

AGE AT MARRIAGE IN ENGLAND FROM THE LATE SEVENTEENTH TO THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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IN the two centuries after 1700 there occurred upwards of twenty million marriages in England and Wales.¹ It is perhaps forgivable, therefore, that this paper has about it the air of an interim report. It might be thought doubly foolish for an individual, and in this field a professedly amateur investigator, to embark upon any enquiry into past demographic behaviour when there exists that formidable, professional task force, the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. At the last count it had within its lockers, for example, 'aggregate analyses' of over 550 English parishes.² To provide information about the ages at which people married, however, the Cambridge Group appears to be relying primarily upon 'family reconstitution' techniques. It is not necessary to explain these techniques or to describe the remarkable light they have shed on the vital events of the past. With such tools the Cambridge Group have not only crept literally between the sheets of history; its individual members have not been abashed at publishing their preliminary findings.³ Yet obscurity remains and with it the thought that family reconstitution may not prove entirely adequate to the insistent demands for more information on when and why people married. For the undertaking of full family reconstitution both registration and record survival have to be good, and the method is undermined where there is a great deal of migration, albeit temporary or permanent. Unfortunately many of the most interesting demographic questions revolve around urban behaviour, and town

¹ I wish to thank Mr Gareth Rees for this calculation and to express my gratitude also to the Research Board of the University of Leicester for the financial help extended to me.

² 'News from the Cambridge Group', *Local Population Studies*, v (1970), p. 7.

³ See, for example, P. Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London, 2nd edn, 1971); E. A. Wrigley, *Population and History* (London, 1969); and R. S. Schofield, 'Historical Demography: Some Possibilities and Some Limitations', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, xxi (1971), pp. 119-32. 'Aggregate Analysis' and 'Family Reconstitution' are described at length in *An Introduction to English Historical Demography*, ed. D. E. C. Eversley, P. Laslett and E. A. Wrigley (London, 1966).

records may be deficient on many of these counts, especially in that vital and perplexing period from about 1780 to 1840. To secure an adequate sample the parish to be reconstituted has to be fairly large, and this adds to the laboriousness of the exercise. It is perhaps not insignificant that so far only one complete reconstitution study has been published by the Cambridge Group.⁴ Moreover, if, as Wrigley suggests in that study, 'Societies are unwilling to allow matters to reach a Malthusian extreme', it is still not altogether clear why the marriage age of both men and women at Colyton should have *fallen* before the advent of the plague of 1645–46, and why the marriage age of women especially should have climbed so abruptly thereafter.⁵ To test possible explanations more information is required about such things as the occupational structure, employment opportunities, the movement of real wages, and the pattern of migration. Unfortunately parish registers are often deficient in one crucial respect: they rarely consistently provide information about occupations. If this deficiency is remedied by using other documents in association with the registers, then obvious problems of occupational mobility within the lifetime of the persons examined begin to arise. The recent reconstitution study of three Lancashire parishes by D. J. Loschky and D. F. Krier relies partly upon wills.⁶ But a man who died a farmer need not necessarily have been married as one. All this tends also to reduce the size of the sample. Loschky and Krier, for example, undertake an elaborate analysis of marital behaviour within particular social and occupational groups, and indeed extend their conclusions to English population experience generally, but four of the eight male groups appear to be based on the experiences of seven gentlemen, seven tradesmen, three clergymen, and a solitary pair of labourers.⁷

Whether agricultural groups married earlier or later than non-agricultural ones and how age at marriage has responded to modern economic growth are questions upon which opinion is divided. Conflict exists, not surprisingly, on the highest plane of generality—in general demography and the sociology of the family⁸—and it is, of course,

⁴ E. A. Wrigley, 'Family Limitation in Pre-Industrial England', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, xix (1966), pp. 82–109, and 'Mortality in Pre-Industrial England: The Example of Colyton, Devon, Over Three Centuries', *Daedalus* (Spring 1968), pp. 546–80.

⁵ Wrigley, 'Family Limitation . . .', pp. 109 and 87.

⁶ D. J. Loschky and D. F. Krier, 'Income and Family Size in Three Eighteenth-Century Lancashire Parishes: A Reconstitution Study', *Journal of Economic History*, xxix (1969), pp. 429–48.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

⁸ See, for example, the statements on these themes in K. Davis and J. Blake, 'Social Structure and Fertility: An Analytical Framework', *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, iv (1955–56), pp. 211–35; K. Davis, 'Statistical

a part of that larger division of opinion about the effects of economic development upon fertility.⁹ If attention is turned from the general to the particular—to the case of England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—no unanimity emerges. There are those who have argued that there occurred at some time during this period a general decline in marriage ages. This group would include Habakkuk, Langer, and the most enthusiastic proponent of such views, J. T. Krause, who has argued that the fall was most pronounced *circa* 1780–1820.¹⁰ Ranged with varying degrees of firmness in opposition are McKeown and Brown, Goode, Eversley, Razzell and Drake.¹¹ The reconstitution studies of Wrigley have clearly been influential in persuading Habakkuk recently to restate his beliefs.¹²

Despite the volume of opinion upon this subject, however, there are precious few references to the mean¹³ age at marriage of English bachelors and spinsters from the late seventeenth century onwards, and what exists is extremely difficult to interpret. For the nineteenth century we have the Registrar General's national returns of mean age at first marriage. These exist for the years 1839–41, 1851, 1857–60,

Perspective on Marriage and Divorce' and J. Hajnal, 'The Marriage Boom', in *Demographic Analysis*, ed. J. J. Spengler and O. D. Duncan (Glencoe, 1956), pp. 243–55 and 220–42; W. J. Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (New York, 1963), chapter 2; E. van de Walle, 'Marriage and Marital Fertility', *Daedalus* (Spring 1968), pp. 486–501.

