
Debates in population history

Living same-name siblings in England, 1439–1851

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The paper by Chris Galley, Eilidh Garrett, Ros Davies and Alice Reid on the topic of living same-name siblings, published in the last edition of *Local Population Studies*, is a welcome contribution to the debate about living same-name children in Britain. They note that there has been little scholarly research on the topic, which they seek to redress by their study of same-name practices in Scotland. They successfully establish the existence of living same-name children in northern Scotland until the end of the nineteenth century, which they link to traditional Scottish naming customs and practices.

They also cite examples of living same-name children in England, although they caution against reliance on purely anecdotal evidence. They quote Edward Gibbon's autobiographical account of living same-name siblings in his family, but their research indicates that there were no living same-name siblings baptised and buried in his family. Likewise, they raise the possibility that many living same-name children may have been step-siblings, suggesting that the data must be treated with care. Research on this topic has been carried out by the prominent American genealogist Robert Anderson. George Redmonds has summarised Anderson's work as follows:

Having studied more than a dozen examples [in New England], almost equally divided between boys and girls, his conclusion was that in every case where surviving children bore the same name it was because they were half siblings, that is to say they did not have the same mother. In most cases the names of the brothers were the same as the name of the father ... However, that cannot always be the explanation, for there are other instances in which full siblings bore the same name, a point that Robert Anderson made himself when discussing New England families whose children had been named in Old England.¹

Galley et al. also cite examples where there were living same-name children in England, although they raise the issue of regional variation and how the existence of living same-name

¹ C. Galley et al., 'Living same-name siblings and British historical demography', *Local Population Studies*, 86 (2011), 15–36; G. Redmonds, *Christian names in local and family history* (London 2004), 49.

children may have changed over time. Their main evidence for Scotland is derived from late nineteenth-century censuses, but similar research on the 1851 English census covering 45 parishes from all areas of England indicates no living same-name children during the mid-nineteenth century.² There are few censuses before the nineteenth century, but the enumeration listings associated with the 1695 Marriage Duty Act do include details of individual family members. An examination of 14 listings reveals no living same-name children in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. These 14 places, with dates of enumeration, are as follows: London (1695), Bristol (1696), Lichfield, Staffordshire (1697), Lyme Regis, Dorsetshire (1696, 1698 and 1703), Swindon, Wiltshire (1697 and 1702), Wanborough, Wiltshire (1697 and 1702), New Romney, Kent (1696 and 1699), Melbourne, Derbyshire (1695) and St Mary's Southampton, Hampshire (1695 and 1696).³

The London data was edited by David Glass and covers 'almost 60,000 individuals', with 'the wife and children of a man ... listed next to his name'.⁴ A search of the listing reveals no living same-name children and, as many of London inhabitants were migrants from all regions of England, this suggests that the practice no longer existed at the end of the seventeenth century.⁵ Likewise, the published Marriage Duty enumeration of Bristol, which included approximately 20,000 inhabitants in 1696, does not include any reference to living same-name children.⁶ There were three censuses conducted at an earlier date—Goodnestone, Kent (1676), and Clayworth, Nottinghamshire (1676 and 1688)—and again it was not possible to locate any living same-name children.⁷

No other earlier census has been examined for this research, but transcripts of wills do provide data which can be used for this purpose. The 1658 Prerogative Court of Canterbury will abstracts are for the Commonwealth period when the Court had national jurisdiction over all wills covering families from all areas of England.⁸ An examination of the first 100 families with at least two siblings of the same sex indicates that there were just two living same-name siblings out of a total of 817 siblings, suggesting that such children did not exist to any extent in the mid seventeenth century. However, earlier will abstracts for other church courts do indicate that living same-name children existed in significant

2 The parishes covered by this research are listed in P. Razzell, *Essays in English population history* (London, 1994), 93.

3 For the London listing see D.V. Glass ed., *London inhabitants within the wall* (London, 1965); for Bristol see E. Ralph and M.E. Williams eds, *The inhabitants of Bristol in 1696* (Bristol Record Society, 15, 1968). Copies of the other listings are lodged in the Cambridge Group's library, and photocopies of these were kindly sent to me by their archivist.

