
Religious Change and Baptismal Days in Sixteenth-Century Non-Metropolitan Surrey*

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Abstract

The religious changes of the sixteenth century profoundly affected many aspects of people's lives. Among these was a change in the expectation as to the timing of baptism. The 1549 Book of Common Prayer placed a novel emphasis on the performance of the ritual of baptism by clergy in front of the congregation, resulting in an expectation that baptisms would occur on Sundays or other holy days. This research note reports a preliminary exploration of changes in the timing of baptisms in non-metropolitan Surrey between 1541 and 1600, changes which provide an indication of the degree of its population's conformity to the established church. It finds that there was an increase in Sunday baptisms after the introduction of the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, a partial though possibly not complete reversal during the return to Catholicism under Mary, and then a gradual movement towards greater adherence during the course of Elizabeth's reign. By 1600 the majority of baptisms took place on Sundays. People in towns and those in rural areas seem to have behaved quite similarly, though there is the possibility of greater adherence to Sunday baptisms in some urban areas in the immediate aftermath of the introduction of the 1549 prayer book and of disruption to the timing of baptisms during the dearth of the 1590s.

The sixteenth century witnessed a series of changes in the official religion in England, changes which altered people's lives in all sorts of ways. The research described here is concerned with one element of those changes, the timing of baptisms. It takes its inspiration from P.M. Kitson who used the information contained in parish records to explore religious change and the timing of baptisms between 1538 and 1750.² Roger Schofield had previously analysed the favoured days for baptisms (and burials and marriages) making use of the data from the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure's 26 family reconstitution parishes.³ By the time of the Reformation, the early practice of baptisms taking place only at Easter and at Whitsun (Pentecost) had fallen into abeyance and baptisms occurred throughout the year, mostly shortly after birth.⁴ During the reign of the Protestant Edward VI the 1549 Act of Uniformity prescribed the publication of the

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2 P.M. Kitson, 'Religious change and the timing of baptism in England, 1538–1750', *Historical Journal*, 52 (2009), pp. 269–94. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X09007456>.

3 R. Schofield, '“Monday's child is fair of face”: favoured days for baptism, marriage and burial in pre-industrial England', *Continuity and Change*, 20 (2005), pp. 93–105. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416004005326>.

4 D. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 100–1.

Book of Common Prayer which was to be obtained by every parish.⁵ Amongst the changes it introduced was a new emphasis on baptism being performed by clergy and taking place in the presence of the whole congregation on Sundays and other holy days.⁶

Kitson expanded on the work of Schofield by using the registers of over 300 parishes in several parts of England to explore the results of this and later religious changes. He found responses ‘ranging from enthusiastic adoption by many communities to complete disregard in religiously conservative parts of Lancashire and Cheshire’.⁷ He found, for example, that in the period 1561–1600 the proportion of baptisms performed on Sundays or other holy days ranged from 24 per cent in Ormskirk (Lancashire) and 27 per cent in Heswall (Cheshire) to 76 per cent in Terling (Essex) and 85 per cent in Aldenham (Hertfordshire).⁸ Such differences, as Kitson pointed out, can be used as a measure of people’s conformity to the established church: as he commented, ‘quantifying the timing of baptism provides a novel and powerful means to investigate the spatial and temporal aspects of conformity in the first hundred years or so of parochial registration’.⁹

The study reported here provides a preliminary exploration of the degree of compliance with the religious changes between 1541 and 1600 in one southern county, Surrey. It considers whether Surrey parishes experienced the high level of compliance noted by Kitson in other southern parishes and also how this changed over the course of the sixteenth century. In doing so it looks at the historical rather than the modern county of Surrey and within that it excludes the handful of parishes in the far north-east of the county which contemporaries viewed as *de facto* part of London (the several parishes of Southwark and the parishes of Newington, Lambeth, Bermondsey and Rotherhithe (Redrith), parishes which were included in London’s seventeenth-century Bills of Mortality). Surrey was a relatively small county, extending about 30 miles by 40 miles. Being a mainly agricultural area, though with soils which were rarely of more than middling fertility, the non-metropolitan area of Surrey was on average considerably less affluent and less densely populated than its metropolitan parishes. It contained about a dozen towns whose populations ranged in size from about 2,500 down to less than 500 and a certain amount of rural industry in its southern parishes. This preliminary study is limited also to considering Sunday baptisms only, not baptisms on other holy days. These latter were days for which the *Book of Common Prayer* provided a collect of the day. According to Kitson’s study, the proportion of baptisms on holy days other than Sundays was modest and did not alter much within the sixteenth century, remaining between 8 and 10 per cent and showing no trend over time.¹⁰ Some of these holy days were related to Easter and its non-fixed date

5 R. Hutton, ‘The local impact of the Tudor Reformations’, in C. Haigh (ed.), *The English Reformation Revised* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 114–38, here at p. 125. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511622113.008>.

