

The hearth tax and the distribution of population and prosperity in Surrey

by A G PARTON

'The good old dames, whenever they the chimney men espied
Unto their nooks they haste away, their pots and pipkin hide,
There is not one old dame in ten and search the nation through
But if you speak of chimney men will spare a curse or two.'

Prior to the first national census of 1801 our sources for the study of population consist largely of surrogates whose purpose was originally other than the enumeration of the people. A variety of these sources survive such as the various muster rolls, church visitation records and a range of taxes.² More localised demographic information can be gleaned from the parish registers as many small scale studies and now the country-wide work of the Cambridge Group for the study of Population have shown.³

The hearth tax was first introduced by Charles II in 1662 and finally abolished twenty-seven years later. Meekings succinctly summarized the principal ingredients of the tax, citing the Speaker of the House of Commons, '... all houses in this Kingdom which are not worth in yearly value below twenty shillings and not inhabited by Almsmen must pay your Majesty two shillings yearly for every chimney hearth forever.'⁴ A number of assessments for the tax have survived for many counties and they constituted the basis for the early demographer, Gregory King's, estimates of the population of the country towards the end of the 17th century. King used a number of multipliers to arrive at his population figures based upon his observation of variations in family size. Whilst one can criticize this approach for its subjectivity, it does have the advantage of being more or less contemporary to the data source.⁵

More recently a number of studies have been made of population in the 17th century using the hearth tax returns.⁶ Some writers have used a multiplier, which is an estimate of the number of people then constituting a household, to arrive at estimates of the population for a given place. This approach, not unreasonably, assumes that in most cases each entry in the hearth tax return represents a household. It is thus possible to reconstruct the size of settlements relative to each other.

The returns record the numbers of hearths for each person assessed; larger houses would have more hearths and so it is also possible to discover in general terms the distribution of wealth. Butlin suggested that houses with fewer than three hearths were below the comfortable level, those with more than ten in a state of considerable affluence.⁷ The principal grounds for exemption from payment of the tax were poverty, and since those so excused are recorded, some indication of the extent of poverty can be gleaned from these records. Meekings summarizes exemptions under four heads:

1. those who paid neither church nor poor rate
2. persons in houses worth less than twenty shillings a year or with an income of less than ten pounds a year
3. charitable institutions with incomes of less than one hundred pounds a year
4. hearths of an industrial character.⁸

A third use of the returns has been explored by Meirion-Jones who used them in conjunction with field examination of surviving 17th century buildings to provide the basis for a study of vernacular architecture.⁹ Meirion-Jones suggests that in north-east Hampshire the two-roomed

