
Research note

The last population of Samson

Christine Jones

This short research note describes the challenges encountered in exploring the historical demography of the island of Samson. The Isles of Scilly lie about 30 miles south west of Lands End. They consist of five currently inhabited islands and over 100 smaller uninhabited ones. They all belong to the Duchy of Cornwall. Samson lies just over two miles north west of the main island, St Mary's.

The first population of Samson flourished in the second millennium B.C. Neolithic pottery has been found. Bronze Age graves and field boundaries have been identified. At that time Samson would have been part of a much larger land mass. Glass beads have been found dating from the second century A.D., silver coins from the fourth century, and the remains of a seventh century chapel. However, nothing is known of the population. By the twelfth century the sea level had risen and Samson was a separate island, although it was (and is) still possible to walk to Bryher and Tresco at extremely low tides. In 1535 the island was deserted and was again uninhabited in 1652, when a parliamentary survey was undertaken, although it is suggested that there may have been a few inhabitants before the Civil War.¹ A traveller in 1669 recorded a single family living on Samson, fishing, keeping cattle and cultivating sufficient land to be self-supporting.²

The sources for a study of historical demography on the mainland for this period are parish registers, providing numbers of marriages, baptisms and burials, together with Hearth Tax records and the Compton Census returns, which provide estimates of population totals.³ Whiteman and Russell have shown how the Protestation Returns of 1641–2 can be used to make population estimates for the Hundred of Penwith.⁴ Hinde has

1 J. Chandler ed., *John Leland's itinerary: travels in Tudor England* (Gloucester, 1993); Z. Cowan, *The story of Samson* (Cirencester, 1991) 4.

2 L. Magalotti, *Travels of Cosmo the third Duke of Tuscany* (London, 1821), 110–5.

3 E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The population history of England 1541–1871* (London, 1981); K. Schürer and T. Arkell, *Surveying the people* (Oxford, 1992), 31–129.

4 A. Whiteman, 'The Protestation Returns of 1641–1642: Part I, the general organisation', *Local Population Studies*, 55 (1995), 14–26; A. Whiteman and V. Russell, 'The Protestation Returns of 1641–1642: Part II, Partial census or snapshot? Some evidence from Penwith Hundred, Cornwall', *Local Population Studies*, 56 (1996), 17–29.

Table 1 Parish register entries attributed to residents of Samson

| Dates | Marriages | Baptisms | Burials |
|-----------|-----------|----------|---------|
| 1726–1750 | 2 | 5 | 0 |
| 1751–1775 | 4 | 5 | 0 |
| 1776–1800 | 2 | 15 | 0 |

Source: Parish register transcripts held by the Isles of Scilly Museum

shown how crude birth and death rates can be calculated from ‘good quality’ parish registers.⁵

Unfortunately the parish registers for the Isles of Scilly have not survived from before 1726. Separate registers for the inhabited islands were not kept, all entries being made in a single register. To further complicate matters the abode of the person being registered is not consistently given. Table 1 shows the aggregate numbers of marriages, baptisms, and burials attributed to people of Samson for the period 1726 to 1800. The total absence of burials may be accounted for by the lack of consecrated ground on Samson. Corpses would have been rowed by gig across to Bryher or Tresco for burial.

Robert Heath recorded only one family on Samson in 1744–5.⁶ William Borlase recorded two families in 1756.⁷ John Troutbeck recorded six dwellings and 30 inhabitants in 1794.⁸ To have a better chance of capturing all the vital events pertaining to inhabitants of Samson it would be necessary to perform a reconstitution of the registers to identify those who were members of a Samson family but were recorded without information as to place of abode.⁹ However, families seem to have moved between the islands and it would be difficult to establish the periods when any given household was resident on Samson. Also the pool of both surnames and given names is extremely limited, making family reconstitution more difficult.

