

Births, Marriages and Deaths in Shillington, Beds. 1602 - 44

On the 4 February 1605 John Parratt married Elizabeth Monnox and in the December, their first child, Thomas, was baptised. Thereafter, children were baptised nearly every year: John and Ann in 1606, Marie in 1608, Sara 1609, John 1610, Margaret 1611, George 1613, Frances 1615, Edward 1616, Richard 1618, Anne 1621 and Ellen 1622. On June 1 1625 John's wife was buried. He lived another twenty years, being buried on 2 February 1645.

John Parratt was vicar of All Saints, Shillington from 1602 until his death over 40 years later. The register of baptisms marriages and deaths is in his handwriting until the last three or four years, although he continued to sign for the accuracy of each page until the end. One advantage of studying this register is the consistency with which John Parratt kept the records, the only change being that in 1638 both parents names are recorded in the baptismal record, instead of the father's only.

Between 1602 and 1644 there were 247 marriages in the village. There were 67 marriages in the first decade, 72 between 1612 and 1621, with the highest number for the whole period, 13, occurring in 1619. Then there is a sharp drop between 1622 and 1631 to 39, nearly half the number of the previous decade with no marriages at all in 1622. There are other indications which will be discussed later, that this was a difficult period in the life of parishioners. The final decade shows a revival to 57 marriages.

John Parratt was married in February, which along with January, April, May and September falls in the middle rank of popularity, the number of marriages in these months ranging from 15 in February to 17 in September for the period as a whole. Easily the most popular month for marriage was October, 66 occurring then, approximately a quarter of the total with a further 31 in November in sharp contrast to the 8 in August. Wrigley and Schofield's national projections¹ show November as the most popular month, followed by October, the reverse of Shillington's practice, but then followed by January, which was rated low in the village. Shillington's third most popular month was June with 22 marriages.

The agricultural calendar was clearly the most important determinant in the choice of wedding date. Shillington was predominantly an arable village so that it is not surprising that in 40 years there were only 6 marriages in August when the harvest would be taking everyone's time and attention and that September records a moderate 17 marriages when in many years ploughing following harvest would be the major consideration. By October, though, the major work of the year would be completed and the food and ales readily available for celebration. It is perhaps surprising that June was the third most popular month (26 marriages), as this is the period of the hay harvest and sheep did feature in the local economy, but there were many years when there were no marriages in June and only 5 where there was more than one.

1. E.A. Wrigley & R.S. Schofield : The Population History of England 1541 - 1871. (C.U.P. 1989) p 301

While the needs of earning a living were of predominant importance, the church calendar also played a part in influencing the choice of month for marriage. Weddings during Advent and Lent were discouraged so the months in which they fall see as few marriages as August : 8 during March (Lent) and 6 in December (Advent). It may be that there were pressures that influenced the choice of an unpopular month : William Kilbie and Bridget Allen were married on December 16 in 1612, their son was baptised on the following March 14! However, only 2 other such marriages have been noted and only 6 baptisms where the mother's name only is recorded. Perhaps the parishioners were skilful at acting speedily when necessary, or maybe the low numbers noticed are a reflection of growing disapproval of pre marital sex, not least because the child might become a charge on the parish. If the latter was the case, disapproval was not always held against the individual : in 1618 William Same married 4 months before his son was baptised, but in 1626 William became a church warden, answerable at the annual visitation for behaviour in the parish!

William Same appears to have had six children in contrast to John Parratt's 13. Two other families chosen at random also had smaller families than their vicar. George Paternoster married Ann Deare in 1606. Their children were born at greater intervals than the yearly occurrence of the Parratt family, being baptised in 1608, 1611, 1614, 1617, 1619, 1620 and 1624. Similarly Richard Ensam, married in 1614, saw the baptism of his 6 children in 1616, 1620, 1623, 1625, 1629, 1635. It is not possible to say how representative these differences are or what the reasons may be. It is possible that John Parratt with an established position in the church married younger than most of his parishioners for whom the mean age of marriage was likely to be 28 for men and 26 for women.² It may even be that Elizabeth Parratt employed a wet nurse so that lactation did not delay her fertility as it did the other wives.

In other respects, however the Parratt family does illustrate aspects of life in the village, such as infant mortality. The Parratt twins born in 1606 were one of 7 pairs born in the period. Of these, 3 pairs survived the first year but there were 3 pairs where one died : John and Ann Parratt were baptised on 10 December 1606 and John was buried on December 18. Even sadder, also in 1606, one of Ralph Huntsman's twins was still born and buried on April 5, the day Agnes was baptised, only to be buried on April 6.