6 E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (London, 2005), pp. 464–7; Kitson, ‘Religious change and the timing of baptism’, pp. 269–70.

7 Kitson, ‘Religious change and the timing of baptism’, p. 269.

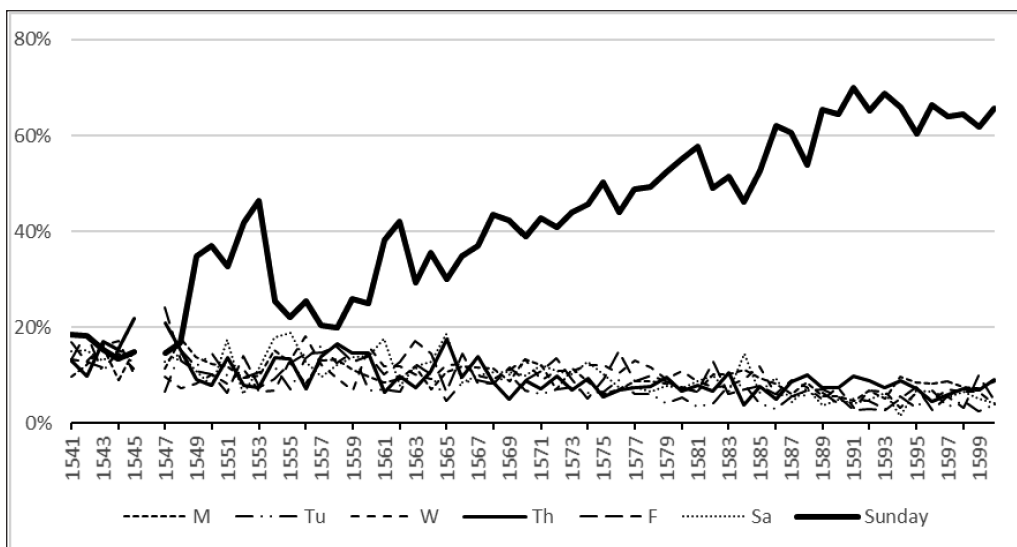
8 Kitson, ‘Religious change and the timing of baptism’, p. 288.

9 Kitson, ‘Religious change and the timing of baptism’, p. 292.

10 Kitson, ‘Religious change and the timing of baptism’, p. 280.

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Figure 1 Percentage of baptisms on each day of the week, 1541–1600



Source: Baptism registers of parishes of Barnes, Betchworth, Bisley, Bletchingley, Burstow, Charlwood, Cheam, Chiddingfold, Chobham, Clapham, Croydon, Dorking, Ewhurst, Hambledon, Hascombe, Mickleham, Newdigate, Peperharow, Petersham, Pirbright, Reigate, Walton on the Hill, Wonersh, and Worplesdon (transcriptions made by West Surrey Family History Society).

adds an extra complication to the identification of the dates of holy days in each year. In consequence, for this preliminary study of Surrey it was decided to exclude such dates and concentrate on the numbers of baptisms on Sundays.

Within Surrey detailed transcripts of baptisms are currently available in digitised form for 24 parishes, about a third of those parishes whose registers survive from this period and about a sixth of all its parishes, providing records of about 11,500 baptisms.¹¹ The total numbers of baptisms per year in these parishes are relatively modest, mostly between 100 and 300, and this will limit the robustness of the findings.¹² Bearing this caveat in mind, in the parishes considered there were marked changes in the proportions of baptisms taking place on Sundays over the sixteenth century (Figure 1). They rose from around 20 per cent in the 1540s to approaching 70 per cent at the end of the sixteenth century. When the approximately 10 per cent of baptisms on other holy days are added in this gives a proportion of baptisms on Sundays or other holy days approaching 80 per cent by the end of the century. This is broadly in line with Kitson’s study, though suggesting some complexity. On the one hand, this proportion of baptisms on Sundays in non-metropolitan Surrey by the

11 The 24 parishes are: Barnes, Betchworth, Bisley, Bletchingley, Burstow, Charlwood, Cheam, Chiddingfold, Chobham, Clapham, Croydon, Dorking, Ewhurst, Hambledon, Hascombe, Mickleham, Newdigate, Peperharow, Petersham, Pirbright, Reigate, Walton on the Hill, Wonersh, and Worplesdon.

