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# Few Deaths before Baptism: Clerical Policy, Private Baptism and the Registration of Births in Georgian Westminster: a Paradox Resolved

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## Abstract

*The evident lengthening of the interval between birth and baptism over the eighteenth century has often been assumed to have increased the risk that young infants died before baptism. Using burial records that include burials of unbaptised infants and give age at death we demonstrate that very few infants who survived the first few days of life escaped baptism in the parish of St. Martin in the Fields, despite a very profound lengthening of the delay between birth and baptism over the second half of the eighteenth century. Examination of baptism fee books indicates that perhaps a third of all infants were baptized privately in the parish and a pamphlet dispute between the vicar and one of his clerks provides extraordinary evidence of the extent to which baptism was a process rather than a single event. Our analysis suggests that it was the registration of baptism that was delayed, with no affect on the risk of death before baptism.*

## Introduction: private and public baptism in early modern England

The main purpose of this paper is to resolve the apparent paradox that very few children actually died before baptism in eighteenth-century London, despite very high local rates of infant mortality and a lengthening interval between birth and baptism. The paradox came about, because, in essence, christening a child in eighteenth-century London was often a process, rather than a discrete event. Only by understanding the nature of baptism practices and customs in the capital (and by implication elsewhere) can one really understand local registration practices, and appreciate how they impact on demographic studies.

The pioneering article on this subject is that by Berry and Schofield in 1971. They noted that the Anglican prayer book provided for both public and private ceremonies, stipulated that no child should be baptized twice, discouraged lay baptism and noted that from 1662 children should be baptized by the first or second Sunday after birth. Given the equal status accorded to private and public baptism they argued that it was probable that ‘private baptisms were included in parish registers’.<sup>1</sup>

Berry and Schofield’s article suffered from a relative paucity of data from parishes outside London, and the fact that their sub periods comprised different mixes of parishes.

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1 B.M. Berry and R. Schofield, ‘Age at Baptism in Pre-industrial England’, *Population Studies*, 25 (1971), p. 454.

Nonetheless the overall finding was that birth-baptism intervals were lengthening over the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Many local studies followed—and continue to follow—Berry and Schofield’s pioneering article. Most of these, in the main, confirmed their findings about the lengthening interval between birth and baptism in the eighteenth century. It was noted, however, that their observation that there was considerable local variation in the patterns uncovered was also true. A few articles drew attention to localized christening customs in rural areas which gave rise to unusual patterns of intervals, notably Dennis Mills’s study of Melbourn in Cambridgeshire, where many children in the late eighteenth century were baptized during the parish feast in July.<sup>3</sup> The causes for observed variation in baptism customs included the attitudes of local clergy, periods of particular hardship, size of parish and distance to church, and so on.

Only a few authors, notably Ambler, returned to the actual meaning of a baptism recorded in a parish register and argued that it might be problematic. Ambler drew attention to the complications in registration practice produced by the incidence of private baptisms. He found baptisms carried out at home in cases of emergency when the child’s life was in danger, but also, and apparently *increasingly*, private baptisms performed for social reasons. Children baptized in private ceremonies might—if they lived—be then be brought to church for later certification. The incidence and chronology of private baptism is difficult to establish since the practice was recorded only rarely in our period, but Kitson has recently argued that ‘evidence relating to the performance of baptism during the eighteenth century suggests that there was a widespread move away from the public performance of the rite’ and that ‘it became the normal manner in which the rite was administered in many parts of the country’. Private ceremonies could include a substantial proportion of all baptisms that took place in a parish.<sup>4</sup>

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- 2 ‘Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the average interval between birth and baptism increased substantially, and with it the danger that a young child would die before baptism’: E.A. Wrigley, ‘Births and Baptisms: the Use of Anglican Baptism Registers as a Source of Information about the Numbers of Births in England before the Beginning of Civil Registration’, *Population Studies*, 31 (1977), p. 281.
  - 3 There is a large literature on the birth-baptism interval, see, for example: D.R. Mills, ‘The Christening Custom at Melbourn, Cambs’, *Local Population Studies* (hereafter *LPS*), 11 (1973), pp. 11–22; R.W. Herlan, ‘Age at Baptism in the London Parish of St Olave, Old Jewry, 1645–1667’, *LPS*, 24 (1980), pp. 42–48; M. Saxby, ‘Age at Baptism in the Parish of St Nicholas Pevensey, 1761–1800’, *LPS*, 61 (1998), pp. 56–57; M.J. Saxby, ‘Ages at Baptism in the Parish of All Saints, Sudbury, 1809–1828: a New Approach to their Interpretation’, *LPS*, 70 (2003), pp. 49–56; J. Perkins, ‘Birth-baptism Intervals in 68 Lancashire Parishes, 1646–1917’, *LPS*, 85 (2010), pp. 11–27; S. Dewhurst and A. Hinde, ‘Age at Baptism in Rural Hampshire in the second half of the Nineteenth Century’, *LPS*, 57(1996), pp. 72–75; R. Finlay, *Population and Metropolis. The Demography of London 1580–1650*, (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 37–43.
  - 4 R.W. Ambler, ‘Civil Registration and Baptism: Popular Perceptions of the 1836 Act for Registering Births, Deaths and Marriages’, *LPS*, 39 (1987), pp. 24–31; R.W. Ambler, ‘Baptism and Christening: Custom and Practice in 19th century Lincolnshire’, *LPS*, 12 (1974), pp. 25–27; Wrigley ‘Births and Baptisms’, p. 283; P.M. Kitson, ‘Religion Change and the Timing of Baptism in England, 1538–1750’, *Historical Journal*, 52 (2009), pp. 275–6; E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871* (2nd edn., Cambridge, 1989), p. 97. See also J.T. Krause, ‘The Changing Adequacy of English Registration, 1690–1837’, in D.V. Glass and D.E.C. Eversley (eds), *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography*, (London, 1965), p. 389.

Londoners, as is well known, were particularly prone to private, clandestine marriages.<sup>5</sup> There seems to be little doubt that private baptisms were likewise found most often in the capital. Contemporaries hostile to the practice made explicit reference to the frequency of their occurrence in the metropolis. Complaint literature and a few diaries suggested to David Cressy that there was a ‘rise of private baptism’ in London after the Restoration, driven less by fear for the child’s life than by the imperatives of social status and a desire for privacy amongst the better off. Such privacy also allowed dissenters to evade elements of the Anglican liturgy that they objected to. By 1682 it was alleged by one hostile cleric that:

Public baptism is now very much grown out of fashion; most people look upon it as a very needless and troublesome ceremony, to carry their children to the public congregation, there to be solemnly admitted into the fellowship of Christ’s church. They think it may be as well done in a private chamber, as soon as the child is born, with little company and with little noise.<sup>6</sup>

London it was claimed in 1754 was the original site of the ‘infection’ of private baptism that was spreading out into the surrounding country.<sup>7</sup> Outside the capital, private baptism is sometimes said to have been confined to emergency christenings only, although this is actually contradicted by the proportions found in some rural areas.<sup>8</sup>

### The prayer book rubric

The eighteenth-century prayer book rubric (i.e. ‘a direction in a liturgical book as to how a church service should be conducted’, *Oxford English Dictionary*) laid down a (relatively) clear procedure for baptism, under two main headings. The ‘Ministration of PUBLICK BAPTISM of Infants, to be used in the Church’ was not to be administered but ‘upon Sunday and other Holy-days’ although ‘if Necessity so require’ children could be baptized upon any other day. Parents wishing to baptize their children ‘shall give Knowledge thereof over Night, or in the Morning before the Beginning of Morning Prayer, to the Curate’. The ‘Godfathers and Godmothers, and the People with the Children’ were to be ready at the font at end of the last lesson of morning or evening prayers. The service would *begin* with the question ‘Hath

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5 J. Boulton, ‘Clandestine Marriages in London: an Examination of a Neglected Urban Variable’, *Urban History*, 20 (1993), pp. 191–210.