⁹ D. M. Heer, 'Economic Development and Fertility', *Demography*, iii (1966), pp. 423–44, and 'Economic Development and the Fertility Transition', *Daedalus* (Spring 1968), pp. 447–62.

¹⁰ H. J. Habakkuk, 'English Population in the Eighteenth Century', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, vi (1953), pp. 117–33; W. M. Langer, 'Europe's Initial Population Explosion', *American Historical Review*, lxi (1963), pp. 1–17; and J. T. Krause, 'Some Neglected Factors in the English Industrial Revolution', *Journal of Economic History*, xix (1959), 528–40.

¹¹ T. McKeown and R. G. Brown, 'Medical Evidence Related to English Population Changes in the Eighteenth Century', *Population Studies*, ix (1955–56), pp. 119–41; Goode, *op. cit.*, p. 43; D. E. C. Eversley, 'Population, Economy and Society', in *Population in History*, ed. D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (London, 1965), pp. 40–45; P. E. Razzell, 'Population Change in Eighteenth Century England. A Reinterpretation', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, xviii (1965), pp. 312–32, and 'Population Growth and Economic Change in Eighteenth- and Early-Nineteenth-Century England and Ireland', in *Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution*, ed. E. L. Jones and G. E. Mingay (London, 1967), pp. 260–81; M. Drake, 'Age at Marriage in the Pre-Industrial West', in *Population Growth and the Brain Drain*, ed. F. Bechofer (Edinburgh, 1969), pp. 196–208.

¹² H. J. Habakkuk, *Population Growth and Economic Development since 1750* (Leicester, 1971), pp. 35–46.

¹³ All references to 'average' ages at marriage hereafter refer to the arithmetic mean. Although it may not always be the most appropriate measure of central tendency it is the one encountered most frequently in the literature.

and become continuous from 1867.¹⁴ The series for both sexes show a remarkable small range of variation. The lowest figure we have for bachelors is that for 1839–41, 25.5 years, the highest figure that for 1899, 26.6; over the same period the average for spinsters rose only from 24.3 to 25.2 years. The earliest figures, however, were based on a very small sample, for in only about six per cent of all marriages did both parties return their age. By 1867, however, the return had risen to two-thirds. In 1897 the Registrar General looking back in time found it difficult to reconcile the slight reported rises of under one-third of a year between 1839–41 and 1867 with the rising proportions of marriages of minors over the same period, and he argued that in reality a fall in the age at marriage had occurred. The small early sample, he suggested, was biased in the direction of the young, elderly couples being less likely to render their actual ages.¹⁵ If the earliest figures are too low, however, the real ones were unlikely to have been substantially above the 25.8 for males and 24.6 for females based on the 37 per cent return for the year 1851.¹⁶ Over half a century of profound structural change in both the economy and society appears, therefore, to have affected age at first marriage only slightly.

Longer-run comparisons are made difficult by the fact that before 1839 there are no national figures; there exist only figures for a few localities and these are produced by a variety of means. If attention is first confined to the few averages produced by family reconstitution then a number of features are immediately apparent.¹⁷ There is no doubt that ages at first marriage of both males and females tended to vary over time, though the degree of variation observed depends both on the number of observations made in each time period and the length of the periods chosen for comparison.¹⁸ Secondly, the direction

¹⁴ These figures are to be found in the Fourth, Twentieth and the Thirtieth to the Sixty-Second Annual Reports of the Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages in England.

¹⁵ *Fifty-Ninth Annual Report of the Registrar General* (H[ouse of] C[ommons]), 1897, xxi, p. 735), pp. ix–xiii.

¹⁶ *Thirty-Fourth Annual Report of the Registrar General* (H.C. 1873, xx, p. 1), p. xii.

¹⁷ The following discussion draws on the figures to be found in Wrigley, 'Family Limitation . . .', pp. 86–87; N. L. Tranter, 'Population and Social Structure in a Bedfordshire Parish: The Cardington Listing of Inhabitants, 1782', *Population Studies*, xxi (1967), pp. 275–76; C. F. Kuchemann, A. J. Boyce and G. A. Harrison, 'A Demographic and Genetic Study of a Group of Oxfordshire Villages', *Human Biology*, xxxix (1967), pp. 255–56; R. E. Jones, 'Population and agrarian change in an eighteenth century Shropshire parish', *Local Population Studies*, i (1968), p. 16; J. A. Johnston, 'Family Reconstitution and the Local Historian', *The Local Historian*, ix (1970), p. 11.