Anne Parratt, baptised on 6 May 1621 and buried on June 24 in the same year, was one of 39 children who, during the period, died during the first year of life, often within days of birth. Even though this death rate is higher than today, there is no reason to think that they were any the less tragic for the parents involved. Also distressing would be the experience of miscarriage or still births and unusually these 'abortives' are recorded among the burials in the village. Perhaps it is a reflection of John Parratt's compassion that they are so recorded. For some it was a repeated sorrow : Henry Heath is noted as the father of 3 abortives so he and his wife had much to contend with. 46 burials of abortives are recorded during the period, 24 between 1602 and 1611 with a further 15 in 1612 - 21. There is then a drop to only 4 in the next ten years and three in the final decade, all occurring in 1638. Was there really such a drop or do the figures reflect a

2. Ibid p 255

change of practice? The latter seems more likely. The higher figures are comparable with those in Hawkshead (Lancs), one of the few places where such deaths are recorded. There from 1581 to 1710, there were between 29 and 96 per 1000 live births.³

Birth, of course, could be a perilous process for the mother as well as the child and, here, Shillington appears to have been fortunate. In 42 years, only 6 women died within days of the baptism of their child.

For the village as a whole, there were 1082 baptisms, almost equally divided between boys and girls : 545 boys to 537 girls. Each decade shows a small growth

1602 - 11	240
1612 - 21	247
1622 - 31	252
1632 - 41	264
with a further 78, 1642 - 4	

It is interesting that there is no dip in the third decade when the number of marriages noticeably declined and that the last decade even shows a slightly larger increase. Truly it was a young society!

Young but also vulnerable. It is possible to discern the children who died as they are recorded as the son or daughter of someone among the burials so they were probably under 12. In the 42 years, 94 sons and 100 daughters were buried which together with the 39 dying in the first year of life and 46 abortives means parishioners mourned the death of approximately 25% of its children, which compares with a similar figure given by Houlbrooke for under 10s in the early Stuart period.⁴

Nonetheless baptisms outnumbered burials so this may have been a period of small overall growth of population : 1082 baptisms, 772 burials. Excluding abortives the highest number of deaths occurred in April (76 during the period) compared with the lowest : 48 in November. The 58% difference in these figures is likely to be a reflection on the availability of food. By April, supplies could well be running low so that individuals were less well able to resist illness and any infection, whereas by November food would be more plentiful and people better nourished. With the exception of November, the winter months December to March, however, are the most critical with deaths in the range 61 - 67, as one would expect when illness is more likely to be prevalent. It is, therefore interesting that, during the period, 62 burials occurred in August. The numbers are not large enough to suggest a major disease of hot weather like typhoid. Maybe dysentery, which was found to be prevalent in Ludlow at that time of year, was also present in Shillington.⁵ It is certainly a contrast to the national figures where August has a low death rate.⁶

3. Ralph A. Houlbrooke : *The English Family 1450 - 1710* (Longman 1986) p 128

4. *Ibid* p 136

5. *Ibid* p 138

6. Wrigley & Schofield p 295

The lowest number of deaths occurred early in the period : 9 in 1604 and 8 in 1611 but the more usual range is 12 to 24 per year. The mid 1620s appear to have been a critical period : there were 24 burials in 1624, 28 in 1625 and 25 in 1626. It is the succession of higher figures which is notable. Children were vulnerable : 6 died in 1624, 7 in 1625 and 10 in 1626. There are no months with particularly high figures, none exceeding 5, so the deaths are a steady stream which does not suggest an epidemic of any sort. The only one of these years where the number of baptisms is among the lowest registered is 1626 when there were 17. Marriages, on the other hand, are at their lowest in the preceding years when there were none in 1622 and only 3 in 1623. They were still low in 1624 at 2 when 1625 and 1626 were fairly typical with 5 and then 4. Without further research it is not possible to explain these figures. Nationally there was a poor harvest in 1623/4 and this may well have had its effect on Shillington deaths, particularly if the succeeding harvests were not good, but this does not explain the marriage figures.⁷

1638 is the outstanding year for burials : at 38, this is 10 more than the other high years in 1625 and in 1639. In the years 1638 and 1639, again, there is no month which is noticeably high in deaths but a range of 3 to 5 for the months April to September is unusual, with a high of 7 in April 1639. The only abortives of the decade are recorded for 1638 with 2 in July and 1 in September. 2 babies died within 2 days of their baptism and 8 other children died in 1638. Again in 1638 there was one marriage in April and then two in October, with none between, such a gap only occurring in 2 other years, 1622 when there were no marriages and 1624. The pattern suggests, not an epidemic, but some on-going infection which died out in the latter part of 1639. In contrast, there were only 14 deaths in 1640.

Of the sample families mentioned at the beginning, one was affected during the critical years. It was Anne Paternoster who died in 1624, a month after the baptism of her son, after 16 years of marriage. Her eldest, Alice, was sixteen. John Parratt's marriage lasted 20 years by which time his eldest child was 19 but the youngest was only 3 years old. Jane Ensam died in 1641 after 27 years of marriage : her eldest was 25 and the youngest 6. Behind these figures and patterns of behaviour lie individuals with their joys and sorrows.

7. P. Laslett : *The World We Have Lost*. (Methuen 1965) p 14

Source Material

P44/1/1 The Register of the Christenings, Marriages and Burials in the parrish of
Shitlington in the County of Bedford.
(Bedfordshire and Luton Archives Centre)

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