6 D. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage & Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997), p. 192.

7 *A Letter from a Clergyman giving his Reasons for Refusing to Administer Baptism in Private, by the Public Form; as Desired by a Gentleman of his Parish*, (London, 1754), p. 40.

8 W. Coster, ‘Tokens of Innocence: Infant Baptism, Death and Burial in Early Modern England’, in B. Gordon and P. Marshall (eds), *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: 2000), pp. 266–287; Y.T. Tjondrowardojo, ‘Stories Baptismal Registers Told: Private Baptism in Seventeenth-century England’, *History*, 95:318 (2010), pp. 177–93. For early examples of private baptism see Wrigley, ‘Births and Baptisms’, p. 283. See also A. Wilson, ‘The Ceremony of Childbirth’, in V. Fildes (ed.), *Women as Mothers in Pre-industrial England: Essays in Memory of Dorothy McLaren* (London, 1990), p. 80, who points out that one motive for private baptism was to enable mothers to be present.

this child been already baptized, or no?’ Given such practicalities, therefore, unbaptized children in imminent danger of dying could rarely have received public baptism.

The second form prescribed was ‘the Ministration of Private Baptism of Children in Houses’. Although such baptisms were discouraged, it is clear from the elaborate rubric that they were carried out routinely. Curates were to admonish parishioners not to defer the baptism of their children longer than the first or second Sunday after the birth, or other Holy day, ‘unless upon a great and reasonable Cause to be approved by the Curate’. Parishioners were not to baptize ‘at home in their houses’ ‘without like great Cause and Necessity’ but ‘when Need shall compel them so to do’ a truncated service was prescribed. The ‘Minister of the Parish (or in his Absence, any other lawful Minister that can be procured)’ would say the Lord’s Prayer and prescribed Collects from the public form ‘as the Time and present Exigence will suffer’. The child would then be ‘named by some one that is present’ and the minister would pour water upon the child, intoning the vital phrase ‘N[ame] I baptize thee, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen’ to be followed by suitable admonitions. The rubric continued:

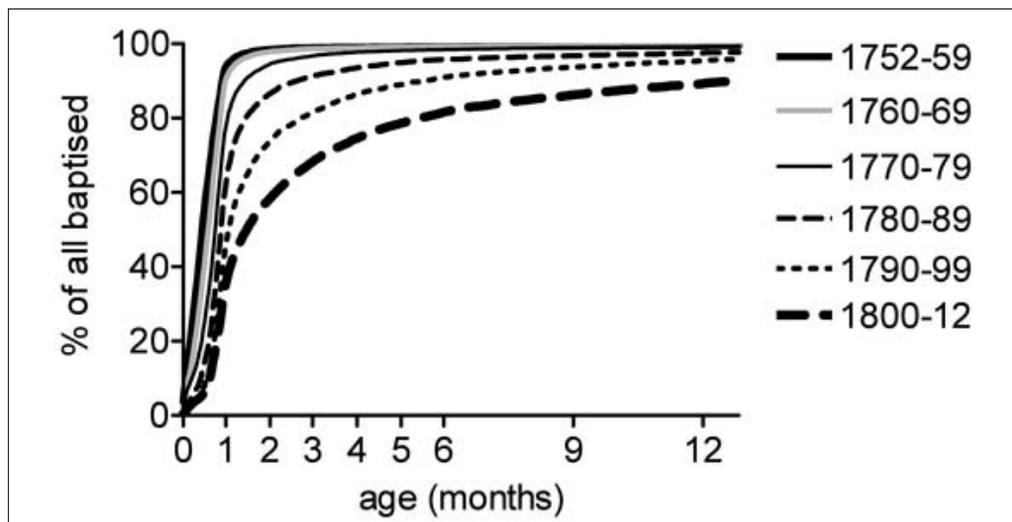
And let them not doubt, but that the Child so baptized is lawfully and sufficiently baptized, and ought not to be baptized again. Yet, nevertheless, if the Child, which is after this Sort baptized, do afterwards live, it is expedient that it be brought into the Church; to the Intent that if the Minister of the same Parish did himself baptize that Child, the Congregation may be certified of the true form of Baptism by him privately before used...

The minister was then to publicly certify the time and place of the original private baptism. If the child had been baptized ‘by any other lawful Minister’ the Minister was to question those bringing the child according to a precise interrogatory. If satisfied the minister was to ‘certify you, that in this case all is well done’ and would carry out a truncated version of the public rubric. However, if those bringing the child ‘do make stick uncertain Answers to the Priest’s Questions, as that it cannot appear that the Child was baptized with Water, ‘in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, (which are essential Parts of Baptism), then let the Priest baptize it in the Form before appointed for Publick Baptism of Infants’. The rubric played it safe since at the point when the child was dipped in the font the form of words here was a conditional ‘If thou art not already baptized, N. I baptize thee, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.’<sup>9</sup> The prayer book rubric therefore, at a number of points, accepted the reality that many children were baptized at home but expected them to be brought to church for a public certification or reception. For some infants, therefore, christening was not a discrete event but a two stage process. The complexities and implications of the rubric are not always appreciated or remembered in the literature on the birth-baptism interval.

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<sup>9</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, according to the Use of the Church of England* (London, 1763), pp. 246–56.

Figure 1 Cumulative percentage baptized, by age, St Martin in the Fields, 1752–1812



Source: City of Westminster Archives Centre (COWAC) Baptism Fee Books, Accession 419/210–227; St Martin in the Fields Baptism and Burial Registers.

### The birth baptism interval in St Martin in the Fields

Just as in other London parishes, those giving birth in St Martin's apparently waited an increasing amount of time to baptize their children in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Figure 1).

The lengthening of the birth-baptism interval is conventionally taken to imply that large numbers of children were at greater risk of dying before baptism.<sup>10</sup> In the 1750s in St Martin's, it was three weeks or so before 75 per cent of baptisms had taken place. Or, put another way, more than 25 per cent of couples were apparently waiting more than three weeks to baptize their infant children. By the 1770s it took a month for coverage of baptisms to reach 75 per cent and by the first decade of the nineteenth century it was *four months* before 75 per cent of all baptisms had taken place. The length of time that elapsed between birth and baptism increased particularly dramatically after the 1760s, driven by the appearance of a large number of long intervals, as well as a substantial reduction in very short intervals. St Martin's was typical of other eighteenth-century London parishes. The lengthening interval in London in the eighteenth century was particularly dramatic since those baptizing children in the capital in the late seventeenth century had tended to do so

