

SHORT NOTES

BIRTHS AND BAPTISMS AT ROSTHERNE, 1697-1705

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The Marriage duty Act of 1694 levied a tax of two shillings per birth, two shillings and sixpence per marriage and four shillings per burial for most individuals. The Vicar of Rostherne, John Wall, did not begin to operate the act until 1697 in 'A Register relating to an Act of Parliament that required the Registering of Births, 1697', which he kept separately, in the parish register. The wording of the register of births varies slightly, 'AB had a child born' or 'AB gave notice of a birth' followed by a date, so that the veracity of these verbal reports is clearly open to doubt on point of detail¹

Two initial deductions can be made. Firstly, as the table shows, the number of births (599) exceeded the number of baptisms in the established church (475). Secondly, the length of time between birth and baptism varied from one day to four weeks.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of births</i>	<i>Number of baptisms²</i>
1697	41	39
1698	69	47
1699	59	57
1700	84	52
1701	71	61
1702	68	52
1703	59	48
1704	76	64
1705	72	55
Totals	599	475

An examination of the Burial Register has shown that, of the 124 children who were born in Rostherne parish in these nine years but who were not baptised, only about a dozen were buried before they could be baptised. When the vicar knew of these he conscientiously entered them among the births, e.g. '18th July 1698. John Fearnhead of High Legh had a child born which immediately died.' He even entered the birth of a stillborn child, but the collectors did not charge tax on that and he crossed the entry out. Nor did he enter, except in the burials, '10th March 1697. A child pulled piece meal from Elizabeth Boone of Bucklow Hill'; the next day, not surprisingly, Elizabeth Boone herself was buried.

The Vicar of Rostherne was unusual in taking the Act so seriously. How little regard was paid to it generally may be judged from the fact that in 1705 it was thought necessary to pass an act of indemnity, which encompassed clergy who had neglected to obey its provisions and who, in consequence, were liable to heavy fines; poor enforcement may explain the

survival of so few of the nominal listings of each household required by the Acts—no listings are known for Rostherne.³

These figures have been produced by a team working [under the supervision of Mr A. J. Gautrey—eds.] on Rostherne parish register as part of the Cheshire Parish Register Project directed by Professor Paul Hair (Liverpool University) and Dr Colin Phillips (Manchester University). Further research will be carried out on these preliminary findings, and on the circumstances which led to under-registration.⁴ Given that in the neighbouring parish of Great Budworth a special register for Quakers and Annabaptists was kept,⁵ Dissent may form part of the explanation.

NOTES

- 1 The 1694 act (6 & 7 Wm & Mary, c.6) extended to 1706 by 8 & 9 Wm & Mary, c.20 required changes in the keeping and content of parish registers. The report of births and still births to Vicar Wall by all denominations was required by the acts. A good introduction to them is that by D. V. Glass in *London's inhabitants within the walls, 1695* (London Record Soc., II, 1966). The Rostherne registers are at the Cheshire County Record Office, Chester.
- 2 Dr Phillips' check on the bishops transcripts showed no register of births. Numbers of baptisms vary slightly, but a detailed check of names and dates was not made.
- 3 Dr Phillips found nothing in the Rostherne parish records. There were payments for writing the parish registers, but the churchwardens' accounts make no mention of nominal listings.
- 4 This phenomenon is of course well known to demographers. M. W. Flinn, *British Population Growth 1700-1850* (Macmillan Studies in Economic History, 1970) is a useful summary which puts the problem in the general context of population change.
- 5 *Ex- info.* Dr Ian Sellers and the Project team for Great Budworth.