4 Glass, *London inhabitants*, xviii, xx.

5 For example, see P. Razzell, *Population and disease: transforming English society, 1550–1850* (London, 2007), 101.

6 Ralph and Williams, *The inhabitants*.

7 Copies of these listings were also provided by the Cambridge Group's archivist.

8 For the source of this data see W. Brigg ed., *Genealogical abstracts of wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury* (London, 1905).

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Table 1 Living siblings with the same names in will abstracts with at least two siblings of the same sex, 1439–1699⁹

| District | Date of will | Number of living same-name siblings | Total number of siblings | Proportion of living same-name siblings (%) | Sample |
|--|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|---|--------------------|
| Sudbury Archdeaconary Court | 1439–1474 | 34 | 258 | 12.7 | First 100 families |
| London Consistory Court | 1492–1547 | 6 | 49 | 12.2 | All families |
| Lincolnshire Wills | 1500–1600 | 0 | 854 | 0.0 | All families |
| Berkshire | 1519–1598 | 12 | 213 | 5.6 | First 100 families |
| Surrey Archdeaconary Court (outside London) | 1537–1541, 1558–1560 | 31 | 718 | 4.3 | First 185 families |
| Surrey Archdeaconary Court (London*) | 1537–1541, 1558–1560 | 6 | 194 | 3.1 | All families |
| Essaex Archdeaconary Court | 1558–1565 | 10 | 315 | 2.5 | First 100 families |
| Registry of Durham | 1563–99 | 0 | 388 | 0.0 | All families |
| Banbury, Oxfordshire | 1591–1620 | 0 | 317 | 0.0 | All families |
| Surrey Archdeaconary Court | 1595–1649 | 0 | 177 | 0.0 | All families |
| Essex Commissary Court | 1596–1603 | 8 | 340 | 2.4 | First 100 families |
| Berkshire | 1600–1649 | 6 | 313 | 1.9 | First 100 families |
| Surrey Archdeaconary Court (outside London) | 1608–1615 | 2 | 344 | 0.6 | First 100 families |
| Surrey Archdeaconary Court (London*) | 1608–1615, 1615–1623, 1620–1631 | 0 | 288 | 0.0 | First 100 families |
| London Commisary Court | 1629–1634 | 4 | 640 | 0.6 | First 100 families |
| Sudbury Archdeaconary Court | 1636–1638 | 2 | 410 | 0.5 | First 100 families |
| London Commissary Court | 1644–1646 | 0 | 149 | 0.0 | All families |
| Berkshire | 1650–1699 | 2 | 368 | 0.5 | First 100 families |
| Canterbury Prerogative Court (national jurisdiction) | 1658 | 2 | 817 | 0.2 | First 100 families |

Note: *Includes Southwark, Bermondsey, Lambeth, Wandsworth, Battersea and Rotherhithe.

numbers, particularly during the period before 1550. The following table summarises available data on will abstracts from a number of church courts.

Table 1 indicates that most living same-name children occurred in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. There were few or no living same-name children in the seventeenth century, and many of the few cases listed in the early part of the century

⁹ *Genuki Berkshire online*, abstracts of wills; I. Darlington ed., *London Consistory wills, 1492–1547*, London Record Society, 3 (1967); A.R. Maddison ed., *Lincolnshire wills 1500–1600* (Lincoln, 1888); J.S.W. Gibson ed., *Banbury wills and inventories 1591–1620*, Banbury Historical Society, 13 (1985); W. Greenwill ed., *Wills and inventories from the Registry of Durham, Part 2, 1563–99*, Surtees Society, 38, (1860); W. Brigg ed., *Genealogical abstracts of wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury: Register Wootton* (London, 1905); F.G. Emmison, *Essex Wills: Archdeaconary of Essex, 1558–65* (Washington D.C., 1982) ; F.G. Emmison, *Essex Wills: the Commissary Court, 1596–1603* (Chelmsford, 2000); P. Northeast, *Wills of Archdeaconary of Sudbury 1439–74*, Suffolk Record Society, 44 (2001); N. Evans ed., *Wills of Archdeaconary of Sudbury, 1636–38*, Suffolk Record Society, 29 (1993); C. Webb, *Archdeaconary Court of Surrey will abstracts, 1537–41, 1559–60, 1595–1649, 1608–15, 1615–23, 1620–31* (Transcripts in London Metropolitan Archives).

probably referred to older children born in the late sixteenth century. Living same-name children seem to have disappeared slightly earlier in London than elsewhere, and there were no such children in the London parishes included in the Surrey Archdeaconary Court and the London Commissary Court will abstracts after 1600.

