

The British Historical Statistics Project

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Medieval and early modern statistics

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The major task of the BHSP is to expand what Mitchell had to offer in three ways.

The first of these is to bring the various series presented by Mitchell up to date, as close to the present as is feasible.

The second involves the inclusion of more data on social and political history, and this is going to present a major challenge as well as a major opportunity to scholars working in these broad fields. This is not going to be central to my talk today.

The third is to extend the chronological coverage back in time, with 1086 forming the formal start date, the various data series extending back as close as possible to this date even if few will get back that far. It is this aspect that I will concentrate on here.

Of course, there is a reason why Mitchell's series rarely start before 1696, when the Board of Trade was established, and often considerably later: before this date the British government was not wedded to formal national accounting, and this has two implications for the datasets that we hope to compile for the medieval and early modern periods.

First, we will have to rely heavily upon derived statistics.

Second, we will have to also make extensive use of local and regional statistics.

As I cannot possibly discuss all 'medieval and early modern statistics' in the space of twenty minutes, so will focus upon two areas – population and overseas trade – to explore how we might approach the task.

Population

In the original 1962 edition of BHS Mitchell's data for England and Wales began in 1700/01, and comprised the decennial data from Rickman's *Observations* (quinquennial from 1780), together with further population estimates, all based upon the parish register abstracts, made by Malthus, Finlaison, Farr, Brownlee and Griffith, which were presented in Table 1. Baptisms, burials and marriages from the same source are presented as Table 9. Only one estimate of the size of Scotland's population was given (that by Webster for 1755), while the Irish data, taken from the calculations of K.H. Connell, start in 1687. These apart, British demographic history begins with the 1801 census.

This is not a criticism of Mitchell: there was precious little else available in 1962, apart from regional and local studies, and these clearly fell outside of his remit and his ambition. Furthermore, in the 1988 edition he did take advantage at least some of the work of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, reproducing estimated population totals, birth and death rates going back to 1541, 1539 and 1539 respectively, taken from Wrigley and Schofield's *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: a Reconstruction* (London, 1981). These remained, however, the only population tables to cover the early modern period.

The intention of the two editors of Volume 1 of the new BHS is to take the data back to 1086 – that is to Domesday. This will be the first source from which a national population estimate – or more likely a range of possible estimates – will be offered. The next bench mark for national estimates will be the Poll Tax of 1377, the third the Exchequer Lay Subsidies of 1524-5 and 1543-5, followed by the ecclesiastical returns of 1563, 1603 and 1676 – the latter probably supplemented by the Hearth Taxes – and possibly also the returns made under the Protestation Oath in 1641-2. Estimates based upon these sources are, of course, by no means new, and serious attempts to use the medieval evidence date back to J.C. Russell's *British Medieval Population*, published as long ago as 1948 (Albuquerque). Furthermore, there

remains no consensus about how these various sources should be interpreted. I have my own – pretty strongly held – views about the early sixteenth century exchequer lay subsidies and how to convert them to population totals, which produce considerably lower population estimates than the method favoured by, for instance, Alan Dyer or Charles Phythian-Adams. Scaled up to the national level, my method also produces fairly low estimates of the national population in the 1520s, pretty much in line with those calculated by Bruce Campbell. But in the new edition of BHS, what I'm hoping we will be able to do is to present the raw data from each of these sources, as well as a range of population estimates based upon them. And, of course, this will involve the writing of detailed methodological essays in support in each case.

I'm also hoping that, in addition to these national estimates, we will be able to present the raw data down to county level. In the *Historical Statistics of the United States Millennium Edition*, fully 200 pages out of the 777 pages in volume one on population cover basic data on State Populations – for some states from as early as 1790 – and although there will be severe limits to what we can do in the pre-census English context, it seems to me that the very least we can aim for is to present raw data on county populations, proportions urban, and numbers and density of towns at each of our fixed points in time – where, at least, the sources are extant.

The US volume also paid great attention to ethnicity. It is our attention to do the same, as far as we are able, and hence we expect to include a section in the population volume on this subject, which will have to rely upon local source material for both the medieval and early modern periods. For pre-industrial household and family composition, the same will hold true, although I suspect one version or another of Peter Laslett's 100 communities might loom large, though I would want to see this supplemented by some more local material that reveals the variations in household and family structure that Laslett's averages obscure, and perhaps a more sensitive chronological breakdown too.

From 1541, for national population estimates, birth, death and marriage rates, gross and net reproduction rates, expectation of life at birth and age structure we have, of course, one of the most well-thumbed Tables in English demographic history, the

invaluable Table A3.1 of Wrigley and Schofield's *English Population History*, revised as Table A9.1 of Wrigley, Davies, Oeppen and Schofield's, *English Population History from Family Reconstitution 1580-1837* (Cambridge, 1997). Summary data from the 404 parish register sample upon which these estimates are based will be published alongside, and hence once again we intend to present both the raw data and statistical information that has been derived from it. This will be supplemented by more detailed data based upon the 26 reconstituted parishes that feature in the latter publication.