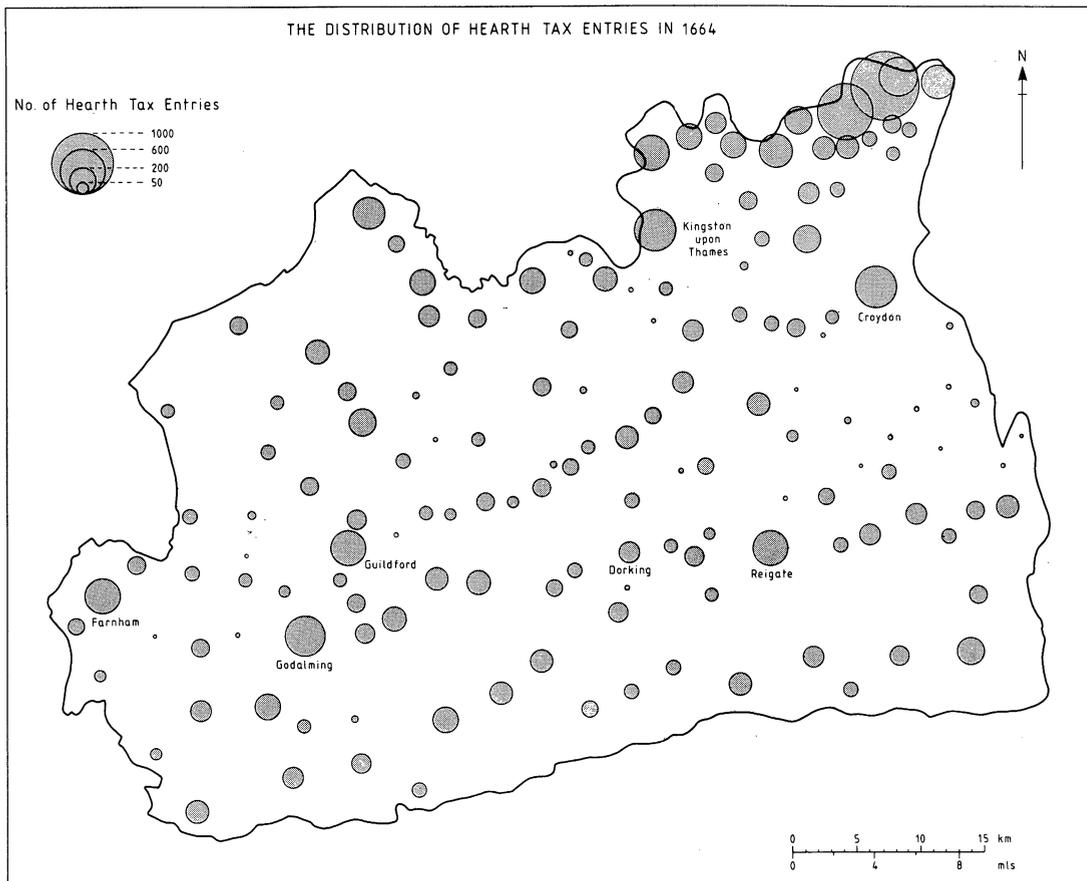


Fig 1. The distribution of hearth tax entries in 1664

cottage with one or two hearths was the norm. It is now some time since Meekings' excellent edition of the Surrey hearth tax was published by the Surrey Record Society. His introduction is of more than local significance and has been referred to by many writers analysing the returns for other counties. Meekings was primarily concerned, however, to provide an alphabetical directory of the occupiers of houses in the county. He concerns himself only briefly with the records as evidence of population. This paper is concerned with the value of the hearth tax as a source for the study of distributive aspects of Surrey's population in 1664. The assessments for this year have the advantage of being fairly complete in their geographical coverage. Meekings considered that the 1664 assessments, following as they did a revising Act of 1663 by which two people were appointed to check the Constables' assessments, were carefully compiled, '... for Surrey the Petty Constables seem to have been laborious and honest in their work.' Incentives to accuracy were provided in fines of £2 for false assessments and of £5 if the Constables failed to visit a house. Meekings' full introduction describes in detail the administrative background to the records which it would be tedious to rehearse here. Then follows the presentation of the assessments in alphabetical order of persons assessed. For the purposes of this article the data was first rearranged by place. Once this was achieved it was possible to examine the distribution of population and to make a tentative assessment of the concentrations of affluence and poverty and the predominant sizes of houses in Surrey in 1664.

The map of the distribution of Hearth Tax entries (fig 1) suggests a fairly even scatter of