An alternative source that might assist in determining who was living on Samson at any given time are the Court Record Books. These record the acts and decisions of the Council of Twelve, a body appointed by the Lord Proprietor. The volume covering the period 1786 to 1801 is held at the Isles of Scilly Museum on St Mary’s.¹⁰ Again there is no mention of

5 A. Hinde, ‘Calculating crude birth and death rates for local populations during the parish register era’, *Local Population Studies*, 79 (2007), 90–6; now available at <http://www.localpopulationstudies.org.uk/sourcesandmethods.htm>

6 R. Heath, *A natural and historical account of the Islands of Scilly* (London, 1750, reprinted 1967).

7 W. Borlase, *Observations on the ancient and present state of the Islands of Scilly* (Oxford, 1756, republished 1967).

8 J Troutbeck, *A survey of the ancient and present state of the Scilly Islands* (Sherborne, 1796).

9 E.A. Wrigley, et al., *English population history from family reconstitution, 1580–1837* (Cambridge, 1997); G. Newton, ‘Recent developments in making family reconstitutions’, *Local Population Studies*, 87 (2011), 84–9.

10 *Scarcer maps and books of Scilly*, Isles of Scilly Museum Publication, No. 8.

residents of Samson before 1789.¹¹ Either they were exceedingly law-abiding compared with other islanders or the court failed to record their place of abode.

Another source of information about living conditions on Samson is the records of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) who provided teachers and clergy to the islands from the 1720s.¹² However, these are probably not sufficiently quantitative or replete with enough nominal detail to be useful for determining the size of the population over the period from 1752 to 1796. In 1782 it was reported that there were 30 children attending the school on Samson.

From 1801 the new source available for the study of mainland demography is the decennial census. Unfortunately the Islands in the British Seas were not included in the censuses of 1801, 1811 or 1821. In 1831 Samson is recorded as having nine families in nine inhabited houses. No houses were being built and none were uninhabited. The total number of persons was 37, 22 males and 15 females. None of the families were chiefly employed in agriculture or in trades, manufactures or handicrafts.¹³ It is likely that none of the islanders regarded themselves as 'employed' at all, although everyone over the age of about seven would have been gainfully occupied in fishing or other branches of seamanship, in kelp (seaweed) cutting, gathering and burning, and in salvaging from wrecks or in smuggling. It is also certain that although not regarded as farmers all would have been tending domestic animals and cultivating vegetable plots. All their food and almost all their clothing would have been home produced, though none would have claimed to be bakers or tailors. There would also have been the routine maintenance of their dwellings, outbuildings and boats, although none would have rated themselves as masons, carpenters, thatchers or shipwrights.

The 1841 census recorded that the number of inhabited houses was now only seven, with none uninhabited and none being built. The total number of persons had fallen to 29, 14 males and 15 females. Of these, six males and six females were aged under 20 years while eight males and nine females were aged 20 years and upwards. All 29 had been born in Cornwall. There is a footnote that from the Scilly Islands as a whole '215 seamen were absent at the period of taking the Census' so that the usual population of Samson might have been a few more than 29.¹⁴

11 Cowan, *Story of Samson*, 19.

12 The archives of the SPCK are now part of the collection of the University of Cambridge. The Manuscripts Department at the University Library holds all non-printed materials, including annual and monthly reports and eighteenth century correspondence. See also Cowan, *Story of Samson*, 14-8.

13 Census of Great Britain, 1831, Abstract of the answers and returns made pursuant to an Act, passed in the eleventh year of the reign of His Majesty King George IV. intituled, 'An Act for taking an account of the population of Great Britain, and of the increase or diminution thereof'. Enumeration Abstract. Vol. I. 1831 BPP 1833 XXXVI (149) 78.

14 Census of Great Britain, 1841, Abstract of the answers and returns made pursuant to acts 3 & 4 Vic. c.99 and 4 Vic. c.7 intituled respectively 'An act for taking an account of the population of Great Britain', and 'An act to amend the acts of the last session for taking an account of the population'. Enumeration Abstract. BPP 1843 XXII (496) 41.

Table 2 Parish register entries attributed to residents of Samson

| Dates | Marriages | Baptisms | Burials |
|-----------|-----------|----------|---------|
| 1801–1810 | 0 | 9 | 1 |
| 1811–1820 | 1 | 9 | 0 |
| 1821–1830 | 3 | 4 | 1 |
| 1831–1840 | 6 | 3 | 3 |
| 1841–1850 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| 1851–1860 | 2 | 1 | 1 |

Source: Parish register transcripts held by the Isles of Scilly Museum

Table 2 shows the aggregate numbers of marriages, baptisms, and burials attributed to people of Samson for the period 1801 to 1860.

