

## Clandestine marriage in Tetbury in the late 17th century

In an earlier note published in Local Population Studies I drew attention to the high baptism/marriage ratios often found in English parishes in the late seventeenth century<sup>(1)</sup>, and suggested that this may have been due to the prevalence of marriage contracted without benefit of church ceremony. Work on the aggregative analysis of the registers of Tetbury, Gloucestershire<sup>(2)</sup>, has revealed a little more about this phenomenon. It is likely that other registers also contain similar evidence<sup>(3)</sup>. Since it would be most valuable to draw together all such scraps of information, I write this note in the hope that it may hasten the day when we attain a more adequate knowledge of marriage in this period.

Early in 1695 there is a note in the Tetbury marriage register, 'Registered by the Vicar according to the Act for Marriages, Anno 1695'. Thereafter until 1699, the register contains three types of marriage entry, rather than one, for in addition to the normal form of entry consisting of the date of the marriage and the names of the bride and groom, there were two novel forms. In both cases the name of the groom only is set down and the entry is undated, but whereas some grooms are said to be 'clandestinely married', others are simply said to be 'married' (in two cases in the latter class a date is also given). The first entries in an unusual form occur in 1696. The frequency of entries of each type is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Marriages recorded in Tetbury register

	A	B	C	D	Total
1696	7	2	6	0	15
1697	7	3	2	0	12
1698	12	7	6	2	27
1699	9	2	3	0	14
Total	35	14	17	2	68

A entries in the normal form; B described as clandestine, groom only named, undated; C groom only named, undated; D groom only named dated.

During the period 1696-99 almost half of the marriages entered in the register were in an irregular form. Of these 33 marriages, 14 were termed clandestine. It is probable that the vicar was moved to record additional marriages from fear of the penalties to which he might be liable under the Marriage Duty Act.<sup>(4)</sup> If he made any attempt to compel more of his parishioners to marry in his church, he had little success. The number of 'ordinary' marriages was not significantly different from the level of the years immediately before and after 1696-99. But by recording the establishment of other unions in the parish, he may have hoped to avoid the danger of prosecution. By clandestine marriage he may either have meant a common law marriage contracted by the exchange of vows before witnesses or marriages celebrated by 'hedge priests' in private dwellings. It is not immediately clear whether the 19 other marriages (in columns C and D of table 1) represent a different class of event or not. Possibly they refer to the marriage of Tetbury men in other parishes celebrated in the normal form but taking place, as was customary, in the bride's parish. By consulting the registers of neighbouring parishes it will be possible to establish whether this was so.

Table 2 shows the decadal totals of marriages and baptisms between 1660 and 1719 and the baptism/marriage ratio in each period. The clandestine and other 'irregular' marriage entries 1696-9 have been excluded from the marriage total 1690-9 (i.e. those marriages listed in columns B-D of table 1).

Table 2

	Marriages	Baptisms	Ratio (baptisms per marriage)
1660-9	73	489	6.70
1670-9	130	609	4.68
1680-9	98	561	5.72
1690-9	69	555	8.04
1700-9	145	749	5.17
1710-19	119	532	4.47

The ratio was high in the first decade 1660-9, fell sharply in the 1670s only to rise again to a very pronounced peak in the 1690s. Thereafter there was a further fall until in the 1710s the ratio was close to the

level of the 1670s. The smoothness of the wave-like movement of the ratio is exaggerated by the use of decades as time units. Examination of the annual totals suggests that there were four major phases in the fluctuations of the ratio during the 60 years after the restoration of the monarchy, and that they were more sharply distinct from each other than the decadal figures in table 2 might lead one to think. Table 3 presents the same data as table 2 but with a different periodisation to substantiate this point. In 1671-85 and again in 1703 the ratio, though still higher than in many other parishes, was at a sufficiently modest level to raise no immediate doubt that marriages were fully registered. In 1660-70 on the other hand, and still more

Table 3

	Marriages	Baptisms	Ratio (baptisms per marriage)
1660-70	80	554	6.93
1671-85	193	914	4.77
1686-1702	130	998	7.67
1703-19	231	1029	4.46

in 1686-1702 the ratio is suspiciously high. For the ratio to be 'genuine', marital fertility would have had to be much higher and/or age at marriage much lower than there is any evidence to warrant for early modern England. Furthermore, the abrupt and large changes in the ratio also argue against the view that marriage registration was on the same basis throughout the period.

Several possible explanations of the fluctuations in the ratio can be envisaged. For example, it might be argued that the high ratio of the 1660s was due to the difficulty of re-establishing ecclesiastical marriage after several years in which the country had a civil registration system for marriages, but that the period 1686-1702 when the ratio was again high, was one in which Tetbury parishioners were making much greater use of the churches of neighbouring parishes when they wished to marry. The proportion of marriages in which one partner came from another parish was normally so high in English parishes that a change on this scale might have occurred simply because a ceremony in Tetbury church was not attractive to the 'home' partner in mixed marriages.

The information about clandestine marriage in 1696-99, suggests that the 'real' baptism/marriage ratio may have changed very little between the two 'low' periods and the intervening 'high' period but that many marriages were clandestine during the 'high' period. Table 4 shows how the inclusion of clandestine marriages lowers the ratio during the period in which their occurrence was registered. If normal and clandestine marriages are counted together the ratio

Table 4

	Marriages	Baptisms	Ratio (baptisms per marriage)
1696-99	35*	253	7.23
1696-99	49+	253	5.16
1696-99	68 <sup>+</sup>	253	3.72

\* Only marriages in the normal form counted

+ Normal marriages plus marriages described as clandestine

<sup>+</sup> All marriages registered.

is 5.16, a figure reasonably close to those found in the preceding and succeeding periods. If all marriages shown in table 1 are counted the ratio drops to 3.72, lower than the ratio in other periods but similar to that found over long periods in many English parishes.