12 One year, 1546, had only 29 recorded baptisms and this is omitted from the graphs in this paper. Three other years, 1545, 1547 and 1550, had between 50 and 100 baptisms.

end of the century was well above the average in 1590–1599 of 63 per cent in Kitson's sample of parishes from across the country.¹³ On the other hand, over the period 1561–1600 non-metropolitan Surrey's proportion of baptisms on Sundays was 52 per cent (or around 62 per cent including other holy days) which, while substantial, was not as high as the around three quarters of baptisms taking place in this period on Sundays noted by Kitson in some southern parishes.¹⁴

Within the period 1541–1600 there appear to be distinct phases which coincide with its differing religious regimes. During the last years of Henry VIII's reign, the proportion of baptisms taking place on Sundays was around 15–20 per cent, in other words Sundays were similar to other days of the week, not having substantially more baptisms than other days. There was a marked change following the introduction of the *Book of Common Prayer* in 1549 with its expectation that baptisms be performed by clergy in front of the congregation. The proportion of baptisms on Sundays doubled to 35 per cent and rose further in the remaining years of Edward VI's reign, reaching 46 per cent in 1553. The return to Catholicism under Mary resulted in an immediate drop and the proportion of baptisms on Sundays remained between 20 and 25 per cent for the duration of her reign, much lower than under Edward but possibly not retreating quite as far as to match the proportions of Henry's last years (the small numbers of surviving records of baptisms in the earliest period make firm conclusions impossible). The return to Protestantism under Elizabeth, though somewhat less prescriptive than in Edward's reign, resulted in an immediate rise in the proportion of baptisms on Sundays, which reached 42 per cent in 1562. The decline over the next few years to 30–35 per cent may possibly reflect uncertainty in the minds of clergy and parishioners resulting from the Convocation of 1563 which discussed and defined the doctrines of the Church of England. Sunday baptisms became increasingly common thereafter reaching 58 per cent in 1581. There then seems, for reasons which are unclear, to have been a modest fall in 1582–1584 before the rise continued, reaching 70 per cent in 1591 and remaining between 60 and 70 per cent until the end of the century.

Overall, this emphasises two elements of popular responses in non-metropolitan Surrey to the 'top-down' religious changes which England experienced over the sixteenth century. One is that some people responded quickly to the shifting religious regimes, changing their behaviour in response to changing liturgical requirements. The other is that it nevertheless took time for these to become fully accepted and embedded in most people's behaviour. The process by which the changes happened is unclear. It may be that new parents were, over time, increasingly keen to have their babies baptised on Sundays or that the clergy encouraged such behaviour or, most likely, both. It is worth bearing in mind that the lives of Surrey people tended to be comparatively closely linked to London, and this included their religious outlook. R.A. Christophers concluded that the clergy of

13 Kitson, 'Religious change and the timing of baptism', p. 280.

14 Kitson, 'Religious change and the timing of baptism', pp. 288–9.

Surrey tended to demonstrate conformity to whichever was the religious approach of the current regime. He wrote of its clergy between 1520 and 1620 that ‘the vast majority appear at every crucial stage as conformists ... The ethos of Surrey was predominately one of support for official policy’ and that ‘[i]f Surrey clergy had been left to themselves they would have had no rebellion, but equally in earlier times they would have had no Reformation either.’¹⁵

The numbers of baptisms recorded in most of the parishes considered are too small to allow analysis at the parish level. However, it is interesting to note the experience of two parishes whose baptism records are more substantial. In both there is a suggestion of the influence of local factors. In Croydon, site of one of the residences of the Archbishop of Canterbury, adherence in the immediate aftermath of the introduction of the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* was particularly strong: baptisms on Sundays rose from an average of 12 per cent in 1541–1548 to 46 per cent in 1549 and reached 67 per cent in 1552. Later in the century in Dorking the proportion of baptisms occurring on Sundays rose rapidly from 52 per cent in 1571 to 83 per cent in 1581 before falling back somewhat to average around 70 per cent over the remaining years of the century. Speculatively this may have been linked with the presence in Dorking of a dissenting parish priest around this time, and who in the 1570s was charged with non-conformity.¹⁶