¹⁸ Compare, for example, tables 2 and 3 in Wrigley, 'Family Limitation . . .', pp. 86–87, and see also P. E. Razzell's 'Note' in *Local Population Studies*, ii (1969), pp. 40–43.

of change appears to have varied, not only between localities but, more interestingly, between the sexes in the same locality. As a result there were, thirdly, considerable differences in marriage ages between communities at any one moment of time. For example, in the mid-eighteenth century, bachelors at Powick, Worcestershire, married at 22.4 years but at Charlton-on-Otmoor, Oxfordshire, at about 28 years. In the late eighteenth century spinsters at Charlton married at about 22, their counterparts at Moreton-Say, Shropshire, at 27.8 years.

Fortunately, we have rather more information about spinsters if the net is thrown to take in ages gathered by means other than family reconstitution. Krause, for example, cites some averages culled from the marriage registers of nine communities *circa* 1770–90.¹⁹ The range of variation is again great, extending from 20.9 to 27.0 years, but seven of the nine fall in the range of 24–25 years. There are also a number of averages derived from whole collections of marriage bonds and allegations. These figures stretch over periods from the early seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries. Rarely do they drop below 24, never do they rise above 26.²⁰ The use of marriage licence materials clearly raises questions of comparability with the other data, but it must also be asked whether such materials can be used in isolation to make comparisons over time.²¹

The temptation to generalize from this scanty and assorted collection ought to be resisted. Most past generalizations have been based, however, on a fraction of that scrutinized here. Those renewing the argument for a long-run decline in marriage ages will have to find many more pre-1750 examples of communities where men married for the first time at average ages above 27, and where women married above the age of 25. Even then there remains the problem that there must always have been local variations about the national mean. It is surprising that there are no local average ages in the Registrar General's reports. There were, however, noticeable differences between regions with respect to the numbers of marriages of minors as a proportion of all marriages occurring. In the years 1838–41, for example, in the Metropolitan division only 1½ per cent of all male marriages involved minors, while in Bedfordshire the figure was nearly 12 per cent. On the female side the figures were 8 per cent and 25 per cent respectively.²²

¹⁹ J. T. Krause, 'Some Aspects of Population Change, 1690–1790', in Jones and Mingay, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

²⁰ Razzell, 'Population Change in Eighteenth Century England . . .', p. 315; Laslett, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

²¹ In the ways deployed by Razzell (note 20 above) and by Habakkuk, *Population Growth and Economic Development*, pp. 36–37.

²² *Fourth Annual Report of the Registrar General* (H.C. 1842, xix, p. 441), p. 7.

Instead of attempting chronological comparisons of much that may not be comparable, perhaps more attention should be paid to the reasons why marriage ages varied between English communities at the same moment of time. The most favoured explanations of such variations appear to revolve essentially around the consequences for marriage of occupational differences. It is here that we enter another contentious area. There are major disagreements, for example, about whether significant relationships exist between the occupations men pursued, the ages at which they married, and the ages of their brides.²³ Several features have characterized the debate: in some cases an absence of empirical evidence, but where such evidence is produced a heavy reliance on ages culled from marriage licence documents. The methods of analysis adopted are so varied, however, as to make impossible anything other than rather impressionistic comparisons between such studies.

To test these impressions, and to discover generally what marriage licence documents can tell us about age at marriage, a large number of bonds and allegations have been examined for three different periods of time. Examined in the first period, the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, were over 600 Suffolk licences for the years 1684–1723, over 2,500 Yorkshire ones for the years 1691–1710, and over 1,100 Nottinghamshire licences 1701–10, all of them stating an age for at least one of the marriage partners. For the mid-eighteenth century over 1,800 Nottinghamshire licences were looked at, over 500 Suffolk cases, and over 1,400 Surrey ones, all for the decade 1751–60. Finally, over 700 Sussex licences and over 2,300 Leicestershire ones were scrutinized for the decade 1801–10.²⁴ These

²³ Those appearing to argue that the occupational structure had some real significance for marriage ages would include: R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem of the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1912), pp. 104–6, n. 3; J. D. Chambers, *The Vale of Trent 1670–1800* (Economic History Review, Supplement no. 3, 1957), pp. 51–53; Habakkuk, *Population Growth and Economic Development since 1750*, pp. 35–46; Krause, 'Some Neglected Factors . . .', pp. 530–31; Loschky and Krier, *op. cit.*, pp. 429–48. These arguments are denied at one or a number of points in the chain of reasoning by McKeown and Brown, Razzell and Drake (see above, note 11).