<sup>10</sup> See above footnote 3; Berry and Schofield, 'Age at Baptism', p. 453; J. Landers, *Death and the Metropolis* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 164–5; E.A. Wrigley, R.S. Davies, J.E. Oeppen and R.S. Schofield, *English Population History from Family Reconstitution, 1580–1837* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 96–101. More recent examples include R.M. Smith and J.E. Oeppen, 'Place and Status as Determinants of Mortality in England, c. 1550–1837', in E. Garrett, C. Galley, N. Shelton and R. Woods (eds) *Infant Mortality: A Continuing Social Problem* (Ashgate, 2006), p. 54; A. Wilson, *Ritual and Conflict: the Social Relations of Childbirth in Early Modern England* (Ashgate, 2013), chapter 4.

relatively early compared to elsewhere. However, by the end of the eighteenth century 'London parishes were amongst the latest-baptizing parishes in the country'.<sup>11</sup>

### Unbaptised children buried in St Martin in the Fields 1747–1825

One obvious way of looking at the extent to which the lengthening interval between birth and baptism produced large numbers of unbaptised children is to look at how young children were described in the parish burial books. One would predict on the basis of the dramatic lengthening of baptismal delay a progressive rise in the numbers of burials of unbaptised infants. Alternatively, if unbaptised infants were increasingly excluded from the burial register (as is argued to have occurred over the eighteenth century)<sup>12</sup> then we should see an increasing deficit of burials of very young infants who escaped both baptismal and burial registration. The sextons' books of St. Martin in the Fields provide exceptional insights into these processes because they recorded all burials, baptized and unbaptised, in the parish, and they recorded age at burial in detail, in days, weeks and months for infants. Burials of 'stillborn' and 'abortive' infants were recorded in abundance, although these latter were unbaptised and were excluded from the parish burial register. Indeed fully 15 per cent of all infant burials in the sextons' burial books were described as 'stillborn' or 'abortive'. This apparently scrupulous attention to the burial of dead-born infants co-existed with a virtual absence of burials of live-born infants in the first few days of life. This suggests that many or most of those described as stillborn were in fact live-born infants who died shortly after birth and before baptism, This issue is discussed more fully in Davenport (unpubl.).<sup>13</sup> However, misclassification of infants as stillbirths can only have occurred amongst children dying in the first hours and possibly days of life.<sup>14</sup> At ages over one week there was no evidence of any burial deficit.<sup>15</sup> Since a substantial number of parents were delaying baptism by some months, and given the lethal rates of infant

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11 In St Martin Orgars half of all baptisms had taken place within six days of birth in the late seventeenth century, but by 1796–1807 the figure was (apparently) 35 days. Birth baptism intervals were relatively uniform across the capital, Berry and Schofield, 'Age at Baptism', p. 460.

12 Wrigley, 'Births and Baptisms', p. 289 (fn.16); Wrigley and Schofield, *Population History*, p. 99.

13 R.J. Davenport, 'The Relationship between Stillbirth and Early Neonatal Mortality: Evidence from Eighteenth Century London', unpubl. working paper: <http://www.geog.cam.ac.uk/people/davenport/davenport11.pdf>

14 For the frequent misclassification of live-born children as stillbirths by midwives in the late nineteenth century see, J-M. Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 239–43. Burials of stillborn infants were charged a lower fee than live-born infant burials. However burial fees were the same for 'chrisom' and stillborn burials so there was no financial motive for describing a dead newborn as stillborn rather than as an unbaptised chrisom. In St Martin's the Vicar relinquished his customary minimum 1s fee when burying stillbirths or chrisom children, Lambeth Palace Library Ms, MS 2716, fol. 7v.

15 If stillborn but not abortive burials were assumed to be burials of live-born infants who died in the first few days of life then the distribution of burials by infant age in the sextons' books conformed to Bourgeois-Pichat's expectations and there was no evidence of any further deficit of burials of young infants (Davenport, unpubl.). Unlike the burial register there is little reason to suspect under-registration in the sextons' books, since the latter recorded the necessary task of interring corpses irrespective of baptismal status in contrast to the more selective record of the register.

mortality in London in the eighteenth century, we would surely expect to find large numbers of *unbaptized* infants in the parish *burial* register (and large numbers of unbaptized infants in the live population). Even allowing for improving infant mortality rates in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with many parents leaving baptism for months many children, surely, would have been expected to die ‘before baptism’.<sup>16</sup> In fact, oddly, this is not what we find at all.

It seems clear from settlement examinations (examinations by Justices of the Peace of paupers as to their legal right to relief in a parish under the English Poor Law) that possession of a name required an act of baptism. Unbaptized children were referred to as ‘not yet christened’ and never referred to by forename. A typical example here would be one Rachel Gwinn, examined in 1722, who had three children of whom the youngest was ‘about 7 weeks old she says it is a Female child not yet Christened’.<sup>17</sup> There is little historical evidence, as far we know, that children in the eighteenth century were named (as they might be today) by their parents *without* some act of baptism.<sup>18</sup> Those with a given forename, therefore, must have undergone a christening of some sort. Children buried *without* forenames, cannot have undergone *any* form of baptism.

It is remarkable that very few children were buried without forenames but with surnames (that is, they were not anonymous foundlings) in the sextons’ burial books. In fact, there were only 92 cases—in a database containing 35,990 records of those labelled as children—who lacked a forename at burial. In a few cases this was due to damage to the register and some of the others may have been due to clerical negligence.<sup>19</sup> There appears to have been no particular period when these were particularly common. This is remarkable because of the lengthening birth-baptism interval, and because of the very high rates of infant mortality in London at this time.

In only 19 of these 92 cases did marginalia make mention of the fact that a dead child lacked a forename. Fourteen were described as ‘Chrisom’, a term referring in this period to unbaptised infants. Chrisom burials were charged the same rates as stillborn burials and we think that the term ‘Stillborn’ came to displace ‘Chrisom’ to describe very early neonatal

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16 John Landers believed that falling early infant death rates in London in the late eighteenth century more than offset the effect of lengthening birth baptism intervals. For this reason he reduced his inflation factor for this effect from the 1770s, Landers, *Death and the Metropolis*, pp. 165–6. This is in stark contrast to Wrigley and Schofield’s allowance which increases steadily over time.

17 See COWAC F5015/208. For similar examples see, F5015/67, 105; F5014/224; F5017/45; F013/47.

18 John Rickman cited several reasons for deficient baptismal registration, including the failure of ‘some irreligious Persons, especially in large Towns, [who] neglect the Rite of Baptism altogether’, as well as Dissenters who ‘baptize after their own manner, or not at all’. However he considered the greatest defects in baptismal registration to be the result of the under-registration of private baptisms. *Census Observations and Enumeration Abstract*, 1811, xxiii.