In view of the number of baptisms exceeding the number of burials from 1801 to 1830, and the large number of marriages 1831–40, one would have expected the population to be increasing, but this does not take into account out migration from Samson to the other islands. In fact the population was decreasing, and the 1851 census recorded a population of only ten.¹⁵

The Census Enumerators' Books (CEBs) give more detail than the published Census Reports on the population in 1841 and 1851. Three of the adult males and two of the adult females in 1841 were described as farmers, in contrast to the lack of farming activity recorded in 1831. Two of the adult males were described as fishermen, one was described as a sailor and another as a seaman. The eldest male was aged about 70 and the eldest female about 75. Most of the adults were aged from 30 to 55. There were seven children aged 10 and under. Of the ten people enumerated in 1851 one was in fact a visitor so that the normal resident population was probably only nine in three households. Three of the adult males, the heads of households, were farmers, cultivating a total of 13 acres. The total acreage of Samson is given as 5,570 acres, but much of this is granite covered with thin soil or sand dunes, not suitable for cultivation. Two of the adult males, neither of them household heads, were fishermen. Seven of the inhabitants were born on Samson, the remaining three being born on St Agnes or Bryher. The most striking feature is the ageing of the population. The youngest was a boy of 14 and his sister aged 16. Apart from the visitor and one person whose age is indistinct the others were aged from 45 to 54. Thus the older generation present in 1841 had died but had not been replaced by a younger generation. This confirms the lack of baptisms in the decade 1841–50. It seems probable that the two couples who had married in that decade had settled on another island.

¹⁵ Census of Great Britain, 1851, Population tables, I. Number of the inhabitants in 1801, 1811, 1821, 1831, 1841 and 1851. Vol. I BPP 1852–53 LXXXV (1631) 53.

In 1834 Augustus Smith had leased the Isles of Scilly from the Duchy of Cornwall.¹⁶ As with many early nineteenth-century landlords he set about ‘improving’ his estate. While the gardens he established on Tresco are internationally famous, less is known of his plans for a deer park on Samson. The walls remain, but not the deer. Essential to this scheme was the removal of the remaining inhabitants. Initially this was achieved by encouraging the younger generation to move to one of his other islands. Of the remaining nine islanders, two went to St Martins, one went to Bryher, and two died on Samson in 1851 and 1854. The last household, which included the two teenagers, joined other people from Samson at Porth Loo on St Mary’s in 1855.¹⁷

Curiously the last two entries in the marriage register for people claiming to be ‘of Samson’ are dated 1856 and 1859. There has been no population on Samson since 1855 but the ruins of 19 buildings are still there—12 cottages, two barns, three out buildings and a boat shed. The island is managed by The Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust.¹⁸ Samson is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, a Special Protection Area, a Special Area of Conservation and designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Boat trips to the island by the St Mary’s Boatmen’s Association are dependent on tide and weather.¹⁹ Potential visitors need to be aware that there are no facilities whatsoever on Samson. There is no quay, jetty or slipway; landing is made directly onto the beach. There is no café, toilets or shelter; visitors should bring their own food and drink, but camping and fires are prohibited. There are no refuse disposal services; visitors must also take all litter away with them.

In 2003 the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust cleared vegetation from around the buildings to prevent further damage.²⁰ In 2006 *The Samson Buildings Project* set out to halt the further decline of the buildings. This work included limited excavation, an archaeological survey and building recording prior to sensitive consolidation work. During this work a stone bearing the date 1826 was found in one of the houses. This may support the theory that there was a more prosperous time on the island between 1800 and 1826 with new houses being built.

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16 The Court Record Book for the period 1818 to 1835 is believed to be in the custody of the Duchy of Cornwall, 10 Buckingham Gate, London, SW1E 6LA. The Court Record Book for the period 1835 to 1917 is on permanent loan to the Isles of Scilly Museum.

17 Cowan, *Story of Samson*, 41–2.

18 <http://www.ios-wildlifetrust.org.uk>

19 <http://www.scillyboating.co.uk>. Boats can also be chartered from Bryher Boat Services: <http://www.bryherboats.co.uk>

20 E. Berry ed., *The Samson Buildings: an assessment of the post-medieval buildings on Samson, Isles of Scilly* (Isles of Scilly, 2003). See also C. Thomas, *Exploration of a drowned landscape: archaeology and history of the Isles of Scilly* (London, 1985), 237–63.