at the age of (say) 16 and yet not have become pregnant before they were 22. If subsequent research shows that the Medmenham experience was typical of the nation and of earlier periods, we can at least rule out what may be termed the Cold Comfort Farm view of rural sexuality.¹⁶ Laslett, in the course of the only previous discussion of bridal pregnancy, has similarly argued against ‘any degree of promiscuity among single people’ in earlier times, his argument being based mainly on strong evidence that the marriage age for women in earlier centuries was, on the average, between 22 and 25, and that the bastardy rate was low.¹⁷

BETROTHAL LICENCE ?

Laslett has further argued: ‘more than half of the babies who arrived early had been conceived within the three months before the marriage ceremony and not earlier. If there had been any form of trial marriage in our country, this proportion would presumably have been lower.’¹⁸ The figures in our previous paper do not support Laslett’s ‘more than half’.¹⁹ In the original sample, for every 10 births between six and nine months after marriage, there were 14–18 before six months – and of these 5–8 were before three months.²⁰ These figures indicate that substantial proportions of brides had conceived each month from nine months before marriage, though there was also an increase in the proportion month by month. However, this increase is more marked if only the pre-1700 brides are considered, and some of the pre-1700 parish samples in our new table support Laslett’s contention that conception took place mainly within three months of marriage. Here we may have another secular trend. In the earlier centuries a larger proportion of bridal pregnancies was the result of conception within three months of marriage than in the later centuries. If, as Laslett suggests, a conception within three months of marriage is evidence of formal betrothal licence (i.e. that a couple were free to engage in intercourse after formal betrothal),²¹ then the change might partly be the result of an erosion of the custom of formal betrothal. Nevertheless, even in the earlier centuries a large proportion of the brides were more than three months pregnant: either there were some uncommonly long periods of betrothal (and even a three-month period may have been long for a betrothal) or, as one would expect, betrothal sometimes resulted from conception, rather than vice versa.

‘Next at our altar stood a luckless pair,
Brought by strong passions and a warrant there’:²²

¹⁶ Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm*, Chapters Iv, xix (Penguin Edition), pp. 42, 184. ‘The country was in its annual tortured ferment of spring growth. Frond leapt on frond and hare on hare . . . The long screams of the hunting owls tore across the night, scarlet lines on black. In the pauses, every ten minutes they mated. It seemed chaotic but it was more methodically arranged than you might think . . . All the trees and hedges came into full leaf over-night: and from behind the latter, in the evenings, cries could be heard of: Nay, don’t ’ee, Jem, from village maidens who were being seduced.’

¹⁷ Laslett, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁹ See Table I on p. 237.

²⁰ Two figures are given because Table I of the previous paper calculated maternities registered by birth dates and maternities registered by baptism dates separately. Another way of stating the position with regard to conception dates is as follows. Of 100 brides registering maternities within twelve months of marriage, 34–47 of the infants had been conceived in the three months after marriage, 22–24 in the three months before marriage, 19–23 in the three months before that, and 12–19 in the three months earlier still. (For convenience in calculation, in this instance only, nine months has been taken as the dividing line between post- and pre-marital conception.)

²¹ Laslett, *op. cit.*, pp. 141–145.

²² George Crabbe, *The Parish Register*, 1807.

hurried betrothals as well as 'shot-gun marriages' must always have been known. Some couples were perhaps merely constitutionally slow in organizing their affairs: we have come across several instances of a couple having their wedding and the baptism of their child on the same day. In sum, while we accept Laslett's view that bridal pregnancy – like owl-mating in darkest Sussex – was 'more methodically arranged than you might think', we are not convinced that it was mainly the product of betrothal licence, and are content with the wider and more cautious generalization, that it was, most probably, mainly the product of a courting convention which has not disappeared with time.²³