19 We searched in the burial register for child burials that lacked forenames in the sextons’ books. Burials of ‘Chrisoms’ were omitted from the register. Twenty-two entries lacking forenames in the sextons’ books involved children exported to other parishes for interment. These types of burials were not recorded in the burial register and such cases were more likely to lack information on the deceased. Fourteen burials without forenames in the sextons’ books were recorded with forenames in the register. Of the remaining 42 burials of apparently live-born but un-named children 35 were found in the burial register, all recorded without forenames.

deaths of unbaptised infants.<sup>20</sup> Of the remaining five it is very significant that four of these cases were of workhouse children since we know that workhouse children were usually baptized very quickly after birth, presumably because their survival chances were so poor. These unbaptised workhouse children were either two or three days old. These cases occurred in a three-year period (November 1779–December 1782). Two of the children were stated to have died ‘not baptized’, one was stated to be an ‘infant baptized (sic)’ while the other was stated to have died ‘not named’ at two days old—a striking testament to the fact that it was the act of baptism that conferred a name. The only other case of the burial of an explicitly unbaptised child was completely different. This was a ‘Miss’ Staremberg, a five-month-old infant imported from the neighbouring parish of St James to be interred in St Martin’s, who had died of ‘fitts’ in 1793. A marginal note reported that she died ‘Not being Christened’. Since dying in fits suggests a sudden death this might have forestalled an emergency home baptism of an apparently robust child, whose parents had (most unusually) delayed any form of christening.<sup>21</sup>

Table 1 compares the pitifully few children lacking forenames against the total number of children buried in infancy (with known ages of 365 days or less) and described as live-born. Only 44 cases of infants lacking forenames but with given ages under one year were found, the remainder were age one year or older or lacked age information. Clearly only a few children were living for some time without a given forename. However, since these cases are very rare in proportion to the huge total of children buried this surely suggests that all but a tiny minority of children must have received some form of baptism *before* their demise. There is not one case, incidentally, where two unbaptised children seemingly came from the same family so there is no sign that families with religious scruples against infant baptism were responsible for even these small numbers. Only one in a hundred ‘live-born’ children buried within a month of birth lacked a forename at burial and the proportions were, as one might expect, much lower than this for infant children at more advanced ages. It is almost certain, as noted above, that many unbaptised very young children were registered as stillbirths. However, older infants (those aged over a week or so) who would surely have been very unlikely to have been misclassified as stillborn, were also very unlikely to die without a forename. Some mechanism was enabling virtually *all* London children to receive a name before they died. For this reason, hardly any London children ‘died before baptism’ even though the median interval between birth and ‘baptism’ was exceptionally long by the end of the eighteenth century. Evidence from the baptism fee books of St Martin’s resolves this apparent paradox.

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20 One of these chrisom children was stated to be ‘4 hours’ old in a marginal comment. Another was four days old when it died of convulsions in 1762. The term chrisom was rather old fashioned by the eighteenth century and most chrisom cases in St Martin’s occurred in the 1740s and 50s. The last case was in 1765. Coster found that the term invariably referred to an unbaptized child by the mid-seventeenth century, Coster, ‘Tokens of Innocence’, p. 283.

21 For these cases see COWAC 419/238 17th October 1780, 5th December 1782, 31st August 1782, 18th November 1779; 419/240, 20th July 1793. Three of the four explicitly unbaptised infants, including ‘Miss Staremberg’ were recorded in the burial register despite their unbaptised status.

**Table 1 Percentage of infants lacking forenames at burial by age, 1747–1824**

Given age at burial (days)	'live-born' infants with forenames at burial	'live-born' infants <i>without</i> forenames at burial	'stillborn' infants <i>without</i> forenames at burial	Total burials in age group	% of 'live-born' lacking forename at burial
0	1	16	2,757	2,774	94.1
1–6	708	10		718	1.4
7–13	827	0		827	0.0
14–20	1,141	2		1,143	0.2
21–27	933	5		938	0.5
28–91	4,788	5		4,793	0.1
92–182	2032	2		2,034	0.1
183–273	2,673	2		2,675	0.1
274–364	2,597	2		2,599	0.1
Total	15,700	44	2,757	18,505	0.24

**Source:** Sexton's books and burial books of St Martin's, COWAC, MS 419/233–44; 419/265–269; F2465, F2467, F2469. Camden Town Registers, 419/123. Anonymous children (i.e. those lacking both forenames and surnames) were excluded from the unknown forename columns. All infants of unknown ages were excluded. 'Stillborn' comprises those burials with cause of death 'stillborn' or 'abortive'.

### Baptism fees in St Martin in the Fields, 1751–1810

The main database for the project is a virtually unbroken list of some 43,004 records of Anglican baptisms that took place in St Martin in the Fields between 1<sup>st</sup> September 1751 and 30<sup>th</sup> September 1810. The data are mostly drawn from parish baptism fee books, although 3391 entries were also taken from the parish register.<sup>22</sup>

These baptism fee books are extremely revealing about christening practices in the parish and also, arguably, the rest of London. The social structure of St Martin's in the period in question can best be described as heterogeneous, with significant numbers of titled and wealthy inhabitants, government officials and very substantial numbers of shopkeepers, craftsmen and servants who provided for their every need.<sup>23</sup> Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the parish operated one of the largest workhouses in London and spent very substantial sums of money, in addition, on relieving its numerous outdoor poor.

22 Most of these were included to fill a chronological gap in the series (1st June 1765–22nd March 1769—2732 entries)—periods when a separate workhouse register of baptisms exists (625 entries covering periods 2nd May 1790–25th September 1810) and 34 entries included which were omitted from the baptism fee books presumably due to random clerical error.

23 The male occupational structure of St. Martin's was very similar to that of Middlesex as a whole (with the exception of the agricultural sector, which was smaller in St. Martin's than the county as a whole), according to occupational descriptors of fathers recorded in baptism registers 1813–18 and of grooms marrying at the Fleet registry 1750–52. Unpubl. data from the Cambridge Group Occupations Project, ESRC RES-000-23-1579 and RES 000-23-0131.

Since the parish was essentially a huge urban district that contained 25–30,000 people (c. 4% of the entire population of the eighteenth-century metropolis) what was happening locally is likely to have resembled closely Anglican baptism practices in other parts of London.<sup>24</sup> That said, there is clear evidence in what follows that the potential for local variation in registration practice over time was considerable.

As noted above, both the fee books and the parish register give both dates of birth and baptism throughout our period. This has enabled the calculation of what proved to be unexceptional birth-baptism interval data—albeit on a hitherto unparalleled scale (see above, Figure 1). The fee books also give the addresses of those baptizing children and contain marginalia relating to payments, the particular circumstances of baptizing couples, exceptional cases, a few certificates of baptism, and letters amplifying individual entries. Those baptizing children outside the workhouse who were considered poor and thus excused fees were labelled as such. The fee books and registers also reveal that over a thousand baptisms were recorded as coming from, or taking place in, the parish workhouse. Private baptisms were labelled as ‘P’ and (after 1783) ‘HC’ (home christening). It is very probable that only a proportion of private baptisms were so labelled (see below). It is not currently clear what all of the other letter labels refer to, although some seem to refer to officiating clerics.<sup>25</sup> Not all the 5,963 individuals’ excused fees, or for whom no fees were recorded, were poor. Clergymen, some squires, a few military men, members of the titular aristocracy, and once even a member of the royal family (whose baptism actually took place at Carlton House), for example, were not recorded as being charged fees.<sup>26</sup> Only two explicit cases of refusal to pay are recorded.<sup>27</sup>

Figure 2 sets out the fees charged for baptisms in St. Martins between 1751 and 1794 (after 1794 the fee structure was greatly simplified). The graph shows a step-like fee structure. Of the 28,136 fees listed in this period 13.5 per cent were zero charges. Nearly half (48 per cent) were charged a standard fee of 1s 6d and a further 14 per cent were charged 3s 6d. Some 92 per cent of all fees were 5s or less. Only a relatively small number of baptisms therefore incurred relatively large fees and less than 5 per cent were charged 10s or more. As one might expect, those paying the higher fees were often from the social elite of the parish.<sup>28</sup>

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24 Assuming a population of 675,000 in 1750, E.A. Wrigley, *People, Cities and Wealth: the Transformation of Traditional Society* (Oxford, 1987), p. 133. The parish accounted for 4–5 per cent of burials in the London Bills of Mortality in the period 1752–1800.

