

# Sources for 17th century population estimates – a critique

by JEREMY GREENWOOD

The demographic history of the 17th century has attracted an ever-widening band of researchers, and there are a number of well-known sources generally available for most parishes. However, these need to be handled with care and circumspection, and none more than the so-called 'Compton census' of 1676<sup>1</sup> which is actually no more than an archiepiscopal variation of the routine episcopal visitation returns, of which a number of more detailed examples exist for Surrey for the 18th century.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately Dr Parton in his article<sup>3</sup> has not only failed to assess his source material critically but has also committed a number of methodological errors which vitiate his potentially informative work.<sup>4</sup>

Dr Parton has based his article upon sources, neither of which are original.<sup>5</sup> There can be no excuse for not using the hearth tax returns either in their original form or even in Meekings's transcripts,<sup>6</sup> rather than in the published conflated version which is difficult to convert back to a parish basis, being an alphabetical list of those assessed in the whole county. Because of this conflation a number of assessments are duplicated. Reigate Priory, for example, with 32 hearths, appears against the names of both Lord Monson and the Countess of Peterborough. Moreover, there are good reasons for using the 1669 collectors' lists rather than the 1664 ones as they are both more complete and more informative.<sup>7</sup>

The dangers of taking the hearth tax evidence as a simple indicator of social structure are considerable, since the deceptively straightforward correlation between wealth and the numbers of hearths ignores the complexities introduced by occupational variation and life cycle. Further, changing local assessment practices make comparisons between towns, or even over time, of doubtful value. Similarly, Marshall has commented that 'the totals derived from hearth tax multipliers alone can be wildly inconsistent'.<sup>8</sup>

It is not entirely clear which classes are being treated as 'poor' in the Surrey returns, as the qualifications for exemption were either those with a low income or those in receipt of poor relief.<sup>9</sup> A high percentage of exempt households is not necessarily a sign of poverty, but rather of economic expansion; only a place with a burgeoning economy could sustain the poor who readily migrated to such places in order to sustain their livelihoods.<sup>10</sup> As Petchey has shown for Essex, the towns that grew most rapidly had the highest percentage of paupers.<sup>11</sup> The only exempt industrial hearths in Surrey seem to have been smiths' forges, even though the original exemption applied to dyers' and fullers' furnaces. In 1670, out of a total 53,904 chargeable and 14,948 exempt hearths for the whole county of Surrey, only 59 smiths' forges were listed.

There can be no doubt that the unit of assessment is the household and not the house.<sup>13</sup> Closer examination of Gregory King's works would have shown that not only was he concerned with houses and not households, but that his figures show a considerable variation in the mean number of inhabitants per house in different types of settlements. Although national mean household sizes have been calculated, it is inappropriate to use the same multiplier for all types of parish, especially in Surrey where there was probably a greater range of parish type than almost any other county.<sup>14</sup> The considerable variation in mean household size in different places has been shown by Laslett, Wall and others, demonstrating the problems that can occur if any universal multiplier is used.<sup>15</sup> Also Boulton has shown the wide variation in household size within a single parish, Southwark.<sup>16</sup>

The document usually known as the 'Compton census' is an 18th century compilation from documents for the Archdeaconry of Surrey that no longer exist.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately Dr Parton has conspicuously failed either to notice or to remark that not only does the William Salt Library MS not include those parishes in Surrey which lie within the peculiar of the Archbishop of Canterbury, but also that the original returns exist for these parishes.<sup>18</sup> In answer to questions about the number of inhabitants, dissenters and papists, incumbents of parishes within the

peculiar were required to return a particular account (children under the age of 16 omitted).<sup>19</sup> Since the original returns frequently give the answers to the questions about papists and dissenters merely as number of families (including halves!) and as there is no information about how these figures were transformed into numbers of individuals, this fact alone casts considerable doubt on the accuracy of the 'census'.

The problems of using the Compton census have been summarised by Wrigley & Schofield<sup>20</sup> and Dobson and Chalklin have examined in detail the mechanism of the survey and the Salt document itself.<sup>21</sup>

In view of the known deficiencies of the sources and their closeness in date, a number of writers have suggested methods where they can be used in conjunction and not in isolation to test the accuracy of each.<sup>22</sup> The work of D G Edwards, in particular, provides an excellent model for the handling of these sources which, had it been applied to Surrey, would have provided more meaningful results.<sup>23</sup>

The whole question of the use of multipliers for calculating the total population of communities from a source enumerating adults only in the late 17th and early 18th centuries has recently been summarised by Stapleton who concludes that the use of a multiplier of 1.5 for the Compton census and 4.3 for the Hearth tax is more valid than the ones used by Dr Parton.<sup>24</sup>