The vicar of Tetbury appears to have regarded all three types of act which he recorded in his marriage register between 1696 and 1699 as marriages and no doubt baptised and registered the offspring of all three types of union indifferently, treating all as legitimate, as no doubt he had always done. Consulting the baptism register would quickly test the truth of this assumption but there was no reason in ecclesiastical law for him to do otherwise. Certainly the fluctuations in the annual number of baptisms in the four periods shown in table 3 was very modest compared with that in the number of marriages. For the four periods 1660-70, 1671-85, 1686,1702 and 1703-9, the annual average number of baptisms was 50.4, 60.9, 58.7 and 60.1 respectively, whereas the annual average number of marriages in the same four periods was 7.3, 12.9, 7.6 and 13.6.

Gloucestershire is one of the counties in which the parish register data collected by Rickman and published in the 1841 census suggest that deficient marriage registration was widespread in the period 1660-1720. Many parishes in Gloucestershire and elsewhere show

fluctuations in the baptism/marriage ratio similar to those visible in Tetbury. Until more is known about marriage customs in this period it is perhaps idle to speculate about the circumstances which caused some couples to avoid marriage in church performed by the parish priest. It is, however, worth noting that the pattern found in Tetbury - alternation between apparently full and presumptively deficient coverage - is often found elsewhere, suggesting that the pressures on couples to 'conform' varied from time to time (possibly with the incumbent?).

It was a normal feature of English life that a substantial proportion of first children were baptised less than nine months after marriage. Many baptisms were performed quite soon after the marriage. (5) In these cases marriage in church often simply confirmed established unions. If the community had already recognised the union and its legitimacy was not affected by the ecclesiastical ceremony, it is understandable that there should be variations in the proportion of couples who decided to go through the church form of marriage. It might be illuminating to discover whether in periods when the baptism marriage ratio was high, there was an increase in the proportion of marriages between couples of high status because couples of low status were more likely to have disregarded the church ceremony. This can be done without great difficulty from those rare registers which at this period give the occupation of the groom (or of the father at baptism) but may prove more troublesome in parishes where the occupations of men can only be established indirectly from other sources. There is incidentally an interesting indication of the flexibility of Anglican usage in regard to the ecclesiastical marriage ceremony from Newfoundland at a much later date. The fishing communities on the island's west coast had no resident clergyman. They were visited periodically by Anglican ministers who then conducted baptism services for children born between visits, and marriage services for couples whose unions had begun recently. The form of entry concerning such marriages makes it clear that they were regarded by the officiating ministers as giving a spiritual confirmation to a marriage which already existed. (6)

There was a further period in Tetbury when the baptism/marriage ratio was very high, from 1737-49 when it was 7.7. In this Tetbury was unusual. High ratios were much rarer after 1720 than before in most parishes. (7) After Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753 it became impossible to contract a valid marriage except by an Anglican ceremony in church (with certain negligible exceptions). Thereafter,

few marriages escape registration. It was rare, however, for the ratio to change significantly after the Act came into force, and, despite the existence of a few parishes like Tetbury with a high ratio at a later date, it seems fair to conclude that early in the eighteenth century the Anglican Church succeeded in re-establishing marriage in church as a nearly universal custom.

In order to learn more about irregular marriages in periods when baptism/marriage ratios were high, it is important to seize the opportunities presented by registers like Tetbury after the Marriage Duty Act of 1695. In such parishes many of the characteristics of clandestinely married couples can be established by family reconstitution supplemented by the use of other local documents. The respects, if any, in which such couples differed from others in the parish can then be specified, and much may be learned indirectly about the institution of marriage more generally. This is only feasible however where clandestine marriages are registered. Where they are not, it is unlikely to be possible to distinguish between a clandestine marriage and a marriage celebrated outside the parish but in the 'normal' way even though the subsequent history of the marriage can be traced in detail.

It would be a pleasing irony if a tax levied on demographic events which proved a failure as a source of revenue to the state, should three centuries later provide the means of increasing substantially our knowledge of one of the events which it was intended to make more expensive.

E.A. Wrigley

#### NOTES

- (1) See E.A. Wrigley 'Baptism/marriage ratios in the late seventeenth century England', Local Population Studies, 3 (1969), 15-17.
- (2) The aggregative analysis of Tetbury was carried out by Mrs. Joan Lawley. I am greatly in her debt for the care and trouble which she took. The Cambridge Group has been singularly fortunate in the assistance and advice given to it by volunteers all over England and it is a pleasure to have an opportunity of acknowledging the value of their work.

- (3) Since the bulk of this note was written I have learned from Mr. Christopher Charlton that some of the published marriage registers of Nottinghamshire contain information about clandestine marriages similar to that for Tetbury described below.
- (4) The Act specifies that every person must '... take an exact and true account, and keep a register in writing of all and every person or persons married, buried, christened or born' in his parish. The collectors and others concerned were to have free access to the register, '... and if such parson or minister shall refuse, or neglect to keep a true register thereof, as before directed, such a parson or other minister so offending, shall forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds ...' (6 & 7, William and Mary c.6, 24).
- (5) See for example, P.E.H. Hair, 'Bridal pregnancy in rural England in earlier centuries', Population Studies, XX, no. 2 (1966) 233-43. In the sample of marriages he drew from many parishes over the period 1550-1820 32% of all first births or baptisms occurred within 8½ months of the marriage and 21% within 6 months of the marriage.
- (6) I owe this information to Miss P.A. Thornton of the Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- (7) This appears from the general tabulations of aggregative returns made by the Cambridge Group.