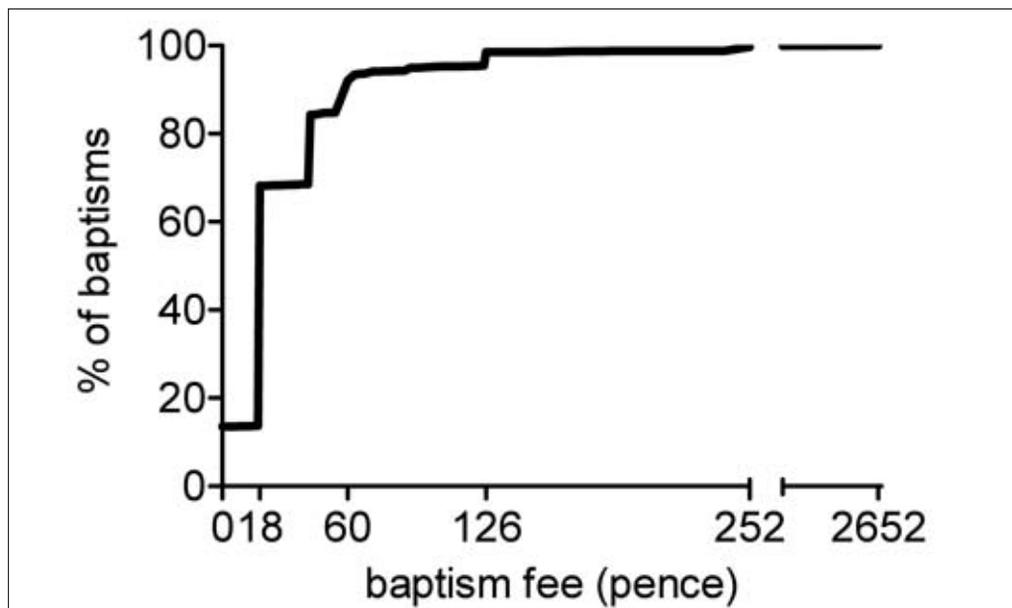
25 Over seven hundred entries were labelled ‘R’ (possibly for ‘registered’ or ‘received’ and referring to private baptisms). This is most unlikely to have referred to a particular parish official since the labels appear in the baptism fee books in 1775 and are found until 1808.

26 121 individuals not charged fees were given explicit status titles. These included the children of six Earls, three Dukes and a royal birth (Charlotte Augusta, daughter of the Prince and Princess of Wales, baptised 11th Feb 1796: see COWAC Accession 419/225). Private gifts to officiating clergy and parish officers might well have gone unrecorded.

27 COWAC Accession 419/217, 15 July 1779; Accession 419/224, 3rd February 1789.

28 And, frankly, of the country. The fathers of 116 of the 339 baptisms charged £1 or more were (unusually) ascribed a title. These included four Viscounts, 12 Earls, 4 Dukes, 6 Lords, 60 Esquires and a healthy sprinkling of right honourables, military and medical men and a few clerics.

Figure 2 Cumulative percentage baptism fees in St Martin in the Fields



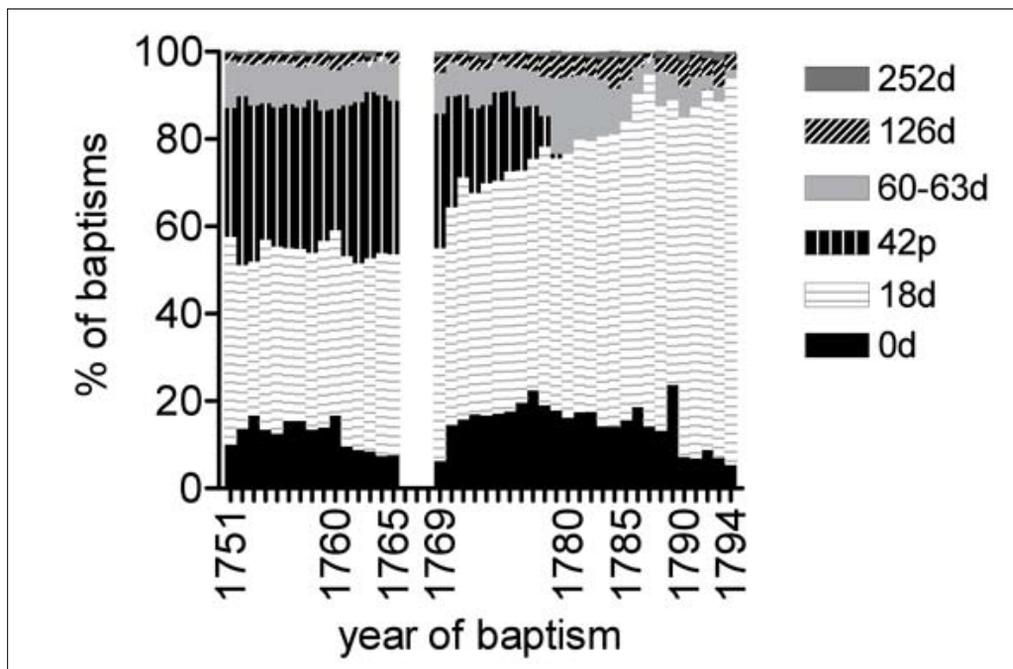
**Source:** COWAC Baptism Fee Books, Accession 419/210–227; St Martin in the Fields Baptism and Burial Registers.

What were these fees levied for? Conventionally christening or baptism fees were charged for the registering of the child, rather than for the service itself.<sup>29</sup> The huge range of burial fees charged in most London parishes covered the provisions of parish palls, attendance of bearers, bell ringing, prestige or otherwise of burial location, searchers costs and so on. The baptism fee books, however, do not specify what large fees might have purchased. One assumes such payments might have been for the attendance of particular clerics or parish officials, perhaps bells or a private service but in not one case are such details specified. It is entirely possible that some of the larger fees represented expected voluntary donations, on top of the standard fee.

We are on safer ground with the lower fees. Fees were clearly excused for the baptisms of those considered too poor to pay. Workhouse baptisms were zero rated as were many of those baptized out of the workhouse and labelled as ‘poor’. The ‘labour’ of baptism registration of these infants did not go unrewarded since local churchwardens paid clerics

<sup>29</sup> See the baptism fees reported by London clergy in *Report from the Select Committee on Parochial Registration; with the Minutes of Evidence, and Appendix* (House of Commons, 1833), pp. 22, 36, 98, 111, 122. For a useful discussion of this source, see Ambler, ‘Civil Registration and Baptism’, pp. 24–31. See also R. Burn, *The Ecclesiastical Law*, Vol. 1 (6th edition, 1797), p. 117 which discusses a case from St Martin’s where the then Vicar, William Lancaster (in post 1692–1716) failed in his attempt to levy a baptism fee of 3s. 6d. on a French resident of the parish who baptized his child at the nearby French Church in the Savoy.