FROM BIRTH TO BAPTISM

Because parish registers normally record date of baptism rather than date of birth, we found it necessary in our first paper to investigate the average interval between birth and baptism. A sample inquiry, based on registers which happen to record both dates, showed great variation between parishes, but on average a large proportion of the children remained unbaptized six weeks after birth.²⁴ However, the sample contained no entries before 1700, and it is now clear that such long delays in baptism were infrequent in earlier centuries. Cox reported that at Chislet (Kent), 1544–46, 88% of 42 children born were baptized on the day of birth.²⁵ Such speed of baptism may have been exceptional, but Wrigley believes that at Colyton (Devon) in the sixteenth century infants were normally baptized 'very soon after birth', and it seems likely that baptism within a day or two of birth was common and general in this century.²⁶ No registers giving sixteenth-century birth dates were available to us, but we have investigated a number of registers with seventeenth-century birth dates. In three Lancashire parishes, in periods between 1646 and 1654 (300 entries), no child remained unbaptized a month after birth, and only 1–4% after two weeks – the median interval being 3–5 days: this was close to the assumed sixteenth-century pattern. In two Sussex parishes, in periods between 1654 and 1657 (100 entries), only 3% and 12% remained unbaptized after one month, but 72% and 61% after two weeks – the medians 10 and 14 days: here a proportion of baptisms was delayed till the third or fourth week. At Leeds, in part of 1666 (79 entries), the position was similar to that in the Sussex parishes a decade earlier: only 1% unbaptized after one month, but 70% after two weeks – the median nine days. Finally, in two Sussex parishes, in periods between 1696 and 1704 (160 entries), though the medians had only advanced to 11 and 15 days, 30% and 16% of the infants were now unbaptized after one month – an approximation to the position we outlined for the period after 1700.²⁷ It thus looks as if baptism delays became progressively longer and more common throughout the four centuries. In our previous paper, we found that bridal pregnancy rates in the later centuries were 6–8% higher when calculated on birth dates than they were when calculated on baptism dates, but for the earlier centuries we allowed a smaller difference,

²³ According to Kinsey *et al.*, 50% of their sample of American married women *c.* 1950 were virgin at marriage: of the remainder, 87% had had coitus with their future spouse (the term 'fiancé' is used, but not defined, and in the context it clearly means 'future spouse' rather than 'formally betrothed partner'). Roughly similar figures are quoted from a study of a sample of English women *c.* 1950. A. C. Kinsey, W. B. Pomeroy, C. E. Martin and P. H. Gerhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, (Philadelphia, 1953), p. 292.

²⁴ Cf. 'In the decade 1771–80 at Colyton, 50% of all children were baptized within a month of birth, 68% within two months, and 75% within three months.' Wrigley, in E. A. Wrigley, *An Introduction to English Historical Demography* (London, 1966), p. 156. But Laslett thought that for 'most parishes' the average interval was 'something like a fortnight'. Laslett, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

²⁵ J. C. Cox, *The Parish Registers of England* (1910), p. 40.

²⁶ E. A. Wrigley, 'Family limitation in pre-industrial England', *Economic History Review*, 19 (1966), pp. 82–109, on p. 99.

²⁷ The parishes were: Bolton, Feb. 1646–June 1647 (95 entries); Bury, 1647 (91); Blackburn, 1653 (106); Angmering, 1654–56 (63); Cowfold, 1654–57 (33); Leeds, Jan.–June 1666 (79); Cuckfield, 1696–98 (81); Ardingley, 1696–1704 (79).

5%. We now think that this was not small enough, since on the assumed sixteenth-century experience there would be no difference. We now put the figure for both the earlier centuries at only 2–3%. The effect of this modification is slightly to reduce our estimate of overall bridal pregnancy incidence in the earlier centuries, and thus to steepen the upward trend from the earlier to the later centuries.