²⁴ The Leicestershire cases were taken from the card index to the marriage bonds and allegations of the Archdeaconry of Leicester, the Archives Department, Leicester Museum. The other cases are from: *Allegations for Marriage Licences in the Archdeaconry of Sudbury*, ed. W. B. Bannerman (Harleian Soc. Publications, lxi and lxx, London, 1918–19); vol. iii of *Paver's Marriage Licences*, ed. J. W. Clay (Yorkshire Archaeological Soc., xlvi, 1912); *Abstracts of Nottinghamshire Marriage Licences*, ed. T. M. Blagg and F. A. Wadsworth (British Record Soc., lviii and lx, 1930 and 1935); *Abstracts of the Bonds and Allegations for Marriage Licences in the Archdeaconry Court of Nottingham, 1754–1770*, ed. T. M. Blagg (Thoroton Soc. Record Series, x, 1947); *Allegations for Marriage Licences issued by the Commissary Court of Surrey*,

10,000 cases were chosen on no other grounds than suitability and convenience; they come, with the exception of the Leicestershire marriages, from those printed marriage bonds and allegations which are best endowed with the relevant information. Bachelors in each of these eight samples were separated, where this was possible, into a number of social and occupational groups. One was the gentry, another the farmers, a third was labourers, a fourth servants. It was sometimes possible to constitute a fifth group of clothiers and hosiers, which one would like to think of as a textile employer class, though one cannot be sure of course that it is really differentiable from the sixth group, other textile workers. Finally into a seventh group went the consistently large numbers of other artisans and tradesmen— butchers, bakers and candlestick makers—who are to be found marrying in this fashion. Spinsters marrying into these groups were also analysed.

On the male side, one finds almost everywhere farmers marrying latest, certainly later than labourers where they can be measured, with the gentry occupying a rather shifting position usually somewhere between the two. Nearly everywhere also one finds the textile workers, whether employers or employees, and the other artisans and tradesmen marrying earliest of all. There are exceptions, of course, to all these generalizations. It is on the female side, however, that the results are most interesting. Amongst the rural groups gentry wives

ed. A. R. Bax (Norwich, 1907); *Calendar of Sussex Marriage Licences*, ed. E. W. D. Penfold (Sussex Record Society, xxv and xxvi, 1917 and 1919). The mean ages at marriage of bachelors and spinsters in each of these samples are given below. In the Yorkshire sample widowers were not always differentiated.

	<i>Bachelors</i>	<i>Spinsters</i>
Suffolk, 1684-1723	26·3	24·5
Yorkshire, 1691-1710	—	23·1
Notts. 1701-10	26·5	24·2
Notts. 1751-60	25·9	24·2
Suffolk, 1751-60	26·6	25·5
Surrey, 1751-60	26·5	24·4
Sussex, 1801-10	24·5	22·3
Leicestershire, 1801-10	25·6	23·8

On the male side, ignoring (for reasons explained below, p. 68) the two early-nineteenth-century samples, the closeness of the figures is immediately apparent, not only to each other, but also to Laslett's average of 26·9 for some Canterbury licences, 1619-60, and indeed to the Registrar General's national averages. The averages on the female side, again disregarding the early-nineteenth-century figures, support the conclusion reached earlier that such figures rarely drop below 24 and rarely rise above 26. Again the similarity with the Registrar General's returns might be noted. But see below, p. 68.

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were almost invariably younger than farmers' wives, but not in mid-eighteenth-century Nottinghamshire. In the two Nottinghamshire samples, moreover, labourers' wives married later than those marrying farmers, but in Surrey and Sussex the reverse was the case. In Leicestershire labourers' wives married latest of all groups, in Sussex earliest of all. In fact, the results, on the female side, are much more varied than on the male side. One important reason for this is that in nearly all these county samples the gap between the spinster group marrying earliest and that marrying latest was inconsiderable: the three earliest samples yield differences of 1.9, 1.0 and 1.2 years; the three mid-eighteenth century ones, 1.8, 1.4 and 1.7 years; and the last two, 2.6 and 1.5 years. Only in early-nineteenth-century Sussex was there a difference greater than two years, the result primarily of a low age at marriage (20.9 years) of some 90 labourers' wives.

To what extent are any of these findings vitiated by the nature of the evidence and the methods of analysis adopted? In particular, what reliance can one place on any findings based on marriage licence documents? Although irregular ceremonies loom large in the marriage literature of the eighteenth century most marriages were regular ones, preceded either by the formality of thrice-called banns or by the acquisition of an ecclesiastical licence which allowed the parties to dispense with that formality.²⁵ The most notable characteristic of licences, therefore, is that they offered greater privacy. This was true of licences throughout in that the notification of intention to marry was avoided, but probably down to Hardwicke's Act of 1753 licences also offered, in practice though not in theory, greater latitude to those wishing to marry in a parish other than that in which one of the parties resided. Licences also offered speed. A couple could, in theory, marry within minutes of obtaining the licence, providing of course that the church named within it lay near at hand. Privacy and speed had, however, to be paid for. In his report for the year 1845 the Registrar General put the normal cost of a licence at £2 12s. 6d., 12s. 6d. of which was then stamp duty. Minors paid an extra 10s. 6d. however.²⁶ In 1864 the cost of a marriage with banns was put at around 12s. and one by licence at about £3 4s.²⁷ A tax of 5s. was first imposed on marriage licences in 1694²⁸ and there seems little doubt that this, and

²⁵ Attention is here confined to the ordinary ecclesiastical licence and not to the Archbishop of Canterbury's special licence. On the distinctions between them see *Twentieth Annual Report of the Registrar General* (H.C. 1859, session 2, xii, p. 1), p. iv.

