
Research note

Traffic in corpses: further evidence from late-Georgian north-east England

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The transport of bodies after death was, traditionally, a medieval right of parishioners to be buried in their own churchyard upon payment of a nominal fee. Corpses were often transported across the country, sometimes at the behest of the testator, sometimes the churchwarden.¹ Far from dying out entirely, the practice appears to still be in evidence in the 1830s. David Souden, for example, has argued convincingly that the presence of such traffic in corpses could skew both studies of migration and individual family reconstitutions and is, as such, of significant importance in determining local population sizes and structures based upon mortality records.² There has, however, been some historiographical controversy over the prevalence of this practice.

Roger Schofield, in his widely cited 1981 *LPS* article on traffic in corpses in Barming, Kent, found that 64 of the 228 burials occurring between 1788 and 1812 were 'imported' from elsewhere. Upon closer examination of the circumstances of these burials, Schofield concluded that while the distances travelled were generally 'relatively small', and 'there were many conflicting reasons of convenience and sentiment that might influence where a person was buried.'³ In St Martin-in-the-Fields parish in the West End of London, Jeremy Boulton identified around 10 per cent of total burials as being 'imported' between 1747 and 1825. However, the presence of clear 'peaks in demand' in the late 1760s and after 1812 'suggests that the traffic in corpses was not merely a "structural" feature of urban demography, where "structural" is defined as post mortem movement caused by such things as prior family ties and adherence to place ... There must have been a dynamic element in such traffic that was responding to a short term

1 N.J.G. Pounds, *A history of the English parish* (Cambridge, 2000), 427–8.

2 D. Souden, 'Movers and Stayers in Family Reconstitution Populations', *Local Population Studies*, 33 (1984), 11–28; K.D.M. Snell, 'Parish Registration and the Study of Labour Mobility', *Local Population Studies*, 33 (1984), 29–43.

3 R. Schofield, 'Traffic in corpses: some evidence from Barming, Kent (1788–1812)', *Local Population Studies*, 33 (1984), 49–53, 52.

stimulus'.⁴ Boulton's forensic examination concludes that the short-term fluctuation in imported burials in St Martin-in-the-Fields is largely explained by the 'imposition of higher burial fees at the Drury Lane ground in the parish which greatly reduced the interment of the dead children of non-parishioners.'⁵ For an earlier period, meanwhile, Razzell, Spence and Woollard, using will evidence, suggest that a far lower percentage of testators were buried outside their parishes of residence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁶

HO71 collection of Clergymen's returns to the 1831 Census

As part of the 1831 Census, parish clergy in England and Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, were requested (not ordered) to enumerate the numbers of baptisms, burials and marriages in each parish for each year between 1821 and 1830, with other statistical information and the number of illegitimate children born in 1830.⁷ These data have been employed in surprisingly few studies, but a combination of quantitative evidence and remarks made by clergy to explain their enumerations can shed light on the processes of registration in this period.⁸ In particular, it is possible to uncover a significant amount of information relating to the traffic of corpses in Northumberland and North Durham.⁹ In Whitfield, for example, the incumbent observed that while there had been 90 burials in the churchyard in the past ten years, 'only 30 percent actually died within the parish.'¹⁰ In nearby Kirkwhelpington, the ratio was 77 out of 229 burials 'having been brought out of other parishes for interment.'¹¹ In Blanchland, meanwhile, the Revd Joseph Law noted while 'many' such cases existed, 'what may be the average number of those dying in this Parish and being buried in another, I cannot easily judge.'¹²

Of course, Law rightly noted that the flow of corpses is likely to be two-way. At this point, it should be possible to use the 'abode' data given in the detailed 'Barrington' parish registers found in the Diocese of Durham between 1798 and 1812 and described

4 J. Boulton, *Traffic in corpses: interment, burial fees and vital registration in Georgian London: Pauper Lives Working Paper*: <http://goo.gl/kuQ7M> [6 January 2012], 13.

5 Boulton, *Traffic in corpses*, 28.

6 P.Razzell, C. Spence and Matthew Woollard, 'The evaluation of Bedfordshire burial registration, 1538–1851', *Local Population Studies*, 84 (2010), 31–5.

7 The National Archives, *Catalogue: Series reference HO71*: <http://goo.gl/LkKmn> [6 January 2012].

8 See, for example, S.A. Royle, 'Illegitimates recorded in the 1831 Clergymen's returns', *Local Population Studies*, 26 (1981), 41–2; S.A. Royle, 'Clergymen's returns to the 1831 Census', *The Local Historian* 14(2) (1980), 79–90 and S. Basten, 'Registration practices in Anglican parishes and dissenting groups in Northern England, 1770–1840' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2008).

9 The National Archives, London (hereafter TNA), HO 71/67–8.

10 TNA, HO 71/67–8 (Whitfield).

11 TNA, HO 71/67–8 (Kirkwhelpington).

12 TNA, HO 71/67–8 (Blanchland). In the period 1798–1812, for example, 20 out of 86 burials had an out-of-parish abode listed for the deceased.

elsewhere—not least in previous copies of *LPS*.¹³ However, the guidelines for filling Barrington registers did not stipulate whether or not ‘Abode’ (which should be given) should refer to place of *birth* or place of *residence just prior to death*. While the latter would perhaps make more sense given the use of the word ‘abode,’ it is possible that information regarding place of birth would have been more useful, particularly when considering matters of identification and cross-checking to baptismal records. As such, without performing a reconstitution, it is impossible to tell whether or not this refers to migration to and subsequent death *within* a given parish or post-mortem corpse transfer. Given the short-time period covered by the Barrington registers, the result of any such exercise would be partial at best.¹⁴ In truth, the intention was probably interpreted by different rectors in different ways, possibly in different cases. Mary Brown, for example, was buried in the Durham parish of Lanchester in 1811, her abode listed as ‘Axwell Park, Ryton’ on south Tyneside, but she was also described as a native of Edinburgh.¹⁵