It is possible to take this study a little further and disaggregate the experience of Surrey’s parishes somewhat to consider whether there were differences between the behaviour of townspeople and of those living in the countryside. About half of the baptisms were from three of Surrey’s towns, Croydon, Dorking and Reigate.¹⁷ The remainder were from 21 rural parishes from various parts of the county. The numbers of baptisms in each of the two areas are, inevitably, quite limited and the findings do, therefore, need to be regarded as tentative.¹⁸ Differences between urban and rural areas might be expected. Clark and Slack described market towns by the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as ‘important centres of evangelical Puritanism’.¹⁹ Consistent with this, the Compton Census of 1676 recorded the presence of more non-conformists in Surrey’s towns than in its rural areas by that date.²⁰ There might therefore be expected to have been a speedier uptake of Protestant ideas in relation to baptism in the towns. But this does not seem to have been the case. To a large extent there were no marked differences in the behaviour of urban compared to rural parishes. Both experienced similar patterns of changing proportions of Sunday baptisms over the period (Figure 2).

15 R. A. Christophers, ‘Social and educational background of the Surrey clergy, 1520–1620’ (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1975), pp. 353–5.

16 K. Atherton, *The Museum Guide to Dorking* (Dorking, 2013), p. 19.

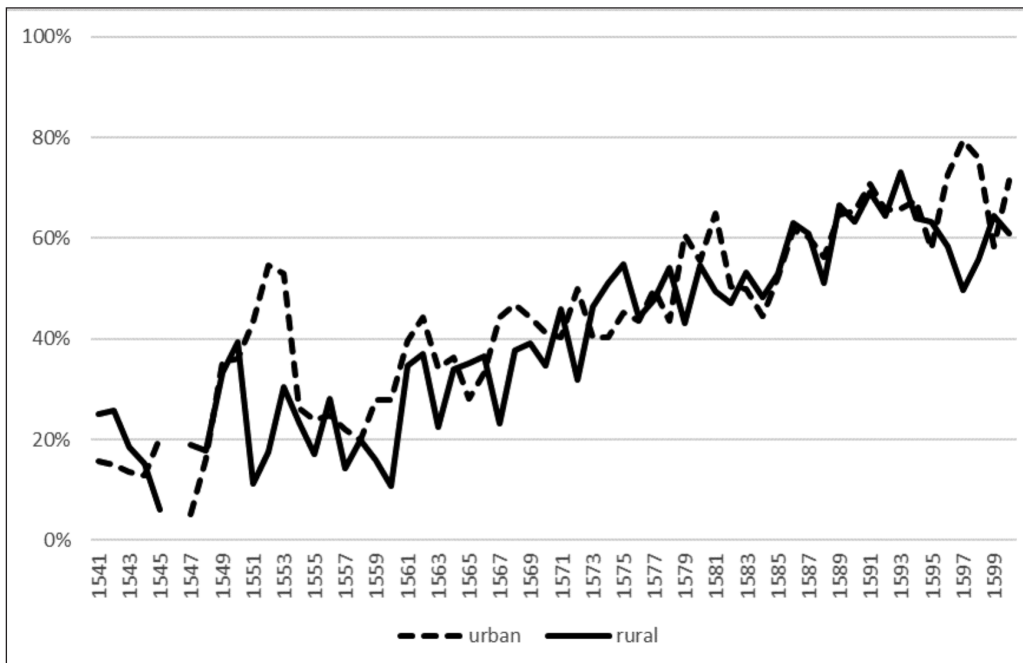
17 All three parishes contained rural areas as well as the towns.

18 The three urban parishes totalled at least 50 baptisms per year throughout (with the exception of 1546 and 1547) but it was not until 1561 that baptisms per year in the 21 rural parishes totalled at least 50.

