

The Measurement of the Reliability of Parish Registration through Same-Name Methodology.

It was common in England to give the name of a dead child to a subsequent sibling of the same sex. This can be illustrated by the example of one London family published by the genealogist Percival Boyd and traced in the 1695 London Marriage Duty Listing.

Table 1: The Family of Samuel and Sarah Fowler, Tyler and Bricklayer, of St. Antholin's, London. ¹

<i>Name Of Child</i>	<i>Date Of Baptism</i>	<i>Date Of Burial</i>
Thomas	05/07/1677	04/01/1721
Samuel	04/05/1679	29/04/1681
William	08/01/1683	03/06/1708
Samuel	10/05/1685	15/02/1688
John	07/08/1687	-
John	12/05/1689	09/10/1692
Sarah	22/04/1691	06/02/1748
Mary	18/07/1693	12/11/1694
John	21/11/1695	-
<i>1695 Marriage Duty Listing: Samuel Fowler, Wife Sarah, Son James, Son Thomas, Son William, Daughter Sarah. Of St. Antholin's Parish.</i>		

Of the three-baptism same-name cases, high-lighted in bold, two of them were traced in the burial register. The second same-name case – John baptised on the 7th of August 1687 – was found neither in the burial register nor in the 1695 Marriage Duty Listing, indicating that he probably died without being registered. (The last John was baptised in late 1695 and therefore did not appear in the Marriage Duty Listing made before that date).

The same-name method allows for the correction of burial under-registration by multiplying the number of same-name cases divided by the number of such cases found in the burial register. In the case of the Fowler family the correction ratio is 3/2. This inflation ratio corrects both for non-registration due to omission from the burial register, as well as burial in neighbouring parishes and elsewhere, accounting for all forms of under-registration. The repetition of the name Samuel in the burial register indicates a burial same name pattern. He was baptized in 1685 before he was buried in 1688 – in effect showing that baptism registration was perfect.

Data on the frequency of same naming from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century is suggested by the following Table.

¹ For the background to this table see P.E. Razzell and C. Spence, 'The History of infant, child and adult mortality in London', *The London Journal*, 2007, p. 274.

Table 2: Proportion of Eligible Families Using Same Names in Six Reconstitution Parishes, 1541-1837.²

<i>Period</i>	<i>Number of Eligible Cases</i>	<i>Proportion Using Same Names %</i>
1541-1600	293	50.1
1601-1650	330	57.9
1651-1700	291	72.9
1701-1750	339	67.8
1751-1800	411	65.6
1801-1837	270	59.5

The data only covers six parishes, but it indicates that many families used same names throughout the parish register period. There was something of an inverted U-Curve distribution in the proportions using same-names, but there is a sufficient majority to make same-naming a valuable basis for assessing the reliability of parish registers.

There has been a criticism of the technique on the grounds that there were living same-name children. A study of Wills indicates the following pattern of living same name children.

Table 3: Living Same-Name Children in English Wills, 1439-1699.³

<i>Period</i>	<i>Number of Living Same-Name Children</i>	<i>Total Number of Siblings</i>	<i>Proportion of Living Same-Name Children</i>
1439-1547	77	1249	6.20%
1558-1599	10	713	1.40%
1591-1649	22	2638	0.80%
1650-1699	4	985	0.40%

There were significant numbers of living same-name children in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, although some of them may have been the result of stepbrothers and stepsisters. After 1558 there were very few living same-name children, some of whom might have been stepchildren. Houlbrooke has argued that this was the result of the aftermath of the Reformation:

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.⁴

The progressive reduction of living same name children may also have been the result of the introduction of parish registration, making it difficult to have two living same name children.

The only complete way of examining the reliability of data on same names is to study

² Eligible families are those with at least two baptised children of the same sex, to the same parents. The table is based on the analysis of original reconstitution schedules for Aldenham, Bridford, Austrey, Dawlish, Hartland and Colyton. See P.E. Razzell, *Population and Disease: Transforming English Society 1550-1850*, 2007, p. 9.

³ Data Taken from P.E. Razzell, 'Debates in population history: Living same-name siblings In England, 1439-1851', in *Local Population Studies*, September 2011, p. 67.

⁴ R.A. Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1450-1750*, 1984, pp 131-32.

local censuses which indicate the status of children and parents. For the late seventeenth century it is possible to examine systematically the question of living same-name siblings through the analysis of various enumerations taken under the 1695 Marriage Duty Act.⁵ A study was made of eighteen census-type listings covering a total of 6,162 cases. The areas covered were the City of London (1695), Bristol, Gloucestershire, (1696). Goodnestone, Kent (1676), Clayworth, Nottinghamshire (1676 and 1688), 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). There were 0.15 per cent of children with the living same name children, almost exclusively in the City of London and Bristol.⁶

Galley, Garrett, Davies and Reid have argued that the London and Bristol censuses provide convincing details of living same-name children.⁷ However an examination of the original manuscript censuses, along with data on baptisms, reveals that all these cases are questionable on grounds of transmission errors and other problems.⁸

It is possible to examine this issue further through the study of nineteenth century censuses, with existing research on 45 parishes covered by census/ baptism registers.⁹ The names of 10,954 people living in these parishes were selected from the household schedules of the 1851 Census and found to include no living full same-name cases. In most of these censuses there are references to stepbrothers and sisters sharing the same forename, but these can be recognized by their different surnames or other information in the censuses. Also, in the nineteenth century there are cases of living siblings sharing one common forename (for example, Edward James and Edward George), but no cases have come to light where names are identical. It is therefore important for same-name research that only siblings sharing the same parents and with identical names are selected for study.