²⁶ *Eighth Annual Report of the Registrar General* (H.C. 1847-48, xxv, p. 1), pp. xxvi-xxvii.

²⁷ *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the Registrar General* (H.C. 1866, xix, p. 1), p. x.

²⁸ By 5 & 6 Wm & M, c. 21.

subsequent tax increases, tended to widen the gap in cost between the two forms of matrimony.²⁹

There is no doubt that the licence system was popular, however, though at the moment this can be measured accurately only from the onset of general registration. In the years 1838–41 there were nationally 19 or 20 marriages by licence for every 100 marriages by banns. The range of variation in the major registration areas ran from about 16 to 28 per cent, with the whole of the North, the North Midlands, Monmouthshire and Wales, experiencing above-average rates, and the South and East below-average rates.³⁰ It is impossible to make comparisons with earlier periods because the only precise published figures relate to particular churches, like St Nicholas's, Rochester, and Holy Trinity, Stratford-upon-Avon, and although the numbers marrying by licence in both are in excess of those marrying with banns, both churches lay in close proximity to an issuing authority, which probably accounts for the high proportions.³¹ Frith has tentatively suggested, however, that in seventeenth-century Gloucestershire the proportion of licences to banns may have been as high as one to three.³² The number of licences taken out annually in Leicestershire 1801–10 was greater than the number of marriages by licence occurring there each year in the early years of general registration. Although there must have been some licences wasted, the possibility exists that in Leicestershire also the proportion marrying by licence may have declined before the onset of general registration.

The licence system undoubtedly appealed to a sizeable minority of the population. The social composition of this minority varied, probably between regions and certainly over time,³³ although it is difficult to measure these variations accurately if only because in every collection of licence documents there are large numbers for which no occupations are given. Wealthier groups are always better represented, however, than the poorer ones. Labourers and servants are clearly

²⁹ A certain amount of information on the fees charged before the nineteenth century can be found in R. Burn, *Ecclesiastical Law* (2nd edn, London, 1767), i, pp. 223, 226; *A Cavalier's Note Book*, ed. T. E. Gibson (London, 1880), p. 263; *Hampshire Allegations for Marriage Licences*, ed. W. J. C. Moens (London, 1893), p. viii; W. E. Tate, *The Parish Chest* (3rd edn, Cambridge, 1969), pp. 130–32.

³⁰ See, for example, *Fourth Annual Report of the Registrar General* (H.C. 1842, xix, p. 441), p. 17.

³¹ *National Index of Parish Registers*, ed. D. J. Steel (London, 1968), i, pp. 227–28.

³² *Gloucestershire Marriage Allegations 1637–1680*, ed. B. Frith (Publications of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Soc., ii, 1954), p. xvi.

³³ L. Stone, 'Literacy and Education in England, 1640–1900', *Past and Present*, xlii (1969), pp. 103–12.

under-represented. Indeed this must have been part of the licence system's attraction. The most important reason for this social bias was undoubtedly the higher cost of a licence. Obviously an outlay of several pounds was well within the capacities of most gentlemen, farmers and tradesmen, but it would represent a considerable slice of the annual income of an agricultural labourer or domestic servant. Yet these latter groups are never absent and the proportion of licences issued to them was higher in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than previously.³⁴ The nature of the records probably leads also to some misrepresentation of the real presence of wage-earners. In 2,113 Leicestershire licences issued 1801–10 there were 200 specified labourers and servants but there were also 281 instances in which no occupations were given, and some labourers must also have been lurking among the 552 artisans and tradesmen. As there were, in addition, 194 textile workers, the wage-earners are clearly not neglected. Yet bias towards the wealthy there was, and it continued well into the nineteenth century, when the Registrar General could report, 'High prices of wheat depress marriage among the classes (five out of six) who marry by banns, to a greater extent than they depress marriage among the remaining sixth of the people marrying by licence.'³⁵

Speed and privacy, argued Blagg, the editor of the Nottinghamshire bonds and allegations, 'doubtless explain the abnormal number of widows and widowers who took advantage of this method and also the large proportion of minors'.³⁶ Comparisons with the proportions remarrying in the early years of general registration do not suggest 'abnormal' proportions, however, especially if allowance is made for the generally higher remarriage rates which must have prevailed before the late eighteenth century fall in mortality. Nor is there any real evidence that the proportion of minors marrying by licence was in any way extraordinary. Indeed, there is more evidence of an appeal to the older bachelor and spinster—those aged 40 and above—than there is of any special appeal to minors. Marriages of the very young—14 to 16-year-olds—are rarely encountered in these documents. It may be that, far from exercising a special appeal to any particular age-group, marriage by licence was preferred where there were marked disparities of age between couples. This could occur, of course, at any level of ages. When James Clark of Sudbury took out a licence in 1752 his age was returned at 53; Jane, his bride-to-be, was 17. In 1801, the 21-year-old Charlotte Loton, of East Langton, Leicestershire, was linked in a licence with the 16-year-old William

³⁴ L. Stone, 'Literacy and Education in England, 1640–1900', *Past and Present*, xlii (1969), p. 106.