19 P. Clark and P. Slack (eds), *English Towns in Transition 1500–1700* (London, 1976), p. 23.

20 See M. Clapinson and A. Whiteman (eds), *The Compton Census of 1676: a Critical Edition* (London, 1986).

Figure 2 Sunday baptisms as a percentage of all baptisms: rural parishes and urban parishes



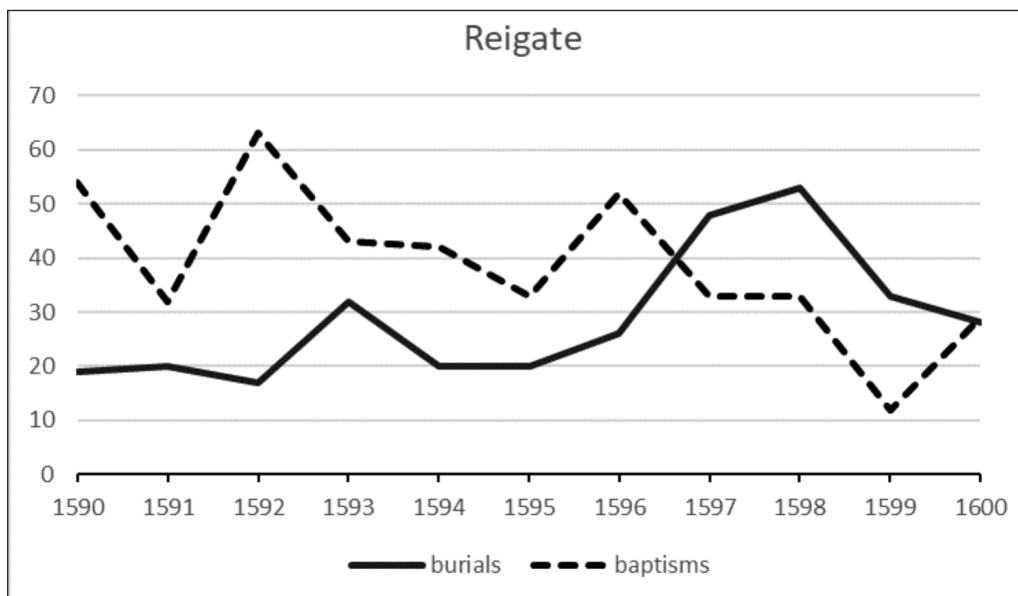
Source: Baptism registers of parishes of Barnes, Betchworth, Bisley, Bletchingley, Burstow, Charlwood, Cheam, Chiddingfold, Chobham, Clapham, Croydon, Dorking, Ewhurst, Hambledon, Hascombe, Mickleham, Newdigate, Peperharow, Petersham, Pirbright, Reigate, Walton on the Hill, Wonersh, and Worplesdon (transcriptions made by West Surrey Family History Society).

There are, however, a couple of times when there appears the possibility of differences between urban and rural parishes. One is that there is an indication of greater acceptance of Sunday baptisms immediately following the publication of the 1549 prayer book in urban compared to rural areas, the proportions of urban baptisms on Sundays possibly tripling while rural baptisms on Sundays rose more modestly. This in part reflects the particular experience of Croydon in which, as described above, the proportion of Sunday baptisms rose considerably during Edward's reign. The other possible difference between urban and rural parishes is in the late 1590s when for a short period (1596–1598) there seems to have been a drop in the proportion of rural baptisms occurring on Sundays set against an increase in the proportion of urban baptisms. This could simply be random fluctuation in the surviving records but the timing is striking. It seems plausible that it was associated in some way with the dearth which struck the country at that time. Clark has described how England experienced 'a disastrous sequence of harvest failures (1593–1597) with economic depression, widespread poverty and high mortality from plague and starvation'.²¹ Different parts

21 P. Clark, 'Introduction', in P. Clark (ed.), *The European Crisis of the 1590s* (London, 1985), pp. 6–8; A.B. Appleby, *Famine in Tudor and Stuart England* (Liverpool, 1978), pp. 133–4.

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Figure 3 Baptisms and burials in Reigate, 1590–1600



Source: Parish registers of Reigate parish: transcription made by West Surrey Family History Society.

of the country had different experiences. Andrew Appleby suggested that by the late sixteenth century there were ‘two Englands’: parts of the north which were vulnerable to starvation following failed harvests in the late 1590s and early 1620s, and the south where, although dearth was experienced, such crises were avoided.²² Wrigley and Schofield, too, felt that the south-east of England was much less affected. They wrote ‘access to grain, together with ease of transport and the well-developed communications in the south-east made the area much less vulnerable to harvest failures’.²³