For research on the reliability of birth registration it is necessary to locate burial same-name children, and then search for the baptism of the second same-name child. For death registration the reverse is the case: location of same-name children in baptism registers searching for the burial of the first same-name child. There were many more cases in the evaluation of death registration because of the use of baptism registers to select the same-name cases, whereas there were many fewer cases in selection from burial registers.

Research carried out on groups of parishes used in previous work reveals the following pattern of birth and death registration.

⁵ See Razzell, *Population and Disease*, p. 10.

⁶ P.E. Razzell, 'Living same-name siblings and English historical demography; a commentary' *Local Population Studies*, 2011, p. 77.

⁷ C. Galley, E. Garrett, R. Davies and A. Reid, 'Living same-name siblings and English historical demography: a reply to Peter Razzell', *Local Population Studies*, 2011.

⁸ P.E. Razzell, 'Living same-name siblings and English historical demography: a commentary', *Local Population Studies*, 2011.

⁹ See P.E. Razzell, 'The evaluation of baptism as a form of birth registration through cross-matching census and parish register data: a study in methodology', *Essays in English Population History*, p. 93.

Table 4: Estimated Under-Registration of Births and Deaths in England, 1538-1837.¹⁰

<i>Period</i>	<i>Total Number of Births</i>	<i>Proportion of Births Not Registered (%)</i>	<i>Total Number of Deaths</i>	<i>Proportion of Deaths Not Registered (%)</i>
1538-1599	95	39	358	34
1600-1649	236	36	465	31
1650-1699	230	30	617	27
1700-1749	424	21	858	22
1750-1799	546	32	594	27
1800-1837	133	30	451	23

The figures for death registration are based on nine Cambridge Group reconstitution parishes.¹¹ I have made a special study of the burial registration of two Cambridge Group parishes, Colyton and Hartland, given their importance for the population history of England.¹² E.A. Wrigley initiated this research through the analysis of Colyton's population history, which was the forerunner of subsequent demographic research. The result of same-name research on Colyton was as follows:

Table 5: Analysis of Burial Registration of Same-Name Siblings in Colyton, 1538-1851.

<i>Period</i>	<i>Total Number of Cases</i>	<i>Cases Traced in the Burial Register</i>	<i>Proportion of Untraced Cases</i>
1538-1600	95	63	35%
1601-1650	121	71	41%
1651-1700	114	86	25%
1701-1750	84	54	36%
1751-1800	94	60	36%
1801-1851	115	98	15%
Total	623	432	31%

There is no linear trend in the proportion of untraced cases, but there was a sharp improvement in burial registration during the period 1801-1851. This can be compared to parish register entries with civil register returns for the period 1837-1850.¹³ According to the Colyton civil register, there were 199 children dying under the age of ten in 1837-50, of which 170 were registered in the Anglican parish register, an omission rate of 15%.

This figure is identical to the 15% of same-name case children not traced during 1801-1851. It is also possible to compare evidence on people leaving wills with entries in the burial register, and of 124 wills registered in Colyton in 1553-1773 – 28% - could not be found in the burial register – slightly smaller than the untraced cases in 1538-1800 in Table 4. This and the above research is an example of the triangulation of data, a methodology appropriate for historical demographic research.

The main reason for omissions of birth and deaths was clerical negligence,¹⁴ as indicated by Burn in his study of parish registers:

¹⁰ For death under-registration see Razzell, *Population*, p. 15. The figures for birth under-registration are based on the analysis of 69 burial and baptisms registers mainly from the counties of Bedfordshire and Derbyshire.

¹¹ See Razzell, *Population*, p. 15.

¹² See P.E. Razzell, *Essays in English Population History*, 1994, pp. 108-111

¹³ I was allowed special access to the original returns in the civil register by the local registrar.

¹⁴ See Razzell, *Essays*, pp. 108-111.