## REFERENCES

*For abbreviations, see list at beginning of volume*

- 1 William Salt Library, Stafford, SMS 33; for a photocopy see SRO 255/1.
- 2 Cf Hampshire Diocesan Records, Record Office B/2/A: Bishops' Visitation returns, Archdeaconry of Surrey, especially those for 1725 and 1788.
- 3 Parton, A G, 1984 The hearth tax and the distribution of population and prosperity in Surrey, *SyAC*, **75**, 155–60.
- 4 Compare the more critical approach of Edwards, D G, 1982 Population in Derbyshire in the reign of King Charles II: the use of hearth tax assessments and the Compton census, *Derbyshire Archaeol J*, **102**, 106–17.
- 5 Meekings, C A F, 1940 *The Surrey hearth tax 1664*, *SyRS*, **17**; see also op cit in note 1.
- 6 In the SyAS Library, Guildford.
- 7 PRO E 179/258/4: dated 1669 in the PRO list, but considered earlier by Meekings (op cit in note 5). These are more complete than the published lists and give more information as they have separate columns for empty and demolished houses and exempt hearths.
- 8 Marshall, J D, 1983 The rise and transformation of the Cumbrian market town, 1660–2 1900, *Northern Hist*, **19**, 128–210; see also Ellis, J, 1984 A dynamic society: social relations in Newcastle-upon-Tyne: 1660–1760, in P Clark (ed), *The transformation of English provincial towns 1600–1800*; Spufford, M, 1961 The significance of the Cambridgeshire Hearth tax, *Proc Cambridgeshire Antiq Soc*, **55**, 53–64; Styles, P, 1962 Social structure of the Kington hundred in the reign of Charles II, *Trans Birmingham Archaeol Soc*, **7**, 96–118. Other authors have declared that it is risky to estimate population from the hearth tax records: Edwards, D G (ed), 1982 *Derbyshire hearth tax assessments 1662–1670*, Derbyshire Record Soc, **7**, xlii; Fieldhouse, R, 1977 *Hearth tax and other records*, in A Rogers (ed), *Group projects in local history*.
- 9 Patten, J, 1971 The hearth taxes 1662–1689, *Local Population Stud*, **7**, 14–25; Marshall, L M, 1936 The levying of the hearth tax 1662–88, *English Hist Rev*, **51**, 628–46.
- 10 Clark, P & Slack, P, 1976 *English towns in transition 1500–1700*, 113–14.
- 11 Petchey, W J, 1972 *The Borough of Malden, 1500–1688*, unpublished PhD thesis, Univ Leicester, 42.
- 12 PRO E 360/159.
- 13 Patten, J, 1978 Population distribution in Norfolk and Suffolk during the 16th and 17th centuries, *Trans Inst Brit Geog*, **65**, 45–66; Arkell, T, 1982 Multiplying factors for estimating population totals from the hearth tax, *Local Population Stud*, **28**, 51–7.
- 14 Glass, D V, 1965 Two papers on Gregory King, in D V Glass & D E C Eversley (eds), *Population in history*; Bradley, L & Schofield, R S, 1968 Estimates of population size and the hearth tax, *Local Population Stud*, **1**, 30–4.
- 15 Laslett, P, 1972 Mean household size in England since the 16th century, in P Laslett & R Wall (eds), *Household and family in past time*; Wrigley, E A & Schofield, R S, 1981 *The population history of England, 1541–1871: a reconstruction*, 567–70; Wall, R, 1980 Regional and temporal variations in English household size from 1650, in J Hobcraft & P Rees (eds) *Regional demographic development*; Spufford, M, 1974 *Contrasting communities*, 39–45; Goose, N, 1980 Household size and structure in early Stuart Cambridge, *Social Hist*, **5**, 347; Drake, M, 1974 *Historical demography: problems and projects*, 82.
- 16 Boulton, J P, 1983 *The social and economic structure of Southwark in the early 17th century, with special reference to the Boroughside district of the parish of St Saviour, Southwark*, unpublished PhD thesis, Univ Cambridge.
- 17 Op cit in note 1.

- 18 Lambeth Palace Library Vp 1c/9 (for a transcript see SRO Z 55/2); for the comparative use of these sources, see Turner, D, 1978 A lost 17th century demographic crisis? The evidence of two counties, *Local Population Stud*, **21**, 11–18; Greenwood, J, 1979 A lost 17th century demographic crisis? Rural Surrey, *Local Population Stud*, **23**, 39–41.
- 19 Lambeth Palace Library MS 639 f 164.
- 20 Wrigley & Schofield, op cit in note 15, 570; see also Whiteman, E A D, 1973 The census that never was: a problem in authorship and dating, in E A D Whiteman (ed), *Statesmen, scholars and merchants: essays in 18th century history presented to Dame Lucy Sutherland*, 1–6.
- 21 Dobson, M, 1978 The original Compton census returns – the Shoreham deanery, *Archaeol Cantiana*, **94**, 61–74; Chalklin, C W, 1960 Compton census of 1676 for the dioceses of Canterbury and Winchester, in C W Chalklin (ed), *A 17th century miscellany*, 153–74.
- 22 Marshall, L M, 1934 The rural population of Bedfordshire 1671–1921, *Bedfordshire Hist Record Soc*, **16**, 10; Sogner, S, 1963–4 Aspects of the demographic situation in 17 parishes in Shropshire, *Population Stud*, **17**, 124–46; Huzel, J P, 1971 Population change in an East Sussex town: Lewes 1660–1800, *Sussex Indust Hist*, **3**, 2–19.
- 23 Edwards, op cit in note 4.
- 24 Stapleton, B, 1985 Age structure in the early 18th century, *Local Population Stud*, **34**, 27–34.

### Dr Parton replies

I have read with interest Mr Greenwood's comments upon my paper which appeared in the last issue of the Society's *Collections*. Mr Greenwood raises a number of interesting and important questions concerning the reliability of demographic data. My paper was concerned with the broad picture of population distribution and not with the fine detail. I do not believe that either the hearth tax or the Compton census, whichever source for these is used, will ever yield accurate population statistics.

The question of using multipliers is particularly fraught; it should be noted that I did not use King's figures for the parishes of South London; whether or not Gregory King used houses or householders is a matter of interpretation, although in rural areas this may be less of a problem.

Whilst in general I would share Mr Greenwood's scepticism concerning 17th century demographic information, in my opinion Meeking's original justification for using the 1664 assessments for the hearth tax remains valid. It is good to see that there is some interest in the county's population history; hopefully this will find further expression in published form.