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**The Parish Register Evidence for the Population of Gloucester**

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# Parish Register Evidence for the Population of Gloucester 1562-1641

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THE reign of Elizabeth and the Stuart period before the outbreak of civil war witnessed signs of growing prosperity in Gloucester. Long a centre for the finishing of goods and their distribution, the city was recognised as a port in 1580 and her powerful neighbour Bristol soon protested against the capture of much of the Severn trade.<sup>2</sup> The erection and renovation of civic and market buildings symbolised the confidence of the community.<sup>3</sup> The other side of the coin is revealed in complaints of the corporation about the decay of trade because of plague and decline in the manufacture of woollen cloth.<sup>4</sup> The crisis of the 1620s in textiles affected Gloucester more as a commercial than an industrial centre. Many clothiers and artisans had already deserted the city with its guild restrictions for villages near the Cotswold escarpment where fast-flowing streams conferred greater advantages in water-power.<sup>5</sup> However, any malaise in the country's leading export industry had an adverse effect on business in general<sup>6</sup> and the disquiet expressed by the city government in 1626 was almost certainly genuine.

In the face of conflicting evidence about the economy and living standards of Gloucester over three reigns, demographic enquiries are of interest. Did the city enjoy the advantage of an expanding population to support commerce and industry during this period?

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Mr. P. McGrath for reading this paper in draft, and suggesting several improvements.

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Willcox, *Gloucestershire: a Study in Local Government, 1590-1640*, p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> M. D. Lobel and J. Tann, "Gloucester", p. 13, in *Historic Towns: Maps and Plans of Towns and Cities in the British Isles with Historical Commentaries, from Earliest Times to 1800*, ed. M. D. Lobel.

<sup>4</sup> Letter of the corporation to the lord lieutenant, 20 January 1626; Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Twelfth Report, Appendix, Part IX*, pp. 476-7. Both here and subsequently 1 January and not 25 March is taken as the beginning of the new year.

<sup>5</sup> R. Perry, "The Gloucestershire Woollen Industry, 1100-1690", in *Trans. BGAS*, Vol. LXVI, pp. 96-7.

<sup>6</sup> B. E. Supple, *Commercial Crisis and Change in England, 1600-42*, *passim*.

Gloucester's historians have long been concerned with her population and some of their work has a bearing on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Sir Robert Atkyns in his *Ancient and Present State of Gloucestershire* listed for the year of publication, 1712, the number of houses and inhabitants for each city parish. Samuel Rudder added to Atkyns's record for 1712 lists of households for 1562 and christenings and burials for 1759-68.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Rudge, writing shortly after the first national census, attempted a thumbnail sketch of development, "The population of Gloucester has considerably increased since the time of the Conqueror. In 1562 it contained 828 householders—4,000 inhabitants; in 1712, 1,003 householders—4,990 inhabitants; in 1801, 1,368 houses, 2,000 families, 7,265 inhabitants; within the liberties of the city."<sup>8</sup> More recent writers have shown an interest in population without exploring the subject in detail.

What source was used by Rudder and subsequent writers for the number of households in 1562? A clue lies in Fosbrooke's *Original History of the City of Gloucester*. The author lists the number of households or houses in each parish under columns for 1562, 1712, 1743, 1801 and 1810.<sup>9</sup> For the figures under the first date Furney's MSS are shown as the source but there is no explanatory comment in the text. Four notebooks of Richard Furney, Master of the Crypt School from 1719 to 1724, survive in the library of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society. MS B has inscribed on its title page the description, 'Collections from Original Records Deeds in the Office of the Bishop's Register of Gloucester made in the year 1721 by Richard Furney.' The first entry begins with the heading, 'The account of the diocese of Gloucester which was sent to her majesty by Richard Bishop of Gloucester 1562.'

It is clear from the following pages that this is a transcript of the Bishop of Gloucester's reply to the Privy Council's questions of July 1563. The source is not a local census but the well-known ecclesiastical survey of the early years of Elizabeth. Furney gave 1562 as the date and subsequent writers perpetuated his mistake. No contemporary copy of the return appears to exist in the Gloucester Diocesan Records but a manuscript at the Bodleian Library<sup>10</sup> supplies most of the particulars found in the Furney transcript. In answer to the fifth article of enquiry, "How many households are within

<sup>7</sup> S. Rudder, *The History and Antiquities of Gloucester*, pp. 182-205.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Rudge, *The History and Antiquities of Gloucester*, pp. 151-2.

<sup>9</sup> T. D. Fosbrooke, *An Original History of the City of Gloucester*, pp. 383-5.