The custody of parish registers having been frequently committed to ignorant parish clerks, who had no idea of their utility beyond their being occasionally the means of putting a shilling into their own pockets for furnishing extracts, and at other times being under the superintendence of an incumbent, either forgetful, careless or negligent, the result has necessarily been, that many Registers are miserably defective, some having the appearance of being kept from month to month, and year to year, yet being deficient of a great many entries.¹⁵

This clerical negligence appears to have been present from the sixteenth century onwards. For example, ‘in 1567 the incumbent of Tunstall, Kent, appeared to have tired of registering the Pottman family because of its concentration in the parish and simply stated in the register: “From henceforwd I omit the Pottmans.”’¹⁶

Some of the neglect of burial registration was due to the non-payment of fees. In the Northamptonshire parish of Brington, ‘the very true reason why this register, is found as imperfect in some years as from 1669 to 1695 is because the parishioners could never be persuaded to take to see it done, nor the churchwardens as ye canon did require, and because they refuse to pay such dues to ye curate as they ought by custome to have payed.’¹⁷

In 1702-03 ‘a committee of Convocation drew up a list of ecclesiastical offences notoriously requiring remedy, in which irregularity in keeping registers is prominent in the list of gravamina.’¹⁸ Evidence for clerical negligence became abundant in the early nineteenth century. The *Gentleman’s Magazine* remarked in 1811 that ‘the clergyman (in many country places) has entered the names at his leisure, whenever he had nothing better to do, and perhaps has never entered them at all.’¹⁹ The *Report of the Select Committee on Parochial Registration in 1833* provided substantial evidence on the reasons for defective parish registration. One of the witnesses, Mr William Durrant Cooper, a solicitor, had extensive experience of tracing individuals in parish registers for property cases, and concluded that parish registration was ‘exceedingly defective ... [with] a very large number of marriages, deaths and baptisms not entered at all ... especially deaths.’²⁰ To illustrate this, he gave the following example:

On the sale of some property [in 1819] from Mr Cott to Lord Gage, it was necessary to procure evidence of the death of three individuals, Mrs Pace, Mr Tuchnott and Mrs Gouldsmith. They were at different places, all in Sussex; Mrs Pace was regularly entered; Mr Tuchnott was buried at Rodmell, about five miles from Lewes, and on searching for the register of burial we found no entry whatever. On making an inquiry in the churchyard of the sexton, he stated he recollected digging the grave, and the ceremony being performed; Mr Gwynne, the rector, whose neglect in that and other parishes is well known, had omitted to enter it ... Mrs Gouldsmith, who was buried at Waldron, in the same county, was not entered, but on going to the parish clerk, who was a blacksmith, he stated he recollected the circumstance, and accounted for her burial not being entered in this way: he said it was usual for him, and not the clergyman, to take account of the Burials, and he entered them in a little sixpenny memorandum book ... If it so happened that the fee [of one shilling] was paid at the time, as was the case with affluent persons, no entry would appear in his book, he only booked what was due to him, and as the clergyman entered the parish register at the end of the year from his book, and not at the time of the ceremony, all burials that were not entered in his book would not find their way into the register.²¹

Given the significant unreliability of parish registers, it is possible to triangulate findings on

¹⁵ J.S. Burn, *The History of Parish Registers in England*, 1862, p. 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 41.

¹⁷ J.C. Cox, *The Parish Registers of England*, 1910, pp. 20, 21.

¹⁸ W.E. Tate, *The Parish Chest*, 1969, p. 49.

¹⁹ Burn *The History*, p. 42.

²⁰ *Report of the Select Committee on Parochial Registration*, p. 24.

²¹ *Ibid*, 25.

baptism and burial registration through comparison with other measures of reliability. The previous study of forty-five parishes selected from the 1851 Census with information on birth places was compared to the data from same-name research. The results are summarized in Table 5 below.

Table 6: Estimated Proportions of Unregistered Births, 1761-1837.²²

<i>Period</i>	<i>Proportion of Unregistered Births Through Census Baptism Comparison</i>
1761-1800	32%
1801-1833	31%
<i>Period</i>	<i>Proportion of Unregistered Births Through Same Naming</i>
1750-1799	32%
1800-1837	30%

The proportions of unregistered births using the two different methods of estimating the accuracy of birth registration are virtually identical. The comparison should not be taken too literally as none of the figures above are based on random samples.

The most significant finding from this research is the very high proportion of births unregistered in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – between thirty and thirty-nine per cent. The Cambridge Group assumed that births registered through baptism were perfect between 1539 and 1550 with no births unregistered, and only deteriorated slowly to a maximum of 9.5 per cent omitted by the end of the seventeenth century.²³ The discrepancy between this assumption and the figures in Table 4 poses major problems for Wrigley and Schofield’s reconstruction of England’s population history.

Existing data suggests that current same-name research is reliable given the triangulation of evidence.²⁴ However, given the digitisation of parish register and census data, it should be possible in future to create random samples for comprehensive same-name research.

²² For the figures for the census baptism comparison method see Razzell, ‘The evaluation’, p. 93.

²³ E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871*, 1981, pp. 537-541.

²⁴ See for example P.E. Razzell, *Mortality, Marriage and Population Growth in England, 1550-1850*, 2016, pp. 18, 23, Razzell, *Population and Disease*, p. 13.