Figure 3 Percentage composition of fees charged for baptism in St Martin in the Fields



Source: COWAC Baptism Fee Books, Accession 419/210–227

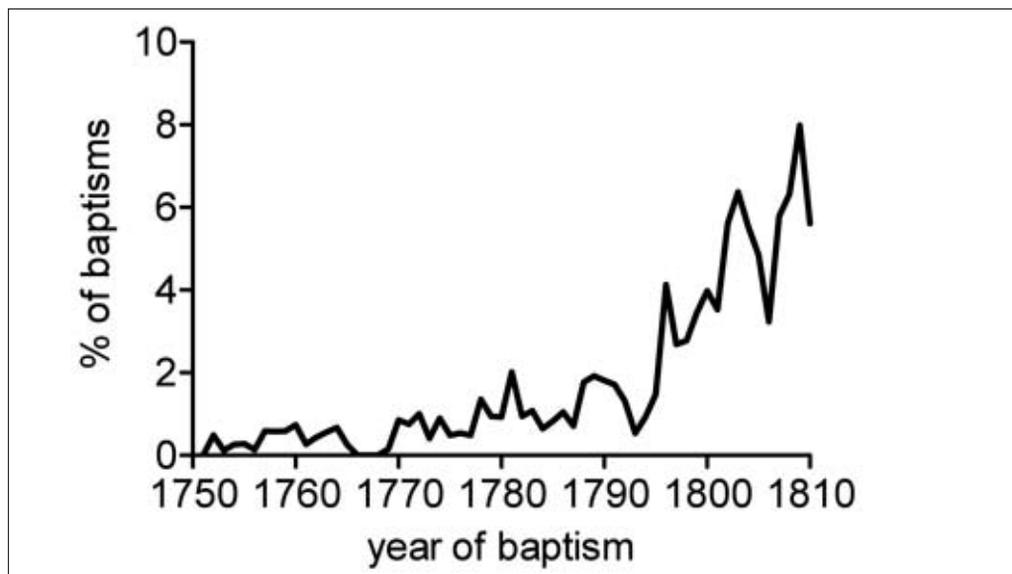
a flat fee to carry out the registrations of poor children.<sup>30</sup> Such poor children included those born in the workhouse.<sup>31</sup> That said, baptisms where no fee at all was recorded were almost as common as those excused on grounds of poverty.

A table of church fees that exists for 1724/5 shows that 1s 6d was the basic fee then charged for what was described as for christenings ‘at Church’. The next most commonly charged fee 3s 6d was explicitly for ‘Christnings at Home’. It seems a reasonable assumption, therefore, that all fees charged above 18d must have been for ‘christenings at home’, although this assumption might be slightly undermined by the extent to which the fee books record voluntary offerings rather than flat rate pro rata charges for services rendered and ignores cases where private baptisms are known to have been excused fees. However, it is also apparent that the distribution of fees changed over time. In addition to the fact that there was a sharp discontinuity in the fees charged in September 1794 (when all but zero fees and 1s 6d fees were abolished) there was clearly movement within fee

30 This is clear from marginalia in the fee books. On a number of occasions in the 1750s it was recorded that churchwardens were paying a flat fee of £2 ‘for Registering the Poor Children Baptized in his year of office’. COWAC Accession 419/210, May 1752–5. This is confirmed by churchwardens’ accounts. Thus an entry in 1750 reads ‘To the Revd Mr Taylor for Registering the Poor Children baptized in the Year 1750’, F115/29. For a similar payment in 1767/8, see F143/44–46.

31 1777/8, ‘Paid the Revd Mr Este for Registring & Christening the Infant Poor at the Workhouse a years Salary due Midsummer £2 2s’, COWAC F166/28. See also, F157/36; F165/26; F163/17; F160/25.

Figure 4 Percentage non-parishioners baptizing children in St Martin in the Fields



Source: COWAC Baptism Fee Books, Accession 419/210–227.

categories before then. To illustrate this, Figure 3 displays the percentage composition of the fees charged between 1751 and 1794. For the sake of clarity the figure includes only fees of 0d, 18d, 42d, 60–63d, 126d and 252d. These latter fees comprised 96 per cent of the fees charged during the period.

Until the mid 1770s the fees charged remained roughly in proportion albeit with a suggestion that 18d fees were becoming more common. The year 1777 marks a dramatic change, with the swift abolition of the 42d baptism fee and its replacement (seemingly) with the 5s (or so) fee. The 18d fee became increasingly common at the same time. Another change is observable in 1783, when the 5s fee starts to decline and zero fees increase. Finally there is a sharp drop in zero fees in 1790 and a commensurate increase in 18d fees. In September 1794 or thereabouts all fees other than 18d fees and zero fees were no longer recorded as being charged.

How are we to understand these movements in the distribution of fees charged? The 1794 move to a payment of 1s 6d or nothing produced a fee structure similar to that uncovered in London by the Parliamentary Select Committee on Parochial Registration in 1833. Witnesses quoted 1s 6d or thereabouts as the standard baptism fee ‘to the registry’ in London parishes. No higher fees were reported.<sup>32</sup> The growth in zero fees which paralleled the falling popularity of the 5s fee is explained by the fact that ‘home

32 *Committee on Parochial Registration*, p. 22 (St Pancras: 1s for the Vicar ‘and a little more goes to the parish clerk’), p. 98 (St Giles in the Fields and St George Bloomsbury: 1s 6d), p. 110 (St Saviour’s Southwark: 1s), p. 111 (Bethnal Green: 1s 6d), p. 122 (Bermondsey: 10d).

christenings' were increasingly charged no fee at all from March 1784. From August 1794 home christenings were always free (which may mean that no fee was formally recorded, rather than an excuse on grounds of poverty). To date there is no evidence about why this apparent reduction in fee after 1794 took place. Given that similar fees were being charged across London by 1833, the most likely explanation is external official intervention but no trace of this has yet come to light. The drastic reduction in baptism fees in 1794 had an immediate impact on the proportion of christenings recorded for the children of non parishioners. Until the fee reduction it was rare for more than one percent of all baptisms to be of outsiders. After 1794 the percentages climbed dramatically (Figure 4).

Local policy changes also explain the fee movements in the 1770s and early 1780s and are exceptionally revealing about baptism practices.<sup>33</sup>

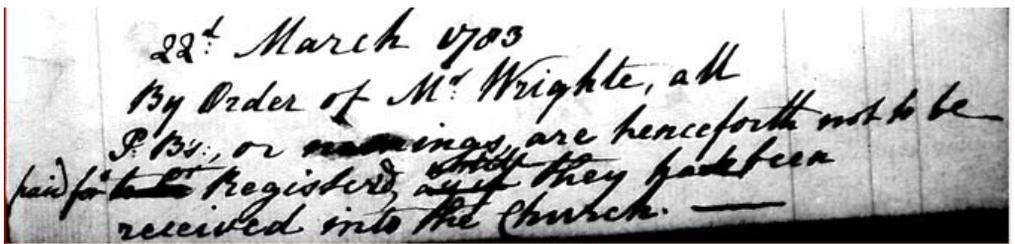
### Clerical policy and private baptism in St Martin in the Fields

The notion that private baptisms conferred a name explains why such things were sometimes given the alternative description of 'namings'. This is exactly how they were represented in an intriguing order that appears in the Baptism fee book for 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1783 and which is depicted in Figure 5.