Once again, however, we would want to see this supplemented by regional and local data, as well as data specific to towns, for the absence of such breakdowns in the work of the Cambridge Group has left a huge research agenda waiting to be tackled. Regional analysis might be particularly challenging, although there is no better stating point than Mary Dobson's work on the south east, published as *Contours of Death and Disease* in 1997 (CUP). Local material abounds, and its collation and organisation will prove both a challenging and an immensely rewarding task.

For the medieval period, of course, there is a growing body of evidence on mortality gleaned from monastic foundations, which has been explored by John Hatcher and others, and more recently supplemented by work on Oxbridge colleges by Rebecca Oakes. Another rather neglected demographic source is wills, possibly 2 million of which survive from between the mid-16th and mid-18th centuries, and in excess of 100,000 from before that date. They have been used by R.S. Gottfried to explore both replacement rates and mortality in Norfolk, Suffolk and parts of Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire in the fifteenth century. I have used them similarly to provide a surrogate measure of replacement, as well as to identify mortality crises, for the three towns of Cambridge, Colchester and Reading 1500-1700, while, of course, they were extensively used by Paul Slack – for Devon, Essex and a number of towns in the pre-parish register period – in his classic study of *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1985). Pre-modern demographic data does not, therefore, begin and end with *The Population History of England*, nor with *English Population History from Family Reconstitution*, and there is plenty of flesh remaining to be put on to these bones by the use of a wider range of sources, and by paying attention to what happened at the local and regional level.

Once again, in pursuit of our substantially extended remit compared with that of Brian Mitchell, we would be expecting to present not only raw data, but also derived estimates, and – as far as possible – at national, regional and local levels. This will give plenty of scope for novel research contributions, and for the writing of extensive methodological essays.

Overseas trade

In regard to overseas trade, Mitchell's focus in the *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* was squarely upon the years from 1750 onwards. As he pointed out in 1962: 'Regular and complete records of English overseas trade date from the establishment of the Inspector-General of Imports and Exports in 1696' (Mitchell, 1962, p. 275). He recognised that even then there were 'inherent defects' in the eighteenth-century data, notably the ossification and/or inaccuracy of customs officials' valuations of commodities, and the variable impact of smuggling.

Nevertheless, he was at least prepared to discuss these, and presented as his Table 1 the data gleaned from these sources and published by Deane and Cole, and hence the earliest data is from the year 1697. He also made extensive use of Elizabeth Boody Schumpeter's *English Overseas trade Statistics, 1697-1808*, and hence once again his data was restricted to 1697 and the years following.

In Mitchell's later publications dedicated to trade in Europe, the Americas and Africa and Asia – the two latter volumes subsequently expanded to include, respectively, Australasia and Oceania – his chronological coverage for the UK was even more restricted, not commencing until 1865 in the 1975 edition of *European Historical Statistics 1750-1970* (p. 570 et sequ.). The reason given for this was the difficulties produced by the earlier tendency for data to be presented in terms of officially fixed values for most commodities, which were not always kept up to date, as he had noted in regard to eighteenth-century statistics in the volume devoted to Britain in 1962. Hence statistics were only presented in the European volume from the time when declared or computed actual values were used (p. 485), and for the UK this meant from 1865.

It goes without saying that Mitchell was, of course, aware of the existence of earlier data and its potential. However, he shied away from its presentation and interpretation because he regarded it as an area only for the dedicated specialist. Hence he wrote: 'We have not attempted to give any of the medieval statistics in this volume since their compilation and presentation is a task for the specialist' (BHS, 1962, p. 275). Furthermore, he was aware of the work in train at the LSE by Carus-Wilson and Coleman which was eventually to lead to the publication of *England's Export Trade, 1275-1547* (Oxford, 1963), although he thought at the time that the series would run to 1575. On early modern trade statistics he is almost completely silent, apart from a reference to G.N. Clark's comment that 'The real beginnings of commercial statistics belong to the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries' (BHS, 1962, p. 274). No reason is given for the lack of any attempt to present any statistics for the later sixteenth or seventeenth centuries – although I'm sure that anyone who has ever wrestled with a port book would be able to provide many.

Perhaps he was too sensible to enter upon this tricky ground, or perhaps – as I believe – a valuable research opportunity was missed that has still not been properly taken up. He did not feel inclined to use the data collected by Ralph Davis for the years 1663/9 and 1699-1701, and published in 1954 in the *Economic History Review*. He was certainly concerned with the fact that little national data was available, and hence he failed to make use of the London data presented by Jack Fisher in the *Economic History Review* in 1940 and 1950, and reprinted in Carus-Wilson's *Essays in Economic History* vol. 1 in 1954. In the new edition of *British Historical Statistics*, we intend not only to accept the fact that much pre-modern data will be local or regional, but to embrace that fact, and to encourage our contributors to reflect as fully as possible both local and regional disparities that emerge from the available data.