³⁵ *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Registrar General* (H.C. 1857, session 2, xxii, p. 279), p. iii.

³⁶ Blagg, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

Cooper.³⁷ One does not have to over-indulge the historical imagination to discern why couples such as these might prefer to avoid banns. The Registrar General once cited a private correspondent who told him how in Cumberland there was 'a disinclination to publication of banns, on account of the notoriety it gives to the intended marriage, at which in many country parishes, idle lads congregate, and often annoy the parties'.³⁸ No doubt the fun would be even greater where one party was markedly older than the other. A dangerous moment in the ceremony itself was when the officiating clergyman asked, 'If any man can show any just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together. . . .' A parish clerk recounted how on one occasion 'an unwelcome visitor . . . a noted character . . . under the influence of drink' used the opportunity to remark audibly, 'I've no objection.'³⁹ The Registrar General's correspondent thought that the rowdiness on which he remarked 'caused many to prefer going to the expense of a licence, and when several do a thing of that kind it becomes a kind of fashion which others follow'.⁴⁰ Snobbery no doubt speeded the process of social emulation, for marriage by licence was the resort of the upper classes, who, we have been frequently told, married this way to avoid their affairs being publicized before all and sundry.⁴¹ Foreigners, like Misson, declared as much: 'To proclaim banns is a thing nobody cares to have done'—nobody who mattered that is.⁴² So also did Horace Walpole, outraged by Hardwicke's Act, when writing to Seymour Conway: 'It is well that you are married. How would my lady A. have liked to be asked in a parish-church for three Sundays running? I really believe she would have worn her weeds forever, rather than have passed through so impudent a ceremony.'⁴³ It is very reminiscent of Lydia Languish's despair, at the collapse of her plans for elopement and a 'Scotch parson', that she might 'perhaps be cried three times in a country-church and have an unmannerly fat clerk ask the consent of every butcher in the parish to join John Absolute and Lydia Languish, Spinster!'⁴⁴ The desire for privacy might also be joined, before Hardwicke's Act, with the intention of marrying in a distant, perhaps fashionable, church. Many gentry couples in the Yorkshire licences, for example, intended to marry

³⁷ Bannerman, *op. cit.*, p. 215; Card Index to Archdeaconry of Leicester marriage bonds, Leicester Museum.

³⁸ *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the Registrar General* (H.C. 1866, xix, p. 1), p. viii.

³⁹ Anon., *Cupid's Pupils* (London, 1899), p. 132.

⁴⁰ See above, note 38.

⁴¹ G. Hamilton-Edwards, *In Search of Ancestry* (London, 1966), p. 65.

⁴² Cited in J. C. Jeaffreson, *Brides and Bridals* (London, 1872), ii, p. 179.

⁴³ Cited in G. E. Howard, *A History of Matrimonial Institutions* (Chicago and London, 1904), i, p. 457.

⁴⁴ R. B. Sheridan, *The Rivals*, Act 5, scene 1.

at York Minster. Once we have a peer group behaving in this way the practice could spread by simple emulation. The cost of a licence acted as a deterrent to complete social debasement of the system, but it was always possible, of course, for the less wealthy to offset the price of a licence against the lower costs of a quiet, more private wedding. There were also, it must be said, cheap licences to be had in some places. The great rise after 1730 in the number of marriages in the tiny Nottinghamshire parish of Fledborough is less likely to be explained, as Professor Chambers romantically hoped, by the magic of the incumbent's name—the Rev. Amos Sweetapple—than by cheap licences offered by that notorious parson.⁴⁵

It is difficult to exhaust the personal reasons why privacy might be desired. A late Elizabethan defence of the licence system justified it because it provided facilities for the bashful; it was of benefit in those cases where there were marked disparities of class as well as age; it allowed young people, once presumably they had reached the age of 21, to follow their own hearts rather than the dictates of their parents; and it enabled some bachelors—in decent privacy—to make honest women of their mistresses.⁴⁶ One could extend the list. Thrice-called banns might be a public torment, for example, for those cursed with unfortunate names. Was it this which persuaded Miss Pleasant Love to marry by licence in Nottinghamshire in 1710, or Avis Urine to seek a licence in Sudbury in 1712?⁴⁷ It is noticeable that in the index of names to the volume of Suffolk licences from which the last example was taken two of the largest entries relate to the families of Prick and Balls.⁴⁸ It is also noticeable that they were conspicuously successful in avoiding each other in the matrimonial market. Oddities of appearance were of sufficient interest to persuade one nineteenth-century parish clerk, recounting in print his long career, to include a chapter on 'Anomalous Couples', including one 'whose proportions outraged all the rules of symmetry . . . The bridegroom was a poor little weak stripling of a man, quite insignificant in appearance. The bride was six feet three, and had a brother who was seven feet six inches, and weighed thirty-four stone. His individuality was so remarkable that he was presented to her Majesty at Buckingham Palace, and had the honour of receiving from the Queen a valuable souvenir of the interview.'⁴⁹ With love, as with monarchs, there is no accounting for taste.