<sup>10</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Rawlinson, C 790.

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every parish or within any such member of any parish that have such churches or chapels of ease?”, the numbers for the city read:

St Mary de Crypt	71	St Owen	93
St Michael	106	Holy Trinity	60
St John the Baptist	76	St Nicholas	146
St Aldate	50	St Catherine	102
All Saints	15	St Mary, Grace Lane	29
St Mary de Lode	156		

The ecclesiastical return provides valuable but incomplete data for an estimate of Gloucester’s population. The most serious limitation stems from the nature of the parishes, three of which had a considerable acreage beyond the boundaries of the city.<sup>11</sup> St Catherine and St Mary de Lode embraced within their compass hamlets and detached segments beyond the walls; the parish of St Michael possessed the hamlet of Barton St Michael outside the liberties of the city. Two independent sources illustrate suburban growth in this period. A map of the city and county of the city published in 1624 shows ribbon development along Barton Street reaching beyond the town limits. The hearth tax assessment for 1671–2<sup>12</sup> lists 83 houses for that part of Barton Street beyond the boundary. However, this material provides no foundation for calculations for the number of households outside the city in 1563.

A second limitation is more obvious. What multiplier is to be used to convert the number of households into the number of inhabitants? The more popular multipliers used by modern scholars range from 4.5 to 6.3, an alarming variation.<sup>13</sup> Dr Hoskins’s use of 4.5–5 commands much support as agreeing to a great extent with the estimates of Gregory King. This method of calculation converts the households of 1563 into a population of between 4,068 and 4,520. Support for the theory of a growing population is provided by the hearth tax assessment for 1671–2. This, unlike the survey of 1563, has the advantage of respecting the boundaries of the city. The enrolment yields 749 houses liable for tax and 279 exempt, 1,028 altogether. When the multiplier 4.5–5 is applied numbers of 4,626 and 5,140 emerge.

The evidence for 1563 and 1671–2 is not strictly comparable, being based on surveys compiled for different purposes but, however interpreted, the documents suggest that there was an increase.

<sup>11</sup> From 1483 to 1662 the towns and hamlets of the hundreds of Dudstone and King’s Barton were incorporated with the city to form the county of the city of Gloucester. This article, being concerned with urban population, treats the boundaries of Gloucester as being those of the city.

<sup>12</sup> Public Record Office, E. 179, Bundle 247, No. 14.

<sup>13</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *Industry, Trade and People in Exeter, 1688–1800*, p. 114; W. T. MacCaffrey, *Exeter, 1540–1640*, p. 12; Roger Howell, *Newcastle-upon-Tyne and the Puritan Revolution*, p. 8.

The number of households for 1563 is inaccurately high as already demonstrated. Even so, the lower multiplier of 4.5 applied to the hearth tax yields a greater total than the higher multiplier of 5 applied to the ecclesiastical survey.

To round off these conjectures an allowance must be made for single persons, the apprentices and servants, many of whom were 'foreigners' attracted by the magnet of a county town. Since our knowledge of conditions in 1563 is less sure than for 1671-2, attention will be focused on the later date. Then about one quarter of the houses possessed three or more hearths and can be assumed to have had relatively well-to-do heads. If two apprentices or servants are allocated to each, 514 can be added to the mean between 4,626 and 5,140, to yield a grand total of 5,397.

These bald and imperfect calculations need some support. This is supplied if one turns to a hitherto neglected quarry of facts, the parish records. Registers of christenings, marriages and burials for five of the city's eleven parishes of this period have survived.<sup>14</sup> The records do not have the advantage of providing a comprehensive picture but since they embrace communities with certain contrasts they can help to measure and interpret the rate of growth.

The parish of St Nicholas was the largest. It included the houses of aldermen and in contrast on the Island, the lozenge between Foreignmen and Westgate Bridge, hovels with only a single hearth. The quay lay downstream from Westgate Bridge. Nearby was the castle, used as the county gaol, with some of the prisoners adding to the toll of the register's burial columns. Off Westgate Street were the Booth Hall and the Bear Inn, the latter offering hospitality to travellers from Wales and neighbouring shires. Three other of the parishes with surviving registers contained the shops and houses of some of the leading tradesmen. Holy Trinity lay immediately east of the parish of St Nicholas. St Michael's lay beyond the Cross and contained both Eastgate Street and an overflow of poorer citizens in a part of Barton Street, a suburb shared with the parish of St Mary de Lode. St John's embraced much of prosperous Northgate Street and beyond the Inner North Gate stretched out two arms, one following London Road and the second Hare Lane. St Aldate's lay within the walls of the north-eastern corner. Life was mean in this parish and the common council frequently made arrangements for the taxing of a wealthier parish to supplement sums raised under the poor rate. For instance, in 1634 when 21 poor were

<sup>14</sup> Holy Trinity, register book, 1557-1758; St Aldate, register book, 1572-1645; St John the Baptist, register book, 1559-1646; St Michael, register book, 1563-1663; St Nicholas, register book, 1558-1706: Gloucester City Library.