With regard to overseas trade, of course, the quantity of data available has also expanded considerably since 1962, for a couple of generations of historians have indeed braved the treacherous waters represented by British port books. Indeed, I did so in a small way myself, to supplement the data for the town of Colchester that had already been made available by K.H. Burley in his 1957 London PhD thesis. It was an instructive and a challenging experience, which taught me that personal

experience of using port books was crucial to an appreciation of the status of the data that they can provide. Fortunately many other scholars have also wrestled with the port books, and in a far more systematic fashion than I ever have. It was this work that underpinned two further, very important, *Economic History Review* articles published in 1969 and 1971 by W.B. Stephens and J.D. Gould, which in particular shed new light on the trading activities of the provincial ports, and showed that Lawrence Stone had been wrong in his judgment of their progress (or lack of it) across the later 16th century, which was itself based largely on a few complaints found amongst the State Papers in the difficult years of the 1590s. Stephens in particular consulted an enormous range of port books himself, besides making use of unpublished material found in MA and PhD theses, while both he and Gould provided clear methodological guidelines to help interpret the data they presented.

Many other scholars had also worked on local material, or on particular branches of trade, some prior to the publication of Mitchell's volume, and many more subsequently. Some of this is published, some remains at least partially buried in PhD theses. To list but a few, we have Hall on Newcastle on Tyne (1933, unpubl. PhD, London); Pilgrim (1938, unpubl. MA, London), Burley (1957, unpubl. London PhD) modestly supplemented by Goose (unpubl Kent PhD, 1984) on Essex; Millard on London's early 17th century import trade (1956); Hinton on early 17th century Boston (1956) and later on the Eastland trade generally (1959); Astrom on the Anglo-Baltic trade (1963); Scammell and Davis on shipping (1962, 1962, 1972); Allison on Hull (1969); Chaudhuri on the East India Company (1963, 1965, 1973, 1978); Stephen Fisher on the Portugal trade (1971); Zins on the Baltic (1972); Dietz on early Elizabethan London (1972); Paul Clemens on Liverpool (ECHR 1976); Mayhew on Tudor Rye (1987); N.J. Williams on the trade of the East Anglian ports (1988); Lynch on Scottish towns; Stephens (1974), Vanes (1979) and later David Harris Sacks on Bristol (1991), plus there are 11 years of 16th century Bristol customs accounts freely available on the ResearchGate Scientific Network, the product of an ESRC funded project on Bristol's trade with Ireland; David Ormrod on trade with the Netherlands (2003)... and many more that do not spring immediately to mind.

For the medieval period, of course, we have the Carus-Wilson and Coleman general data on exports covering the years 1275-1547. In addition there is E. Veale on the English fur trade (1966); M.K. James on the Medieval wine trade (1971); John Hatcher on tin (1973); Steve Rigby on Boston and Grimsby (1984, 1985, 1993 and 2005); Richard Britnell on Colchester (1986), and many more that my ignorance of the medieval period renders me completely unaware of.

Far from all of these studies present comprehensive or systematic runs of statistics. But then again some do, and there is considerable scope for bringing together even the partial material into a more coherent package. Furthermore, there are the published Sound Tolls to be properly scrutinised, edited by N.E. Bang and Bang and Korst between 1906 and 1933 *Tabeller over skibsfart...*) – currently being digitized – besides George von Schanz's *Englische handelspolitik... (English trading policy towards the end of the Middle Ages, with particular attention paid to the period of the first two Tudors)* (2 vols. 1881). Unfortunately the port book project, which was based at Wolverhampton University and was wound up about 10 years ago, only focused upon coastal and river trade – mainly in the south west – and failed to capture overseas trade data.

What all this adds up to, therefore, is a tremendous challenge. But it also represents a great opportunity for one or more scholars to bring all of this disparate medieval and early modern material together, and to write one or more major interpretative essays, and hence make an important contribution to the new edition of British Historical Statistics, which will have both research and impact credibility in their own right, but which will no doubt result in many spin-off publications too.

Conclusion

These are just two topics that exemplify the type of opportunity that the BHSP provides to the medieval and early modern historian, and – given the paucity of early data presented in any of the Mitchell editions of BHS – this offers more scope for novelty than any other aspect of this project, and requires a different approach that must necessarily involve the use of local and regional data and derived statistics.

Just like its American counterpart, the new BHS volumes will constitute far more than a collection of bald statistics, and will contain a series of methodological and interpretative essays, written by a collection of specialists, who will be clearly credited for the work that they contribute as well as bearing the responsibility for the accuracy of that work. These essays will thus be eminently REF-able, besides catering to the 'impact' agenda about which we are currently hearing so much. The value of the end product to the academic community, of course, will be inestimable.