However, research in progress by the author suggests that in Surrey there was considerable distress at this time and that a crisis in mortality was experienced in parts of the county.²⁴ Overall, burials in non-metropolitan Surrey rose to about half as much again as normal at the peak of the crisis in the winter of 1596–1597.²⁵ There is evidence of the presence of typhus, a disease associated with dearth and one which contemporaries, recognising the association, sometimes referred to as ‘famine fever’. The parishes worst affected,

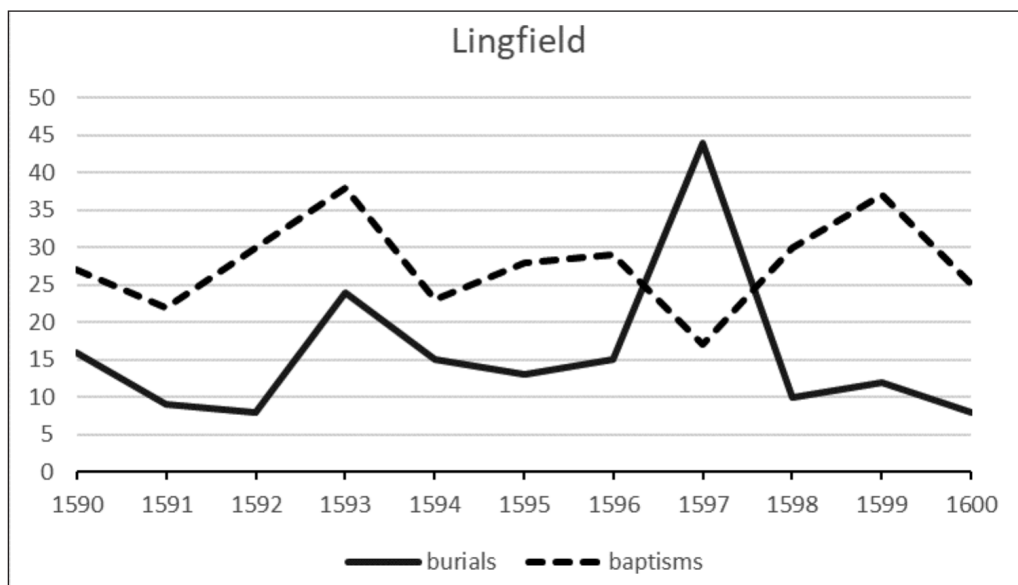
22 A.B. Appleby, ‘Disease or famine? Mortality in Cumberland and Westmorland 1580–1640’, *Economic History Review*, 26 (1973), pp. 403–432, here at p. 430. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0289.1973.tb01944.x>.

23 E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871: a Reconstruction* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 678.

24 I am currently working on this topic as a DPhil candidate at the University of Oxford, supervised by Jonathan Healey: my thesis is to be entitled ‘Taking the measure: a demographic-based study of non-metropolitan Surrey, c. 1550–1750’.

25 Based on the 59 non-metropolitan parishes with surviving burial records for this time.

Figure 4 Baptisms and burials in Lingfield, 1590–1600



Source: Parish registers of Lingfield parish, Surrey.

about a third of the 59 parishes for which burial registers survive, tended to be towns and rural parishes towards the south of the county. In Reigate, at the northern edge of the area most affected (the parish contained the town of the same name), burials more than doubled (Figure 3) while in rural Lingfield in the far south-east of the county burials tripled (Figure 4). In both parishes baptisms also fell, a further indication of the distress and dislocation their populations experienced. Returning to the timing of baptisms, while there was a reduction in baptisms in some parishes, the total numbers of baptisms in the parishes being considered here in relation to Sunday baptisms remained at over a hundred per year in each of the urban group and the rural group. It therefore seems less likely that changes in the numbers of baptisms were the sole cause of the observed alterations in the timings of baptisms. It seems possible that the differing patterns of urban and rural Sunday baptisms at this time were in some way related to the dislocations to ordinary life resulting from severe shortages of food. But how and why is, as yet, unclear.

In conclusion, this initial investigation of the timings of baptisms in non-metropolitan Surrey supports Kitson's finding that acceptance of the Protestant styles of liturgy, and hence of religious conformity, was high in the south of England by the end of the sixteenth century. It shows that within the period 1541–1600 some responded quickly to the various changes imposed, both Protestant and Catholic. But it shows that acceptance of the new liturgical styles was not necessarily immediate and it took time for the majority to adhere to them. It also suggests that people in urban and in rural areas followed similar paths, though there are some hints of differences at particular times. A larger study would be needed to confirm these preliminary findings.

Acknowledgements

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