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receiving aid from the overseers, All Saints' parish contributed 6s. 5*d.* to add to the 3s. 1*d.* supplied by 14 inhabitants of St Aldate's.<sup>15</sup>

At this stage the limitations of the parish registers must be conceded. The number of christenings and burials does not equal the number of births and deaths. Under-registration would appear to have affected some of the figures for the first decade under consideration. Nor are registers always a complete record of key events in the lives of those who stayed within a city parish; for instance, with the appointment in 1626 of Thomas Woodroffe as rector of St Michael's there was an increase in the popularity of that parish's graveyard among certain families living in other parts of Gloucester. Yet even when these defects are allowed for, the registers remain valuable evidence for about one half of the city's inhabitants.

TABLE I

CHRISTENINGS AND BURIALS FOR PARISHES BY DECADES

	<i>Holy Trinity</i>		<i>St Aldate</i>		<i>St John</i>		<i>St Michael</i>		<i>St Nicholas</i>	
	C	B	C	B	C	B	C	B	C	B
1562-1571 ...	110	103			82	53	152	133	289	206
1572-1581 ...	125	93	49	66	116	74	222	148	280	305
1582-1591 ...	157	114	65	53	170	101	239	204	205	169
1592-1601 ...	132	155	82	70	140	137	209	219	258	226
1602-1611 ...	161	128	92	129	183	154	194	214	262	158
1612-1621 ...	174	115	81	61	186	132	172	161	252	206
1622-1631 ...	164	147	69	46	219	152	195	150	285	251
1632-1641 ...	185	153	66	119	209	227	213	173	309	308
	1,208	1,008	504	544	1,305	1,030	1,596	1,402	2,140	1,829

Table I, summarising the number of christenings and burials for the eight decades 1562-1641, shows how the living standards of differing areas affected the size of the processions to the font and to the grave. St Aldate's was the single parish with an excess of burials over christenings for the whole period. The plague of 1604 helped to reduce the population of the parish by 73 but the decade of the severest loss was that of 1632-41 with an excess of burials over christenings of 53.

The other parishes in the sample show an excess of christenings over burials. In St Nicholas's the two decades 1572-81 and 1632-41 were marked by the heaviest aggregates of burials but there was an escape from the worst effects of the general economic crisis of the 1590s. The twenty years over the turn of the century constituted the single period when the total of burials for St Michael's climbed higher than the total of christenings but the 1630s left no marked scars. St John's population increased at the fastest rate. Though

<sup>15</sup> St Aldate MSS, OV 1/12, Gloucester City Library.

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with 76 households against the 146 of St Nicholas in 1563, the excess of christenings over burials was only 36 less over the eight decades.

The evidence of the parish registers prompts a question about the slowing down in the rate of population increase during the least favourable decades. How great a brake against increase was exerted by visitations of the plague?

TABLE II

PLAGUE AND TOTAL BURIALS DURING PLAGUE YEARS

	<i>St Nicholas</i>		<i>Holy Trinity</i>		<i>St Aldate</i>		<i>St John</i>		<i>St Michael</i>		<i>Gross Total</i>
	P	T	P	T	P	T	P	T	P	T	
1578 ... ..	27	56	—	6	—	7	—	14	—	12	95
1579 ... ..	13	33	—	22	—	6	—	6	—	17	84
1580 ... ..	3	37	—	20	—	16	—	7	—	17	97
1593 ... ..	0	23	—	35	—	11	—	42	—	62	173
1594 ... ..	88	91	—	13	—	12	—	16	—	12	144
1604 ... ..	50	69	22	34	—	73	29	38	—	89	303
1605 ... ..	0	13	7	16	—	3	0	15	—	16	63
1637 ... ..	2	37	0	20	—	17	0	32	—	33	139
1638 ... ..	9	34	27	42	9	18	32	47	—	20	161

The single parish furnishing a full picture of plague deaths is St Nicholas's. The incumbent or scrivener noted the impact of epidemics throughout the period under consideration and typical of this concern is the entry, "Item the 8 September 1578 was buried Edward Sargaunt servant to James Tomkins who died of the plague. And the rest of those who died of the plague are marked with this letter 'p'." Table II summarises the total of burials from plague when this is revealed by the registers and the gross total during the years of epidemic. For St Nicholas's it is apparent that the strength of onslaughts varied; in 1594, 88 were carried away as against the 11 victims of 1637-8. The register gives further confirmation to the theory that the violence of attacks was related to their brevity. The epidemic of 1594 began on 15 June and ended on 9 September; for five months the number of deaths was relatively low but the disease mounted to a peak in the late summer. The monthly figures are: June 1, July 11, August 21, September 36, October 6, November 9, December 4. By contrast the 11 plague deaths of 1637-8 were spread over a period one month longer.