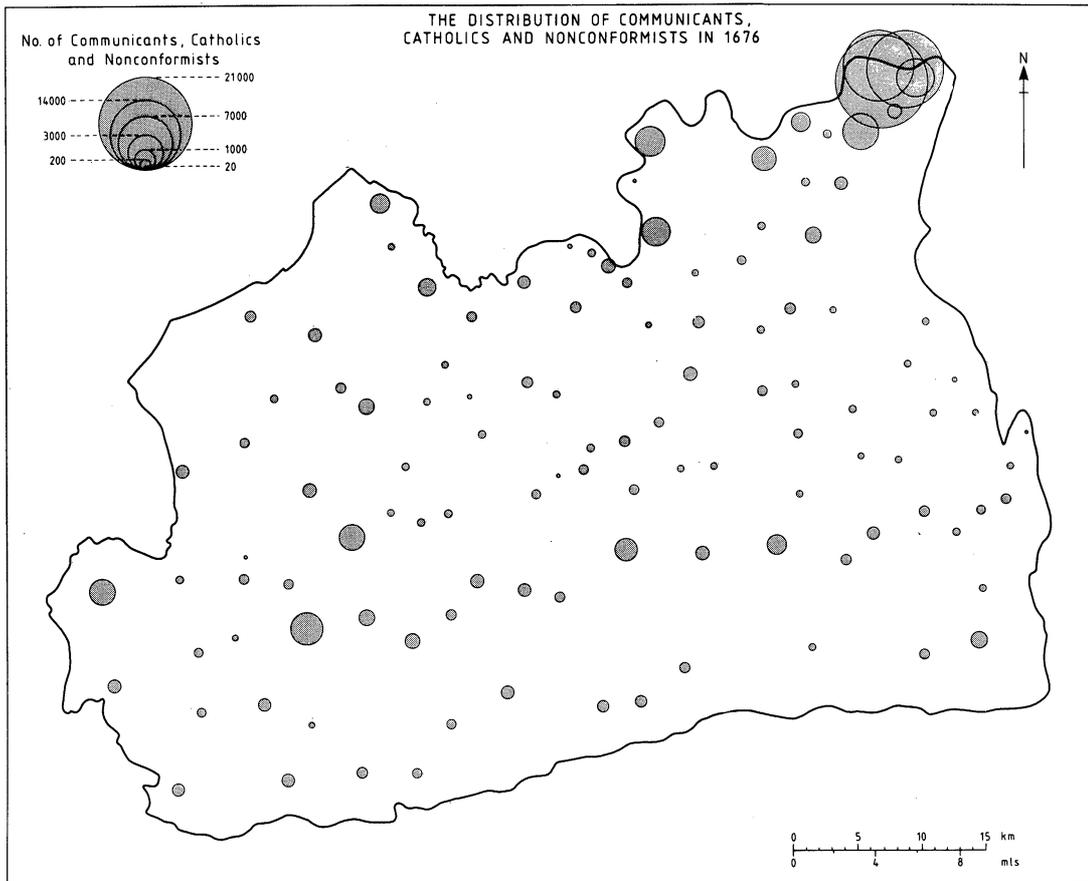


Fig 2. Numbers of Communicants, Catholics and Nonconformists in 1676

households in rural areas, the median number of entries being 56.5, with very few places containing more than 100 households, although these values take no account of the differing sizes of the areas recorded. It is interesting to compare this picture with that provided by the first Census in 1801 when the median size of settlement was 99 houses. This suggests that there was a fairly general increase in the population across the county during this period. At the other end of the scale most of the country towns with the exception of Haslemere and Leatherhead were of similar size, a pattern which is confirmed at 1801. The Thameside parishes exhibited a very marked concentration of households and were sharply differentiated from all other settlements in the county. Southwark and the rest of the bridgehead area consisted of a dense maze of industrial and residential buildings which, even in the 1660s extended along the Thames from Rotherhithe towards Lambeth and south to St George's Fields.

Only twelve years after the 1664 hearth tax a return of Communicants, Catholics, and Non-conformists was collected on a parish basis. A good deal of doubt has been expressed about this 'Compton Census', so called because it was drawn up by Henry Compton, Bishop of London.¹⁰ Only adults over sixteen years were included, making it an incomplete count, a problem compounded by an under-registration of both Catholics and Non-conformists, understandable at a time when religious toleration was still a relative novelty. The data is presented here as a comparison with the picture given by the hearth tax of the relative size of settlements. As fig 2 shows the Compton returns suggest very similar geographical variations in the relative