This order has clearly been corrected and is oddly written. The second line extends to the right hand part of the page, and the second line extends awkwardly into the left hand margin. Three sets of words of have crossed out, for no apparent reason. This order, we think, is actually a good example of hasty official back-tracking. If one accepts the corrections, then the passage currently reads, and would have read *after* the corrections: 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1783

By order of Mr: Wrighte, all P: B's:, or namings, are henceforth not to be paid for ~~to be~~ or Registered ~~as if~~ until they [have] been received into the Church

Figure 5 Order of Mr Wrighte regarding private baptisms or naming, 1783



22<sup>d</sup> March 1783  
By Order of M<sup>r</sup>: Wrighte, all  
P: B's:, or namings, are henceforth not to be  
paid for ~~to be~~ Registered ~~as if~~ until they have been  
received into the Church. —

Source: COWAC Accession 419/221, 22nd March 1783.

33 Exactly the same responsiveness to lowered fees can be seen in burial records, see J. Boulton, 'Traffic in Corpses and the Commodification of Burial in Georgian London', *Continuity and Change*, 29 (2014), pp. 20–34.

However, if we take off the matter extended into the right and left hand margins, restore the crossed out matter, and remove substituted words we get back to an original order:

22<sup>nd</sup> March 1783

By order of Mr: Wrighte, all P: B's., or namings, are henceforth [to be] Registered [as if] they ha[d] been received into the Church

The *corrected* order therefore actually represents a local policy *reversal* relating to the treatment of private baptisms. The *original* order on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1783 suggests a policy change which would have elevated private baptisms to the same status as public baptisms. This latter was precisely the kind of clerical compliance that had been attacked since the seventeenth century as subverting the rubric of the prayer book since it made nonsense of the public reception and acknowledgement of the new member of the communion of the Church of England.

In fact these conflicting orders were the direct result of a row between two local clergymen, William Boyer and William Wrighte. Boyer, who was dismissed following the dispute, described the events leading up to his dismissal in a highly partisan pamphlet, *Clerical Policy; or, A Short Account of the Impositions, Encroachments, and Regulations, of The Revd. William Wrighte, Clerk in Orders, of the Parish of St Martin in the Fields*.<sup>34</sup> This work provides us with a detailed commentary on the treatment of home and public baptisms for a vital ten-year period in the parish. It also explains some of the fee movements discussed above (Figure 3).

What does this pamphlet tell us about baptism fees? The fee hike in 1777 turns out to have been part of Wrighte's wider campaign to generate more personal income from the fees under his control. Shortly after his arrival in the parish (in 1777):

He found the fees for *home christenings*, 3s 6d (which is the common fee throughout London, Westminster, &c) but the Rev. Mr. Wrighte ordered that they should be 5s. very wisely judging it would be better<sup>35</sup>

The observable disappearance of the 3s. 6d. fee in 1777 (Figure 3 above) was thus a product of this order. Wrighte was also worried by the loss of income produced by children dying before public baptism:

But long before this [i.e. long before March 1783], the Rev. Mr. Wrighte had very wisely ordered, that the fee should be demanded at the time of the *private baptism*, perceiving that many children died without having any thing more than *private baptism*

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34 W. Boyer, *Clerical Policy; Or, A Short Account of the Impositions, Encroachments, and Regulations, of the Revd. William Wrighte, Clerk in Orders, of the Parish of St Martin in the Fields* (London, 1784), pp. 3–22. Jeremy Boulton is preparing an account of this pamphlet.

35 *Clerical Policy*, p. 13.

Wrighte was not apparently worried about children dying without *any* baptism. The problem for Wrighte, therefore, was how to persuade parishioners pay an up-front fee at the point of private baptism, rather than to risk a wait for a public reception/baptism and registration. Wrighte's solution led directly to the row with Boyer, and the latter's dismissal. On 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1783 a:

dispute happened between the Rev. M. Wrighte and Mr. Boyer, about the register; the Rev. Mr. Wrighte insisted, that *private baptisms* should be registered, the same as *christenings* ... This was to give the Rev. Mr. Wrighte a more plausible pretence for demanding the *fees* at that time; the *fees* are for *registering*, though commonly called the *christening fees*.

This thus explains the original, *uncorrected* order, of precisely the same date, found in the baptism fee books (see above Figure 5). *If* that order had been followed through, the baptism fee books would have included home baptisms masquerading as public christenings. However, Wrighte's order was resisted. Boyer continued:

altho' the *Rev. Mr. Wrighte* was obeyed in the money's being frequently then demanded, it was impossible for *Mr. Boyer* so far to debase the register, while in his care, as to enter *private baptisms*. For had that been done, many children (according to the register) would have appeared to have been christened, though they never had. And likewise duplicates, of the same thing must frequently have happened; as for instance, *John Nokes* of *Richard* and *Mary*, baptized on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 1783, and *John Nokes* of *Richard* and *Mary*, baptized on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 1783; making it appear by the register, that the same persons must have had twins, baptized at different times by the same name, and that likewise without any specification of which was the first born.<sup>36</sup>

Boyer's refusal thus explains the countermanded order in Figure 5. The corrected order represented a *return* to normal practice, whereby private baptisms 'or namings' were not paid for or registered *until* the infants had been officially received into the church. This raises the possibility that there may have been some periods in the parish when Wrighte's type of registration policy *was* followed, as it sometimes was elsewhere.<sup>37</sup>

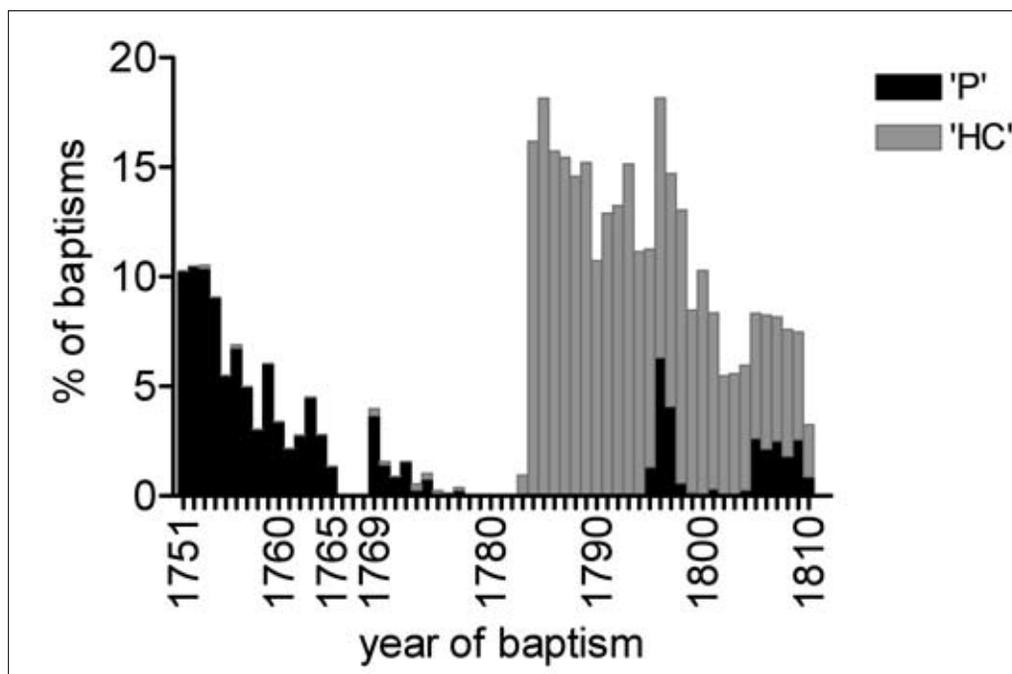
Figure 6 sets out the percentage of baptisms in the parish which were annotated as P or HC events. It is clear that the dismissal of Boyer coincided with a surge in the recording of home christenings—recorded as 'HC'—which reached 19 per cent of all baptisms in 1784–5, the percentages peak again at that figure in 1796 a time when 'P' labels had

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36 For these quotes see *Clerical Policy*, pp. 12–14.