SEASONAL DISTRIBUTION AND THE PROHIBITED SEASONS FOR MARRIAGE

It is sometimes asserted that the conception of bastards shows a seasonal distribution.²⁸ We have noticed no obvious seasonal trend in pre-marital conceptions, and close investigation of a few parishes has not shown any marked bunching (though there may have been a slight increase at harvest time and in the winter). The matter deserves to be pursued further, preferably in parishes where there are large numbers of pregnant brides, and as part of a general investigation of birth distribution. A point to be considered is whether the seasonal distribution of conceptions, both regular and irregular, was affected by the Church's regulations forbidding marriage (except with special permission) during certain periods of the year. The regulations of the post-Reformation English Church applied to a long Lent, to a short Whit season and to an Advent-cum-Christmas season, altogether 18–20 weeks or one-third of the year. As Easter was a very movable feast, in about two years out of every ten the Lent prohibition began only a few days after the Advent prohibition ended, and thus, if both were strictly adhered to, it was only possible to marry, during the months of December to March, in one week in January. Couples anxious to marry might be frustrated for weeks, or, if for any reason they missed the open week in one of these years, for months; and such delays might be expected to have increased the bridal pregnancy rate. It therefore seemed worth while to investigate if in fact these regulations were kept. Cox was categorical in his opinion: 'A careful examination of a large number of marriage registers up and down the country enables us to say that the ancient discipline of the Church of England with regard to the three periods was widely observed throughout the whole of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thus, the register of Letherington, Sussex, which begins in 1580, contains only three marriage entries during March (the centre of Lent) for the term of 182 years.'²⁹ Our own examination of a small number of registers leads us to question Cox's assertion.³⁰ The task is a tedious one, since the dates of prohibition vary from year to year, and a mere search for March entries is a very rough approximation. In the few parishes we have investigated the prohibited periods were progressively whittled down, and the process can be often shown to have reflected the advance of Puritan views. The full range of prohibition began to break down after 1560. Within 50 years the Advent prohibition was almost totally disregarded, and marriages took place in December and early January. While the prohibition of marriages in actual Lent (i.e. in March and neighbouring weeks) was normally maintained throughout the four centuries, marriages in the month before (late January, February) began to take place towards the end of the sixteenth century and were common by the middle decades of the seventeenth century. If later research confirms our findings, a possible complicating factor in the seasonal distribution of births will have been largely eliminated, since the remaining periods of prohibition, during actual Lent and around Whitsun, were too short seriously to affect the distribution.

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

A factor not considered in previous discussions of bridal pregnancy, Church discipline, will now be briefly examined. In our previous paper we argued that there was little shame at bridal pregnancy. However, pregnant brides and their grooms were often later involved in public and vexatious

²⁸ E.g. 'the population was slightly immoral all the year round, with bulges nine months after the harvest', correspondent in *Local Population Studies*, I (1968), p. 46.

²⁹ Cox, *op. cit.*, pp. 81–82.

³⁰ Our fullest investigations were in the registers of Horsham and Abinger (Sussex), and Standish (Lancashire).

proceedings in Church courts. Bridal pregnancy was, in the eyes of the Church, not only a moral offence but a crime – though in both respects no more than a mild misdemeanour. The offence, cited as ‘ante-nuptial fornication’ or, together with adultery and/or plain fornication under the heads of ‘incontinence’ or ‘fornication’, was tried in the Archdeacon’s Court, the lowest court of ecclesiastical jurisdiction.³¹ In the Court books (most still unpublished) can be found the names of at least tens of thousands of couples who were cited for this offence during the period of operation of this Court, between the thirteenth and the early nineteenth century. Since a large proportion of the cases tried in this Court concerned sexual incontinence, it was justly known in the seventeenth century as the ‘bawdy court’. The proof of guilt in respect of a charge against a married couple must always have been the birth of a child within nine months of marriage (we have found one instance of an inquiry whether a birth at nine months is a fair proof of the offence, but probably a charge was normally only laid when the interval from marriage was more obviously too short, say, within seven months). However, in the majority of cases, no reference to the birth was made in the citation, presumably because it was assumed that the proof was too obvious to be mentioned. The charge was brought in the first instance by the churchwardens of a parish, acting with the clergyman, and was included in the regular presentments made to the Church authorities. The case was dealt with in a Court held normally in the local market town, at fairly frequent intervals, and postponements and delays in judgment, which were not uncommon, meant that the defendants had often to appear several times. The punishment inflicted was normally a penance, which involved appearing in a public place, usually the church, and publicly confessing, sometimes on several occasions. Apart from the expenditure of time and energy, in appearances at Court and in performing the penance, fees had to be paid to the Court. Thus, bridal pregnancy could be a troublesome business (though not, of course, as troublesome as to be the unmarried parents of a bastard).