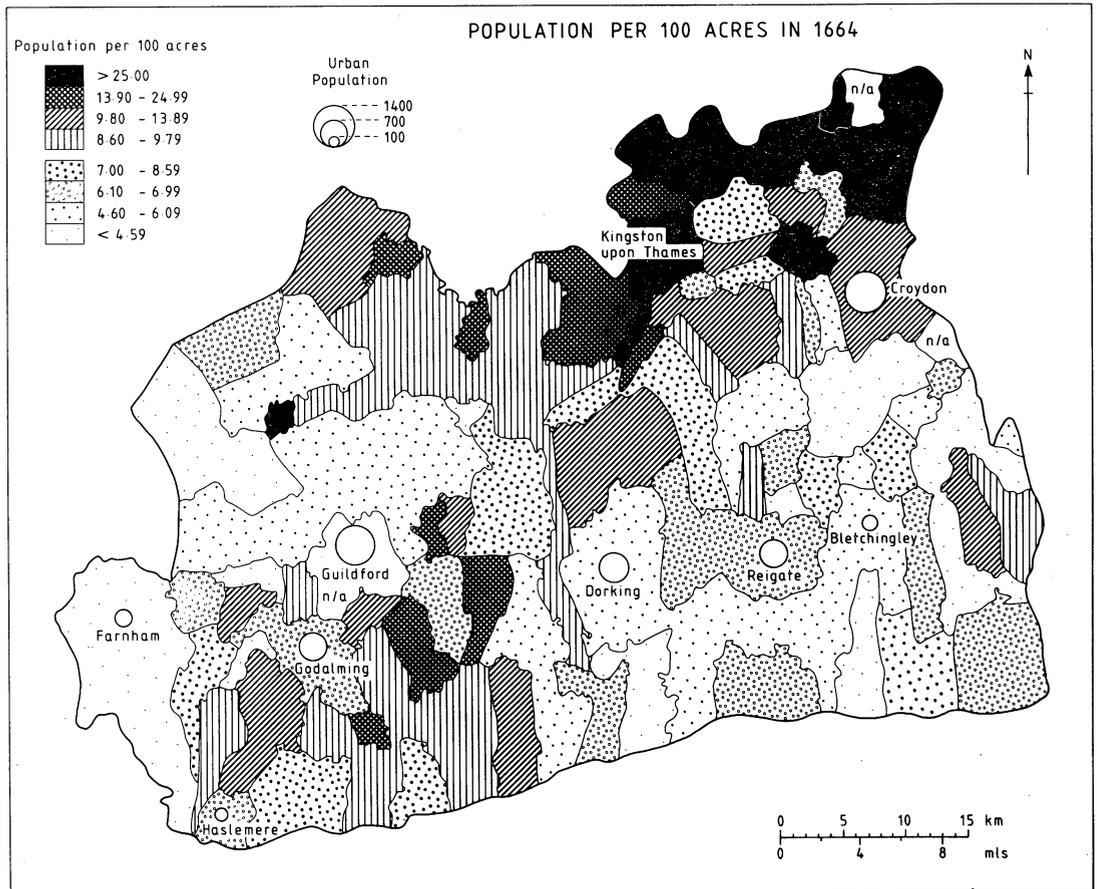


Fig 3. Population distribution in 1664

size of settlements. Thus the dominance of the Southwark area, the larger villages of the Thameside districts and a fairly even distribution of people elsewhere is confirmed.

However, no account has so far been taken of either the difference in the size of the areas enumerated or of variations in the numbers of people contained in the households recorded. If multipliers are applied to the hearth tax entries a number of interesting regional differences appear. King suggested that within the City of London there were on average 5.4 people per house compared with 4.4 for the out-parishes. Meekings suggests a greater diversity. His analysis of a hearth tax exemption list for Lambeth Marsh, one of many which show details of dependants, produces a figure of at least 4.33 for the less densely peopled suburban places and he suggests 6 for the Southwark area. Since Meekings' figures are based upon a contemporary data source rather than upon opinion these have been used for the parishes near to London. Elsewhere King's figures of 4.3 for market towns and 4 for villages and hamlets have formed the basis for the reconstruction of population distribution shown in fig 3. In compiling this figure, account was also taken of the differences in the size of the parishes, the resultant data being mapped by octile.¹¹ Where possible the urban populations were abstracted from the parish totals and represented separately, thus leaving the remaining rural population to be shown in the same way as other rural areas.