The reason given by the rector of Whitfield for the traffic of corpses was simply that ‘it is still the custom with very many families who have been removed from it, to bring their dead to be interred in the church yard here.’¹⁶ In newer rural parishes this practice appears to have been even more significant. In the Cheviot parish of Greystead, which was formed out of the ancient parish of Simonburn in 1811, the curate, George Stubbs, observed that ‘the reason so few have been interred here hitherto is that most of the families prefer using the ancient Burial Grounds in the adjoining parishes’.¹⁷

13 See Basten, ‘Registration practices’; S. Basten, ‘The economic context of infant mortality in Yorkshire, 1760–1840’ (unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2003). The Barrington registers are similar in their coverage to the more widely known ‘Dade’ registers found in the diocese of York: C. Galley, ‘An exercise in Dade parish register demography: St Olave, York, 1771–1785’, *Local Population Studies*, 74 (2005), 75–83; A. Levene, ‘What can Dade registers tell us about infant mortality in the later eighteenth century?’ *Local Population Studies*, 76 (2006), 31–43; R. Bellingham, ‘The Dade parish registers’, *Family History: News and Digest*, 10, 2, (1995), 76–9; R. Bellingham, ‘Dade parish registers’, *Local Population Studies*, 73 (2004), 51–60.

14 As there are only a maximum of 13 years worth of data available, the chances of finding a marriage or baptism preceding death in either the ‘burial’ parish or the ‘abode’ parish are slim—particularly given the advanced ages of most of the interred. Although not performed in this study, it is possible that such an exercise could be performed for a significant number of Yorkshire’s ‘Dade’ registers, as these run for up to 35 years. Again, however, any results from such a study must be treated very carefully given our knowledge of under-registration in Dade registers. See, for example, Basten, ‘The economic context’; Galley, ‘An exercise’.

15 Durham County Record Office, M42/688.

16 TNA, HO 71/67–8 (Whitfield).

17 TNA, HO 71/67–8 (Greystead). Although Greystead was officially formed in 1811, the earliest actual register dates from 1818. Greystead is called a ‘thinly populated and uninteresting parish’ by Mackenzie, who also notes that Greystead hamlet, the site of the churchyard, contains only three houses: E. Mackenzie, *An historical, topographical and descriptive view of the County of Northumberland*, (Newcastle, 1825), 254. Other adjoining ‘ancient’ parishes apart from Simonburn (1681) include Haltwhistle (1656), Falstone (1762) and Bellingham (1684.) Greystead is also bordered by Wark, but as this was not formed until 1818 it is unlikely that the churchyard would have been used for these reasons.

Table 1 Anglican interment in Newcastle and the ‘correct’ location of burials, 1798–1812

		Buried in		
		St Andrews	St Johns	St Nicholas
Total burials		1650	1851	1179
Abode	All Saints	87	153	71
	St Andrews	1324	79	114
	St Johns	106	1424	101
	St Nicholas	63	89	816
	Northumberland	30	39	21
	Durham	38	49	43
	Elsewhere	2	18	13
% burials from other Parishes		19.76	23.07	30.79

Source: Barrington registers

This fragmentary evidence from the Clergymen’s returns, therefore, suggests that such traffic in corpses may have been widespread and, concurring with the findings of Schofield and Boulton, occurred for a wide array of reasons.

Traffic in corpses in an urban setting

When we move into an urban setting, however, the difficulties of analysing a given parish without taking into account potential anomalies in the burial record resulting from migration are immense. Indeed, this very feature formed a central part of Boulton and Schwarz’s large-scale *Pauper lives* project. However, by using the data from the Barrington registers it is possible to extract data relating to the abode of all those interred in the four parishes of Newcastle. Indeed, Newcastle is also an interesting example given that it was home to one of the largest dissenting burial grounds in provincial England—Ballast Hills—adding further complexity to the chosen location of burial.¹⁸

Given the relatively small sizes of the town’s parishes, it is, perhaps, our *a priori* expectation that a significant number of burials would be ‘in the wrong place’. However, even with the caveat in place regarding our lack of knowledge concerning the precise meaning of ‘abode’, the results of the analysis appear striking. As Table 1 above demonstrates, the number of burials which appear in a given register but are named as originating from elsewhere runs between 19 per cent and 30 per cent. While the redistribution may not make a significant difference to the number of burials which *should* be in each of Newcastle’s four churchyards, the observation is still an important one. Even if these deaths are the result of decisions made pre- or post-mortem, Table 1 provides strong evidence of inter-parochial traffic in corpses within three sample Tyneside parishes.

¹⁸ Basten, ‘Registration practices’.

This in turn lends further support to the argument that any consideration of *single* Anglican parishes as the basis of historical demographic analysis, *particularly in an urban context*, is seriously flawed.

The potential consequences of this practice upon estimating adult mortality in particular parishes, and on family reconstitution methodology are surely significant. If, for example, one were to study any of the Novocastrian Anglican burial registers in isolation, not only would a significant proportion of burials be missing, being located in either Ballast Hills or one of the other churchyards, but a potentially large number of burials which should, by rights, belong elsewhere would be erroneously included. As such, when calculating mortality levels or life-tables, while the 'books might balance' through serendipity, the inescapable fact is that a large proportion of the people who make up the counts upon which any aggregative analysis is performed simply should not be there. Barrington registers, in tandem with HO71, therefore provide further evidence of the importance of considering the potential for inflation and deflation of burial figures as a result of post-mortem corpse transfer.