Only small sections of Church Court records have been published and the Courts have not been studied in detail. References to Church Courts in general histories are, in our view, misleading owing to over-concentration on what were, for the courts, and for the majority of contemporaries, minor matters, e.g. proceedings against a minority of theological nonconformists. It is usually alleged that the Church Courts were widely disliked from an early date, but this must be questioned: their proceedings against sexual offenders were traditional, and despite the trouble caused to offenders, were most probably widely accepted as a necessary instrument of social discipline. The effect of the success of theological nonconformity in the Puritan rebellion was to limit the powers of the Church Courts thereafter, and hence to make it increasingly easy for offenders of all types to avoid punishment (or even judgment). Nevertheless, a stream of sexual offenders continued to appear before the Courts, and to accept punishment by them, up to the later decades of the eighteenth century. This in our view indicates that the sexual discipline of the Church was not widely resented, but instead was approved of by the community at large.

The effect of the discipline is not easy to assess. The offence of ‘ante-nuptial fornication’ is an odd one in that the majority of offenders have no opportunity during their further lifetime to repeat the crime: punishment is therefore primarily intended to deter others. The offenders most probably considered punishment by a Church Court as one of the minor disadvantages of becoming a respectable married couple, rather like having to pay the clergyman a fee for the wedding; and conceivably there was some minor advantage in having formal absolution from a slightly guilty conscience. Public penance was, of course, supposed to be humiliating, but it may be doubted whether there were many – possessing a soul as sensitive as that of Robert Burns³² – who found it

³¹ I am grateful to my colleague, Dr. B. W. Quintrell, for introducing me to the subject of the Church Courts and their influence on bridal pregnancy, a subject touched on in his pending book on ‘Government in early Stuart Essex’. The most complete account of the social content of the Church Court records is S. A. Peyton, *The Churchwardens’ Presentments in the Oxfordshire Peculiars of Dorchester, Thame and Banbury* (Oxfordshire Record Society, x, 1928).

³² Whose case before the Kirk Session was peculiar in that he confessed to fornication with one woman in order to obtain a certificate of bachelorhood to enable him to marry another, a somewhat shameful proceeding.

so. Any offence of ante-nuptial fornication had, of course, been common knowledge for months: public confession by the offenders was no revelation, indeed, it must often have seemed like a triumphant announcement of successfully completed courtship, marriage and parenthood. Above all, as we have shown, the offence was too common to be regarded as scandalous.

Blackstone took the view that the sexual discipline of the Church was ineffective. 'Offences of open and serious lewdness have been ever since the restoration left to the feeble coercion of the spiritual court, according to the rules of the canon law; a law which has treated the offence of incontinence, nay even adultery itself, with a great degree of tenderness and lenity; owing perhaps to the constrained celibacy of its first compilers' (!).³³ But it could be argued that the incidence of bridal pregnancy increased as the effectiveness of the Church Courts declined, and that the Courts had been less lenient in early centuries than they were in Blackstone's day. Their claim certainly had always been that, although they could not eliminate the grosser moral offences, sexual irregularity and drunkenness, 'they helped to prevent them becoming more prevalent by the punishment they meted out to offenders'.³⁴ Whether this was the case or not, their claim was reasonable enough: it is still accepted to-day that drunkenness can be controlled by legislation and the courts.

What is important from the point of view of the statistical investigation of bridal pregnancy is whether the activities of the Church Courts need to be considered in the analysis of the figures we draw from the parish registers. The major problem in our previous paper was to decide on the experience of the brides who could not be traced to a baptism in the parish of marriage – nearly half the original sample; and we argued that the missing brides had not fled the parish because of shame at their pregnancy. Could it be, however, that couples fled the parish to escape the vexations of Church discipline? (If so, more of the missing than of the traced brides might have been pregnant, and the final figure might be higher.) Bridal pregnancy, if not obvious at marriage, became known when a child was born early, and was forced on the attention of the clergy if the child was baptized without delay. While the child could be 'legitimized' in the register by delaying baptism, it was almost impossible to prevent public knowledge of a birth in a rural parish – not least since midwives were expected to inquire into and report on any irregular circumstances at births. The conditions therefore existed in which every bridal pregnancy within a parish could be translated into a charge before a Church Court. The only way of escape would be to move into another parish where the exact date of marriage was not known, either to the clergy or to the public.