37 Tjondrowardojo, 'Stories Baptismal Registers Told', p. 186. See also, Wrigley, 'Births and Baptisms', p. 283, n. 9. In Hawkshead, Lancashire the baptism registers recorded a variety of types of baptism, including private baptisms, public receptions of privately baptised infants and occasionally two entries for the same infant, describing first its private and later its public baptism: K. Leonard (ed.), *A Register of Births and Baptisms, Deaths and Burials 1788–1812 and of Baptisms and Burials 1813–1837 in the parish of Hawkshead, Lancashire* (London, 1971), p. 12.

Figure 6 Percentage of baptisms described as privately baptized ('P') or as home christenings ('HC'), 1751–1810



Source: COWAC Baptism Fee Books, Accession 419/210-227; St Martin in the Fields Baptism and Burial Registers.

reappeared in the books. Before 1783 the percentage of private baptisms is very different. They are all labelled as 'P' and the percentages are much smaller. Few if any are recorded in the 1770s, but up to 10 per cent of christenings are so labelled in 1752–3. Examination of the intervals between birth and baptism and the fate of infants whose baptisms were labelled 'P' before c.1780 suggests that in this period 'P' referred to 'emergency' baptisms of sickly infants. These baptisms occurred fairly shortly after birth and were often followed closely by the death of the infant.<sup>38</sup> In this case the recorded baptism may well refer to the private naming event. However from 1783 baptisms marked as 'HC' and 'P' were almost identical to other baptisms in the lengthiness of the delay between birth and baptism. Given the evidence presented here regarding local policy and the paucity of burials of unbaptised infants it seems likely that 'HC' baptisms (and 'P' baptisms after 1794) referred to the formal reception into the church of a prior private baptism. In addition to the complexities surrounding interpretation of these labels we cannot of course be sure that the absence of a label means that home baptism did *not* take place. Reference to Figure 3

38 In the period 1752–67, when the annotation 'P' was common, of 1,359 infant burials that could be linked to a baptism, 29 per cent of those dying baptised within a week of birth were linked to 'P'-type baptisms, compared with 15 per cent of those aged 7–29 days, and 6 per cent of those aged 1–11 months at burial.

(percentage level of fee charged over time) and the underlying data in Figure 2 (percentage distribution of fees) would (assuming that *all* fees over 18d represented a 'home christening' of some sort) suggests that private baptisms must have taken place in at least 31 per cent of *all* christening 'processes' in the parish between 1751 and 1794. Moreover if we allow for 545 cases in this period when labelled home christenings were *not* charged fees, we get an overall figure of 33 per cent. Therefore the fees charged alone suggest that something like one third of *all* registered baptisms involved a private ceremony of some sort prior to, or instead of, a standard public ceremony. If this estimate is reasonable, it must explain why so few infant children died without given forenames in the burial register. Both the sick *and many others* had already undergone a 'naming' even though they died before a registered public baptism.

### Conclusion

All this requires a reconsideration of the nature of the baptisms recorded in parish registers. It would be quite wrong to think that these were all christenings at the font carried out by a local cleric. In fact a significant proportion *must* have been either home baptisms registered as public baptisms, or registrations of the public reception of children *previously baptized at home*. The birth-baptism interval is therefore NOT necessarily measuring the interval between birth and *baptism*. It is often measuring the interval between birth and the public reception of a previous private baptism.<sup>39</sup> One reason that parents were so relaxed about baptizing their children in the eighteenth century was because a growing number had persuaded a cleric of some description to baptize their children at home on social as well as medical grounds, the later church ceremony then being for legal or perhaps status reasons. This widespread practice surely explains why the *burial* register of St Martin in the Fields contains so few unbaptised children in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, despite the dramatic lengthening of the 'birth-baptism' interval (see above Table 1).

Wrigley and Schofield noted long ago that:

when a child died young its death often occurred before baptism, and even in parishes where home baptism was widely practiced such baptisms were often not entered in the register unless the child lived long enough to be received into the church by public ceremony<sup>40</sup>

The point made in the present paper is that if private baptisms had *not* been widespread, cases of dead infants lacking forenames would surely have been a lot more commonly found in the burial books, given the growing proportion of parents who delayed public

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39 In the case of St Ann, Manchester, the baptism register explicitly recorded the public reception of private baptisms. For the period 1737–1743 entries also included the date of private baptism: the average interval between a private baptism and its public registration was 21 days: Manchester Central Library microfilm MFPR 2157.

40 Wrigley and Schofield, *Population History of England*, pp. 96–97 and n. 15

baptism, often for months, in the later eighteenth century. Krause cited two examples of high numbers of burials of unbaptised infants in the early nineteenth century, both in rural Bedfordshire parishes where Baptists opposed to infant baptism were numerous.<sup>41</sup> However we know of no study anywhere that has reported an *increase* in the proportion of explicitly *unbaptised* children in burial registers during the *eighteenth* century. Nor is there any study we know of that has found growing numbers of children buried lacking forenames.<sup>42</sup> Wrigley and Schofield assumed that there was an increasing reluctance on the part of clerics to bury unbaptised children over the course of the eighteenth century.<sup>43</sup> If so this could account for the absence of large numbers of unbaptised infants in burial records even if the actual incidence of death before baptism increased. However the sextons' books of St. Martin in the Fields recorded the burials of baptized and unbaptised (usually 'stillborn') infants and appear to be a remarkably complete record of burials in the parish. In this case there was no evidence of a rising trend in the numbers of stillborn or unnamed infant burials across the period when the birth-baptism interval rose so markedly.<sup>44</sup> All this therefore suggests that the lengthening birth-baptism interval in the eighteenth-century must have been accompanied by a substantial growth in the number of home or private christenings. This is entirely consistent with the evidence for such a rise documented in contemporary comment and in some baptism registers.<sup>45</sup> It is, in this literal sense therefore, quite wrong, to write (as many historical demographers still do), that high infant mortality rates and lengthening birth-baptism intervals produced a significant risk of 'dying before baptism'. The significant risk was that such children died before a *public* baptism or public reception of a private baptism. In the event—apart from those who died within a couple of days of birth—very few children died before baptism in Georgian London. Therefore while the lengthening of the birth-baptism interval contributed to the increasing under-registration of births and baptisms it had no necessary knock-on effect on the registration of burials. A question for future researchers is whether this is also true for most parishes in England.

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41 Krause, 'Changing Adequacy', 391–2.

42 Indeed Wrigley and colleagues reported a reduction in the proportion of infant burials that could not be linked to a corresponding baptism entry in the eighteenth century; Wrigley et al., *English Population History*, pp. 112–4. Although these 'dummy baptisms' in the Cambridge Group family reconstitutions are sometimes referred to as unbaptised infants in fact almost all of these infants possessed forenames at burial, making it likely that these were burials of infants privately baptised but not yet registered in the baptism register (Cambridge Group family reconstitutions, archive of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure; see also Wrigley, 'Births and Baptisms', p. 286).

43 Wrigley, 'Births and Baptisms', p. 289 (fn.16); Wrigley and Schofield, *Population History of England*, p. 99.

44 Davenport, unpubl..

45 See above.

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