The districts with high densities were those along the Thames where the influence of London was strong and where more intensive agriculture was followed. A second district with higher

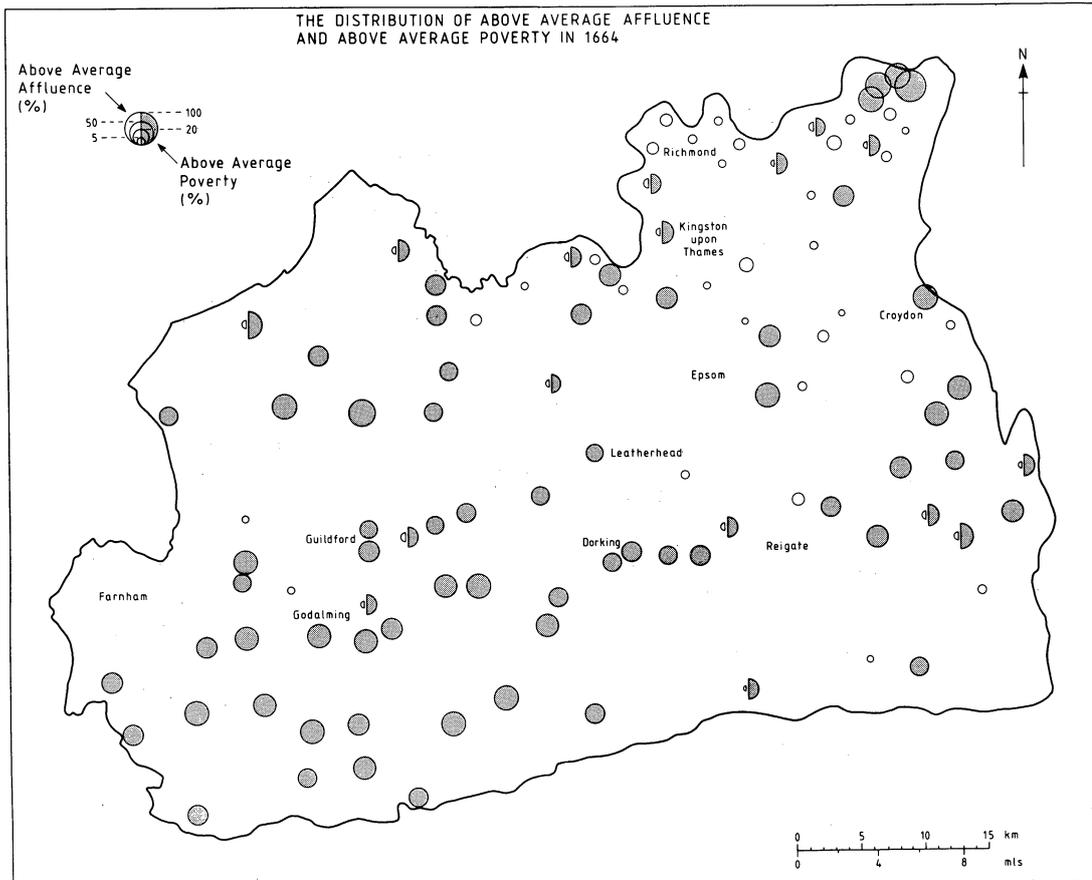


Fig 4. The distribution of above average affluence and above average poverty in 1664