We do not believe that a significant number of couples moved for this reason. First, because the Church discipline, though vexatious, was not severe enough to justify the trouble of removal, and in our view was not greatly resented. Second, because there is evidence that couples moving into a parish where they were not known were sometimes required by the clergy and churchwardens to produce evidence of their marriage; hence, their date of marriage would become known. Third, because it is open to doubt whether more than a small proportion of offending couples were charged. We must consider the social circumstances in which churchwardens and clergy framed their presentments. 'They were dealing with tiny worlds where each was intimately known to each: nothing could be hid from them; and they could not have been uninfluenced by the gossip which prevailed in small communities then, as now. The churchwardens had but a brief authority: a short time and they reverted to the ranks. And if while in office they were exposed to abuse, when out of it they might expect retaliation: there were many temptations to turn the blind eye and the deaf ear.'³⁵ We suspect that only a small proportion of pregnant brides found their way before a Church Court, and that they appeared only when their offence was particularly flagrant, or when individual clergy were abnormally strict, or when the offenders had incurred the malice of the churchwardens. Tolerance of bridal pregnancy, we suggest, more often than not extended to freedom from Church

³³ W. Blackstone, *Commentaries on the laws of England*, 1765–69, Book 4, Chapter 4.

³⁴ Quoted from Dr. Quintrell's thesis.

³⁵ E. R. Brinkworth, *The Archdeacon's Court: Liber Actorum 1584*, (Oxfordshire Record Society, 23–24, 1942), p. vi.

discipline. If this was the case, then Church discipline is a red herring in our inquiry, and our previous results require no modification.

However, these conclusions are merely suppositions: suppose, instead, that all pregnant brides were charged and punished? It is in fact possible to check whether or not all pregnant brides were charged. One has only to compare the list of pregnant brides drawn from a study of the parish registers, with the list of couples charged with ante-nuptial fornication in the churchwarden's presentments from the same parish. In practice, the exercise has proved beyond the capacity of the present investigator, for the following reason. Very few sets of churchwardens' presentments have yet been published, and of those that have we have found almost none that relate to a parish (and a period) whose registers are in such a form that bridal pregnancy can be calculated. To match a suitable register and an extant set of presentments, it will usually be necessary to work from manuscript sources. The exercise is strongly recommended to local historians; it will not only assist the inquiry into bridal pregnancy, but will provide material for an assessment of the historical social discipline of the Church, a subject on which the discussion to date has been painfully theoretical.

We report, in conclusion, one attempt to carry out this exercise. The bills of presentment for Angmering and Horsham parishes (Sussex), 1621–26, are available in print,³⁶ as are the parish registers for the period. Both sets of records include cases of bastardy and of bridal pregnancy. At Angmering both sets record no bastards. At Horsham the registers record seven bastards, the presentments only four – but the missing three were born during periods for which either the churchwardens failed to make presentments or the bills have been lost. It is therefore uncertain whether any bastards were deliberately passed over in presentments. At Angmering the registers record no pregnant brides (aggravatingly, since this is a very abnormal circumstance for a period of five years). But the presentments charge one couple with ante-nuptial fornication. The couple, although they subsequently had children baptized in the parish, neither were married there nor had their pre-nuptially conceived child baptized there, but the child may have been buried there. This looks like rigorousness – or malice – on the part of the churchwardens, and it shows that movement to another parish was not always a means of escaping Church discipline. Meanwhile, at Horsham the registers record seven pregnant brides, four of whom had children born within six months of marriage (one at one month, one at two months). None of these four appear in the bills of presentment, but three of the births were during periods of months for which either the churchwardens failed to submit bills or the bills have been lost. Only in one instance can we be certain that an obvious early birth (two months after marriage) was deliberately not presented. If the missing bills of presentment for Horsham never existed, then the churchwardens were being selective in their presentments for both bastardy and ante-nuptial fornication. But the very slight evidence from Angmering suggests that the wardens there were perhaps rigorous. The investigation is, on the whole, sadly inconclusive.

³⁶ H. Johnstone, *Churchwarden's Presentments (17th century), Part 1, Archdeaconry of Chichester* (Sussex Record Society, 49, 1948).