

NOTES AND QUERIES

THE TIMING OF MARRIAGE IN MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY INDUSTRIAL COMMUNITIES

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The timing of marriage in pre-industrial England has received a great deal of attention from historical demographers, but its more recent history has been neglected.¹ One obvious reason for this is the inaccessibility of the civil registers for the post-1837 period. However, this note suggests that worthwhile research is still possible, using a combination of published statistics and parish registers to reveal the impact of economic fluctuations on family life.

My starting point is William Beveridge's classic study of unemployment, first published in 1909. This includes a diagram entitled 'The Pulse of the Nation', meaning the trade cycle, in which Beveridge graphs a number of variables over the latter half of the nineteenth century.² Some of these variables were obviously economic: overseas trade, wage rates, and unemployment. However, he also included the marriage rate *per capita*, which displays a close relationship, particularly in its turning points, with the unemployment rate derived from trade union insurance schemes: fewer people got married in years of bad trade.

Given that the available unemployment statistics derive from a limited number of unions in particular sectors, notably engineering and construction, whereas the marriage rate in some senses involves the entire population, this tells us something about the wider impact of nineteenth century recessions. Currently I am working on an analysis of the County- and Registration District-level statistics drawn from the Registrar General's Annual Reports, available from 1841 onwards, and these suggest that there was substantially higher variance in the marriage rate for the more industrialised counties. This would seem to confirm my earlier work on localised unemployment, which argues that unemployment in the pre-1914 period was concentrated in the industrial north, just as it has been subsequently.³ However, the purpose of this note is to draw attention to the scale of cyclical variation found in particular localities, and even more among particular occupational groups.

The depressions of the 1840s are important because of their political impact, closely related as they were to the Chartist unrest, and also because they possibly marked the emergence of an integrated national space-economy, in which regions differed in terms of the depth of the down-turn but not of its

timing.⁴ However, there are very few statistical series available for this period which permit the comparison of localities; trade union unemployment series are only available from 1851, and provide patchy coverage of the country until the 1880s. Marriage statistics do tell us something of this, and the scale of the impact of recession is illustrated by the experience of Bolton, Lancashire. A contemporary observer, Henry Ashworth, reported in 1842:

There are in Bolton, which contains a population of about 50,000, 50 [cotton] mills, usually employing 8,124 workpeople; of these, there are 30 mills and 5,061 work-people, either standing idle or working only four days a week. ... In 1836, the number [of iron founders, engineers, millwrights, and machine makers] employed was 2,110; there are employed at present 1,325; discharged 785. A considerable number of these have left the country, some for the continent, others to America ... The distress among the mechanics is greater than among any other class; and upon these it presses the more severely, as their earnings, in times of ordinary trade, are probably above the average of the other classes.⁵

Turning to the marriage statistics, the Registrar General's reports show that the number of marriages in England and Wales increased by 21 per cent from 1842, the year of deepest depression, to 1845; in Lancashire, by 44 per cent; and in Bolton Registration District, by 62 per cent.⁶ The size of the increase following the up-turn in the economy from 1842 would suggest that Bolton had been very badly hit by recession in the preceding years. For a more detailed analysis, we must turn to the registers of St Peter, the parish church of Bolton and in this period almost the only church in the town itself licensed for marriages; as a result, over half of all marriages in the Registration District took place there, and in 1850 there were only seven fewer marriages in this one church as there were in the whole of Herefordshire.⁷ Figure 1 graphs the total number of marriages there, and compares it with the number of persons relieved by the Bolton Poor Protection Society, established in 1840. The strong relationship between the state of the economy and the numbers getting married will be obvious, and the percentage increase in numbers of marriages from 1842 to 1845 for St Peter's was 104 per cent, presumably because the town was harder hit than the surrounding villages.

Ashworth suggested that engineers were particularly hard hit. From July 1837 onwards, the marriage registers record the occupations of the groom, his father, and the bride's father, and it is therefore possible to examine variations between occupational groups. Figure 2 plots the number of marriages in which the groom was an engineer or iron worker, and it can be seen that there is an enormous variation over the cycle: the increase from 1842 to 1845 is 216 per cent.⁸ The figure also shows the numbers of baptisms where the father came from the same group; although the degree of variation with the cycle is not as marked, it is still conspicuous, and it will be interesting to employ linkage techniques to discover how far this is due simply to varying numbers of first children.

Figure 1 Marriage and poverty in Bolton, 1837-50



Source: St Peter's parish register transcripts, Bolton Borough Archives; Bolton Poor Protection Society, **Annual Reports**.

These results are spectacular, and they justify further research. However, the transcription from the Bolton register was restricted to this particular occupational group and it is not possible to present comparative figures for other groups. My reason for publishing these interim results is simple: has anyone made more extensive transcriptions from the registers of a nineteenth century industrial town? The minimum information needed is, for a series of years, the date of each marriage and the occupation of the groom, and obviously this information needs to be in machine-readable form to repeat the analysis. I should be extremely grateful if anyone with suitable data, or a wider interest in the use of marriage statistics as an economic indicator, would get in touch.

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1. See, in particular, A.Kussmaul, *A general view of the rural economy of England, 1538-1840*, 1990, who uses the seasonality of marriage to identify different types of local economy.
2. W.H.Beveridge, *Unemployment: a problem of industry*, 2nd edition. 1931, p.44.
3. H.R.Southall, 'The Origins of the Depressed Areas: Unemployment, Growth, and Regional Economic Structure in Britain before 1914', *Economic History Review*, II, 41, 1988, pp.236-258.
4. H.R.Southall, 'The tramping artisan revisits: labour mobility and economic distress in early Victorian England', *Economic History Review*, II, 44, 1991, pp.272-96. This paper explores the impact of these recessions on labour mobility.

5. H.Ashworth, 'Statistics of the present depression of trade at Bolton; showing the mode in which it affects the different classes of a Manufacturing Population', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, 5, 1842, pp.74-81.
6. A summary tabulation of registered marriages covering the period 1841 to 1850 was printed in the Thirteenth Annual Report of the Registrar General for 1850, pp.170-193.
7. Six hundred and fourteen as compared to six hundred and twenty-one. The analysis which follows used a modern transcript of the parish register, only available up to 1850. The total number of marriages per annum is an estimate based on the number of pages in the transcript. The number of engineers' marriages given for 1837 was obtained by doubling the July-December total.
8. Engineers and iron workers were defined, using the Booth-Armstrong occupational classification, as categories MF1 and MF4, but adding all men described as 'Mechanic'; W.A.Armstrong, 'The use of information about occupation', pp.191-310 in E.A.Wrigley, *Nineteenth Century Society*, 1972.

Figure 2 Marriages and baptisms among Bolton engineers and iron workers 1837-50



Source: St Peter's parish register transcript, Bolton Borough Archives.