What was the effect of the plague on the five parishes taken together? Since the registers do not in general distinguish between plague and other burials the conclusions made can only be tentative. But assuming that the total number of deaths for plague years must embrace a certain number of plague deaths a pattern emerges. The epidemics of 1593-4 and 1604 were relatively severe, those of

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1578-80 and 1637-8 relatively light. It is worth noting that the registers give no indication of plague in the city during the period 1624-5. A letter of the corporation already referred to draws attention to this "yet continuing" scourge in the city and there was an attack at Tewkesbury in 1624.<sup>16</sup>

Gloucester appears to have escaped the ravages that were experienced by the larger provincial towns. Bristol as a nearby urban centre provides a convenient comparison. During the epidemic of 1603-5 there were 2,956 deaths.<sup>17</sup> If one accepts an estimate of a total population for 1600 of 12,000<sup>18</sup> the number of lives lost amounts to 25 per cent. The experience of Newcastle-upon-Tyne was even more disastrous with local estimates suggesting a total of 6,000 deaths. While this figure cannot be conveniently expressed as a percentage of the total population, it must have been considerably higher than that for Bristol. An estimate of Newcastle's population in 1665 provides a total of 13,402.<sup>19</sup>

The figures for Gloucester, admittedly incomplete, suggest that the plague was not the major scourge suffered by larger centres of population. Let us turn again to the Gloucester parish for which there is the best register evidence. If we postulate 4.75 as a multiplier the 146 households of St Nicholas's in 1563 yield a population of 693. An allowance of two servants for a quarter of the households swells the figure to 765. To this can be added the excess of christenings over burials from 1564 to 1593 bringing the total to 834 in the latter year. The 88 plague deaths of 1594, the year when the losses from this cause in St Nicholas's were heaviest, are 10.6 when expressed as a percentage of the total population of the parish.

TABLE III

EXCESS OF CHRISTENINGS OVER BURIALS IN GLOUCESTER PARISHES WITH REGISTERS

1562-1571	...	...	...	...	138
1572-1581	...	...	...	...	106
1582-1591	...	...	...	...	195
1592-1601	...	...	...	...	14
1602-1611	...	...	...	...	109
1612-1621	...	...	...	...	190
1622-1631	...	...	...	...	186
1632-1641	...	...	...	...	2

<sup>16</sup> C. R. Elrington, ed., *Victoria County History of the County of Gloucester*, Vol. VIII, p. 151.

<sup>17</sup> John Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Seventeenth Century*, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick McGrath, *Merchants and Merchandise in Seventeenth Century Bristol*, p. ix.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Howell, *Newcastle-upon-Tyne and the Puritan Revolution*, p. 9.

Table III, summarising the excess of christenings over burials for all parishes with surviving registers, suggests that plague alone was not responsible for checking population growth. The decade with the smallest gain of christenings over burials coincided with the relatively light epidemic of 1637-8. 1636 and 1639, years when the city was free of plague, saw an excess of burials over christenings. During the decade 1592-1601 a shortage of cereals was certainly responsible for some deaths. In 1597 when burials climbed higher than christenings, the dear price of barley was a warning light indicating a general scarcity of grain and the magistrates had already reacted to the crisis by prohibiting the making of malt.

Table III also shows that in spite of setbacks experienced during the decades 1592-1601 and 1632-41 the population of Gloucester was increasing steadily over a period of eighty years. One reason for this advance is suggested by the hearth tax evidence. With only 279 out of 1,028 householders exempt it is apparent that 73 per cent of the population lived above subsistence level. This is a larger percentage enjoying reasonable living standards than in many other towns; for example in Newcastle-upon-Tyne only 59 per cent of the population were treated as liable to the hearth tax.<sup>20</sup> The city of Gloucester was to enter a period of eclipse after the Restoration but this was a consequence of the political leanings of her governing class who backed parliament in the civil war, and not because she possessed a dwindling population in the period before conflict.

<sup>20</sup> Roger Howell, *op. cit.*, p. 9.