densities lay in the south-west; it might be speculated that this area of light soils which were in the van of agricultural improvement in the eighteenth century was already exhibiting signs of change which might have been reflected in larger populations. The parishes with lower population densities fall into three quite well differentiated zones; the North Downs dip slope, the Weald and the parishes fringing the western heaths. The Board of Agriculture Reporters in 1794 and 1809 certainly identified the latter two areas as the parts of Surrey least developed agriculturally. It is tempting to adopt a deterministic explanation for their lower population densities in terms of their less well developed and lower labour demand agricultural systems. The heathlands were largely used for extensive sheep grazing whilst the Weald clay farmers were chiefly concerned with the production of wheat and oats to the neglect of livestock husbandry and associated fodder crops. Both areas used less labour than the mixed farming systems of central and north Surrey. The hearth tax statistics, reworked in this fashion arguably constitute a weak base for such statements, but at least they provide a framework for more detailed study and the opportunity to establish testable hypotheses.

The information about size of buildings which can be inferred from the number of hearths recorded in each entry and the numbers of exemptions gives an indication of the distribution of wealth and poverty (fig 4). Above average affluence is based upon the numbers of households having ten or more hearths, the average per parish being 2.84 households. Proportional circles were then constructed on the basis of the percentage of households above this average figure, the

larger the unshaded circles the greater the number of households with ten or more hearths. It is no surprise to find the concentrations of larger buildings in the north of Surrey, already wealthy Londoners were living in Richmond, Barnes and Putney. Excepting these areas and a few isolated instances along the northern fringe of the Downs, Surrey does not generally appear at 1664, to have attracted the affluent in large numbers as was to be the case in the following two hundred years. The same technique was applied to those exempt from paying the tax, the circles being proportional to above average poverty. The pattern would suggest that poverty was surprisingly widespread, reflecting the distribution of population quite faithfully. This might suggest that during the mid-17th century there was a fairly consistent stratum of the less well off. In the London area the greatest concentrations of poverty were evidenced, often cheek by jowl with above average numbers of the wealthy. Apart from these extremes the most common sizes of houses were those with one or two hearths, thus tending to confirm the findings of Meirion-Jones for north Hampshire.

Whilst one may have reservations about the accuracy and reliability of the hearth tax returns in detail, they constitute a rich source for the reconstruction of population distribution and to some extent permit a glimpse of the geographical variations in well-being during the latter half of the 17th century.

'A house she hath, its made of such good fashion.
The tenant ne'er shall pay for reparation;
Nor will her landlord ever raise her rent,
Or turn her out of door for non-payment,
From chimney men too, this cell is free,
To such a house who would not tenant be.'¹²

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Quoted 1911 by a correspondent to *Archaeol Aeliana*, 3 ser, 7
- 2 For a discussion of these sources see W B Stephens, 1973, *Sources for English local history*, 23-39
- 3 E A Wrigley, and R S Schofield, 1981, *The population history of England 1541-1871: a reconstruction*
- 4 C A F Meekings, 1940, *The Surrey hearth tax, 1664*, SyRS, 17
- 5 D V Glass, 1950, Gregory King's estimates of the population of England and Wales, *Population Stud*, 3, 4, reprinted in D V Glass, & D E C Eversley (eds), 1965 *Population in history*, 183-220
- 6 J D Chambers, 1959 The Vale of Trent 1670-1800, *Econ Hist Rev*, Supp 3; R Howell, 1964, Short guides to records, 7, Hearth tax returns, *History*, 49
- 7 R A Butlin, 1965, The population of Dublin in the late seventeenth century, *Irish Geogr*, 5
- 8 C A F Meekings, *op cit* in note 4
- 9 G Meirion-Jones, 1971, The use of the hearth tax returns and vernacular architecture in settlement studies, *Trans Ins Brit Geogr*, 53
- 10 The Compton Return is held at the William Salt Library, Stafford; Salt Manuscript, 33
- 11 The octile is a way of objectively dividing a set of data into eight parts. This is achieved by first placing the population densities in rank order, from highest to lowest. The first octile thus includes the top 12½% of parishes in 1664 in respect of their population.
- 12 Epitaph of Rebeca Rogers of Folkestone who died August 22, 1688, *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 1911, 3 ser, 7