Houlbrooke summarised patterns of same naming which is consistent with the above findings:

The greater variety of opinion about the bestowal of names which prevailed after the Reformation gave parents more freedom to follow their own inclinations. One result was that the bestowal of the same name on more than one living child became much less frequent from the sixteenth century onwards. But in many cases parents continued to give babies the same name as older siblings who had died.¹⁰

The disappearance of living same-name children may have been partly the result of the introduction of parish registration, with parents having to formally name their children, and was possibly linked to the decline of children being named after god-parents.¹¹ However, of the 125 living same-name cases in Table 1, 110 were males and 74 were named John. It is unclear why males should predominate in this way, and even less clear why the name John was used so frequently. It is possible that the use of the name John in this way is linked to the legal practice of using the fictitious name John Doe in litigation procedures from the early fourteenth century onwards.¹² Jeremy Boulton has described how in the Southwark burial register the keeper of the burial register named all 27 unbaptised female children as Joan in the period 1597–1602, with 10 of the 29 unbaptised males named John.¹³ However, none of this evidence explains why the name John predominated amongst living same-name children, and this intriguing issue can only be resolved through further research on naming patterns, requiring detailed genealogical and local historical investigation.

Galley et al. also raise the question of the use of same-name data for the correction of mortality rates. It is important that such corrections do not rely on any one inflation ratio, and there are a number of additional methods for measuring registration accuracy. These may be summarised as follows:

- The comparison of information in wills and poor law records with that in burial registers.
- The matching of census and parish register data.

10 RA. Houlbrooke, *The English family 1450–1750* (Harlow, 1984), 131–2.

11 Houlbrooke, *English family*, 131.

12 See the entry for John Doe in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

13 *Local Population Studies*, 23 (1979), 51.

- The comparison of returns of burials in bills of mortality and burial registers.
- The tracing of independent information on burials with that in parish registers.¹⁴

The application of these methods indicates that for purposes of family reconstitution, on average between a quarter and a third of all deaths went unregistered in burial registers during the parish register period. The latter may be illustrated with respect to London. For the parish of Bloomsbury, a searcher's reports register for the period 1770–1834 lists the export of corpses to other parishes both in London and elsewhere, naming the parish 'where buried'.¹⁵ This allows the direct measurement of the accuracy of the registration of these burials, and of 466 such cases in 1771–74 and 1801–07, 106 (22.7 per cent) could not be traced in local parish registers, although this varied significantly from parish to parish. This average is lower than the proportion of unregistered deaths according to the same-name correction technique (33 per cent) found in 16 London parishes for the period 1681–1709, and 35 per cent in eight London parishes in the period 1539–1849.¹⁶ However, in addition to missing deaths due to the non-registration of burials, there is evidence that the 'traffic in corpses' possibly accounted for about 10 per cent of burials.¹⁷ The combination of the non-registration of burials and the traffic in corpses would suggest that about a third of all burials were missing from reconstitution schedules in London, which is consistent with the findings from same-name research.

Although the above data is for different periods and parishes, it illustrates the possibilities for the triangulation of data necessary for the evaluation of burial registration. The paper by Galley et al. represents such work, along with the research summarised in this paper. With the digitisation of data, the issues of living same-name children and same-name correction ratios lend themselves to further detailed research, which should significantly clarify the accuracy of parish registers, a central issue in British historical demography.

14 For research on these methods see Razzell, *Population and disease*, 3–39, and P. Razzell, 'Infant mortality in London, 1538–1850: a methodological study', in this issue of *LPS*, above, 00–00

15 See the 'Searchers reports register' in the London Metropolitan Archive, reference P82/GE01/063.

16 Razzell, *Population and disease*, 13.

17 See J. Boulton and L. Schwarz, 'Yet another inquiry into the trustworthiness of the eighteenth-century London's bills of mortality', *Local Population studies*, 5 (2010), 28–45; Razzell, 'Infant mortality'.