⁴⁵ Chambers, *op. cit.*, p. 50; Blagg, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

⁴⁶ 'Reasons for licences to marry', printed in P. McGrath, 'Notes on the History of Marriage Licences', in Frith, *op. cit.*, pp. xxiv–xxvi.

⁴⁷ Blagg and Wadsworth, *op. cit.*, p. xii; Bannerman, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁴⁸ Bannerman, *op. cit.*, pp. 392, 439. See also 'Cock' (p. 402).

⁴⁹ *Cupid's Pupils*, p. 145.

Speed may have been an attribute of the licence system which influenced the character of its clientele. Some have seen signs of its influence in numbers of sailors and soldiers resorting, at certain times and places, to marriage in this fashion. More important, however, is whether a system offering speed would have special appeal to the pregnant. If haste was necessary such girls would, of course, have to be in an advanced state of pregnancy for a few weeks to make much difference. The same is arguably true if it was privacy, rather than haste, which was required. Also, if by the end of the eighteenth century one-third of all first pregnancies were conceived out of wedlock, one wonders seriously whether girls were so embarrassed by their condition as to make them marginally prefer licences to banns. If they were, the question arises of whether girls conceiving out of wedlock were likely to be younger than virginal brides. Hair, however, has discounted that bridal pregnancy was due to teenage innocence.⁵⁰

A number of other possibilities suggest themselves. Before Hardwicke's Act a church marriage was desirable, if only to establish property and hereditary rights, but it was not necessary for validity in the eyes of the church; after the Act marriage in an Anglican church of the parish of residence of one of the parties became a legal necessity for all except Quakers and Jews. The licence system may take on significance in the light of these facts. Did it, for example, appeal to those indifferent to religion, the non-churchgoers, more likely to be found among the industrial and commercial classes than amongst the agricultural ones? The social composition of the licensees may be significant in this respect. Did it offer some appeal to non-Anglicans, especially after 1753 when they were compelled to go through an Anglican ceremony? Here the geography of the licence system in the mid-nineteenth century is interesting, especially the above-average proportions in the North and in Wales. In a period also when physical mobility was increasing did the system offer a marginal appeal to relative newcomers to both rural and urban parishes? In all these cases it is possible that the licence system could have minimized both contacts with the parish clergy and any embarrassment this was likely to have caused.

Before considering the consequences of all this for the conclusions previously arrived at, we must consider the greatest deficiency of these documents—the accuracy of the ages returned in them. The editors of printed bonds and allegations have tended to deprecate their accuracy; those who wish to use these documents for sociological

⁵⁰ P. E. H. Hair, 'Bridal Pregnancy in Rural England in Earlier Centuries', *Population Studies*, xx (1966-67), pp. 233-43; 'Bridal Pregnancy in Earlier Rural England further Examined', *Population Studies*, xxiv (1970), pp. 59-70.

enquiry, not surprisingly, are less pessimistic.⁵¹ The precise degree of accuracy overall is impossible to establish, and exceedingly laborious to establish in individual cases, but the ages are probably less accurate than those volunteered ones that successive Registrar Generals relied on. A vicar drew attention in 1872 to some of the defects of those: 'both parties to the contract shy of telling, perhaps for the first time to each other, their exact ages, both also, in country parishes often apparently woefully ignorant of their own ages'.⁵² Everywhere in the eighteenth-century licences one finds evidence of rounding: usually at 30, 40 and 50, but not in the Yorkshire licences where the ages bunch at 29, 39 and 49—an interesting example of Yorkshire tact. A more serious failing lies in those cases where age was returned as '21 and above'. Some of these at any time were formalistic entries, denoting 'of mature age', but the proportions of such entries tended to rise in the eighteenth century. In the Leicestershire and Sussex licences of the early nineteenth century over one-third of all the entries were of this type. The proportions were much lower in the three earliest samples: 5–6 per cent for bachelors, 12–15 per cent for spinsters. The higher proportions for females may mean they had a greater propensity to lie about their ages, but they also reflect the fact that 21 lay nearer the modal age at marriage for women than it did for men.

Thus there was at any moment of time some under-reporting of age and this tended to become much more serious as the eighteenth century progressed. This fact, allied with the social composition of the licensees and its tendency to vary, means that average ages calculated from whole collections of licences should not be compared with each other, certainly not over periods embracing the beginning and end of the eighteenth century. Nor, for all these reasons, should averages calculated from whole collections of licences be compared with reconstituted ones. The thought also occurs that in comparing averages derived from licences with the Registrar General's age returns we may simply be comparing the efficacy with which different generations lied about their age.

What is much more difficult to establish is whether the character of both licences and licensees seriously invalidates any of the conclusions about social differentials, especially among females. One reason for the narrowness of female differentials may be the narrowness of

⁵¹ Compare, for example, Blagg, *op. cit.*, p. vii, and P. E. Razzell, 'Statistics and English Historical Sociology', in *The Industrial Revolution*, ed. R. M. Hartwell (Oxford, 1970), pp. 108–9. (There appears to be an error in the relevant Razzell passage: 'seven' should read sixteen.) The pessimism of editors may be explained by the fact that most could foresee their value only to genealogists.

⁵² Cited in Steel, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

male ones. In the eight area samples explored here, the differences between the average ages of those bachelor groups marrying earliest and those marrying latest were 2.1, 1.5, 2.8, 3.5, 2.3, 2.6, 2.0 and 3.4 years. It is difficult to see how anything so far stated could greatly extend the age difference between the group marrying latest, usually the farmers, and those marrying earliest, the textile workers, artisans and tradesmen, and, in early-nineteenth-century Sussex, the labourers. Indeed, the differences may already be exaggerated by a number of characteristics, such as the tendency for wage-earners marrying by licence to be wealthier than those marrying with banns, and the tendency in the documents for there to be fewer than average formalistic (age 21) entries among the farmers and a more than average number among the early marrying groups.

That these age-differentials are not entirely the product of the sources used may be seen by comparing them with those produced for nine occupational groups by William Ogle from the marriage registers of 1884-85.⁵³ The age-spread between groups was, paradoxically, much greater. Among the bachelors it was 6.16 years, among the spinsters 4.45 years. One reason for this appears to be that the intervening period does seem to have witnessed some marriage postponement among those males marrying latest—the 'professional and independent' group and the farmers, and these groups were choosing older brides than they had done in the eighteenth century. Another reason is that at the other end of the male age-spectrum we have the miners, a group not represented in the licences. Their brides also were a clear year younger than those of textile workers, the group otherwise marrying earliest. But from at least the mid-nineteenth century miners had displayed a fondness for young brides, and also for high fertility, a propensity Brownlee put down to the large coal fires they kept blazing in their tiny houses.⁵⁴ The interesting fact, however, is that the differences among the remaining six groups—textile hands, shoemakers and tailors, artisans, labourers, commercial clerks, shop-

⁵³ *Forty-Ninth Annual Report of the Registrar General* (H.C. 1887, xxiii, p. 1), pp. vii-viii; W. Ogle, 'On Marriage-Rates and Marriage-Ages, with Special Reference to the Growth of Population', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, liii (1890), pp. 253-80. Ogle's groups and ages for bachelors and spinsters were (bachelors' ages first): Professional and Independent classes—31.22 and 26.40; Farmers and sons—29.23 and 26.91; Shopkeepers and Shopmen—26.67 and 24.22; Commercial Clerks—26.25 and 24.43; Labourers—25.56 and 23.66; Artisans—25.35 and 23.70; Shoemakers and Tailors—24.92 and 24.31; Textile hands—24.38 and 23.43; Miners—24.06 and 22.46.

⁵⁴ T. H. C. Stevenson, 'The Fertility of Various Social Classes in England and Wales from the Middle of the Nineteenth Century to 1911', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, lxxxiii (1920), pp. 401-32 and 'Discussion', p. 433.

keepers and shopmen—were 2·29 years for males and 1·0 year for females.

It is possible, of course, that the differentials are not greater in all these cases because of the deficiencies of the occupational descriptions. All users of such materials are familiar with them: the mixture of status and occupational description; and the impossibility of establishing the degrees of wealth or independence lurking behind nominally similar labels. A 'farmer' could be operating on 100 acres or on ten. A 'baker' might be either a master or an employee. Even people describing themselves as 'labourers' must in reality have varied a great deal. In so far, therefore, as it is difficult to isolate groups enjoying common employment characteristics it is impossible to test precisely the influence of male employments upon age at marriage.

Even if we could isolate groups with more precision, however, we would have also to acknowledge that the nature of a man's employment was only one influence on age at marriage. That decision was probably moulded by a whole host of other influences: sibling order, patterns of inheritance, custom, the sex balance within the eligible age group within communities,⁵⁵ the power-structure within the parish,⁵⁶ the availability of housing—of vital importance if the prevalence of the 'nuclear or conjugal' household is insisted upon,⁵⁷ the nature and availability of female employments,⁵⁸ and so on. Intensive economic and social studies of particular communities have much to tell us about the factors influencing marriage arrangements, and age at marriage is a subject which should not be left exclusively in the hands of the parish register demographers.

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⁵⁵ If, for example, Gregory King's enumeration of the ages of the population of Lichfield in 1695 is correct, there were 108 bachelors aged 20–39 to 244 spinsters of the same age. See D. V. Glass, 'Gregory King and the Population of England and Wales at the end of the Seventeenth Century', in Glass and Eversley, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

⁵⁶ This might determine *inter alia* whether the parish was 'open' or 'closed', the ease of obtaining a 'settlement', attitudes to squatters, the nature and general administration of poor relief, and the availability of cottages, commons and allotments.

⁵⁷ Laslett, *op. cit.*, p. xiii, and 'Size and Structure of the Household in England over Three Centuries', *Population Studies*, xxiii (1969), pp. 199–224.

⁵⁸ Ogle, *op. cit.*, p. 269; *Twenty-Ninth Annual Report of the Registrar General* (H.C. 1867–68, xix, p. 1), pp. v–vi.