

Some Comments on the Blakeney Census of 1871

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Synopsis: some 25 years ago the author copied out, on visits to the Public Record Office in London, the 1871 census returns for Blakeney. While looking for names to append to the family tree, other questions came to mind. What were the occupations of the residents? How many were born in Blakeney? How many children were there? Could comparison with the censuses of 1770 and 1971 help to illustrate long-term social changes? This article revisits notes made at the time, but it remains a collection of comments rather than a systematic demographic study.

Introduction

Most people with an interest in local history will know that censuses have been taken every ten years since 1801 and that detailed results from more than 100 years ago can now be seen without having to go the PRO – indeed a visit to the History Centre Blakeney is all that is required. Since 1841 all the enumerators' original lists have been preserved. From 1851 they contain the names of every person present, together with some standard information about them: principally their age, sex, marital status, birth-place and relationship to the head of the household. There is much of interest to be gleaned from these listings for each local community.

This article uses the 1871 census for Blakeney as an example and comments not on particular people but about the whole population and some groups within it.¹

Total Population

Cynical jokes about the value of statistics apply as much to census material as to any present-day figures. The issues lie mostly with definitions. An obvious example is 'How many people live in Blakeney?' Not an easy question to answer today when so many houses are used as second homes or as holiday accommodation. In 1871 there were probably no such houses at all but there were people away at the time of the census who are not listed in the returns. Conversely there were a few people visiting Blakeney on census night who were included in the Blakeney total.

Table 1 shows that 806 people were recorded, or 803 if visitors are excluded. If absent household heads ('Strays') are included the total rises to 830. In theory, other Blakeney residents temporarily away from the village (including those on ships) could be ascertained from the census records but this has not been done and no estimates have been made. Further comments about the 'total' population will refer either to the 'net' or the 'gross' population as appropriate.

Category	Males	Females	Total
Recorded population	372	434	806
Visitors	0	3	3
'Net' Population	372	431	803
Absent household heads	26	1	27
Other absent residents	?	?	?
Gross Population	398	432	830

Table 1. Blakeney 1871: Population totals.

Household size

The 'gross' population lived as 233 separate households, which means that the average household size was 3.6 people per household – perhaps nearer to 3.7 if all those absent could be included. The two-person household was the most common size (57) but over a quarter (62) had five or more people living in them. Bearing in mind that the majority then lived in High Street and Westgate Street it can be imagined that living conditions then were far more crowded than they are today. The largest households, incidentally, were those of William Pond, a blacksmith, with wife, nine children and a servant, and Henry Beck, an agricultural labourer, with a wife and nine children. William Baker, postmaster and auctioneer (and a widower) also had nine children to support.

Age Structure

Children comprised a high proportion of the population: one quarter of the net total were under ten (rather more than today!), 286 (35%) were under 15, and 355 (43%) were under 20. Only 28 people were, or claimed to be, aged 75 or over, while the remaining

447 (54%) were fairly evenly distributed over the age range 20-74.

One odd feature of the age structure is the relatively low number of men of working age compared to the number of women. In the age group 20-59 there were 204 women but only 124 men. Adding in absent household heads changes the figures to 150 men to 205 women. This disparity looks odd when there were more boys than girls and when the numbers aged over 60 were exactly equal (60 men, 60 women). It suggests that there could have been another 30 or more men away from home on census night. This unknown element, mostly sailors no doubt, is a reminder that population figures need to be read in conjunction with their definitions.

Birthplace

It is often assumed that until the First World War most people remained in the village of their birth. The 1871 census shows that 500 Blakeney people (62%) were born there. However, this is only to be expected when children form such a high proportion of the population. If all those under 20 are excluded then fewer than half of all adults (48%) gave Blakeney as their place of birth. This means, of course, that a small majority of adults were born elsewhere, the proportions for men and women being virtually the same. Whether this is a typical figure for villages at that time (assuming there is one) is not known to the author, but no doubt much depends on population trends. A growing village will bring in people from outside – but Blakeney's population had been falling during the previous 20 years or so.

Perhaps those not born in Blakeney came from villages close by? A count shows that 100 of the 235 'foreigners' were born within five miles of Blakeney, and a further 47 within ten miles. This covers 80% of all adults and leaves just 62 who came from elsewhere in Norfolk and 26 from outside the county. (It's a fair bet that today rather more than 26 adults living in Blakeney were born outside Norfolk.) In view of the strong links between Blakeney and the Northeast in the 1800s it is surprising that only two adults were born there – and neither of them in South Shields.

Blakeney-born couples were not very numerous: a 'head of household' and his wife both from Blakeney can be found in only 27 of the 233 households in the village.

Occupations

Most married women were busy enough looking after their families and had no additional occupation. On the other hand virtually all men had a specific occupation, sometimes more than one; very few had the leisure of 'retirement'.

Marine occupations can be expected in any coastal village. Of the 236 men with known occupations in Blakeney at least 108 (46%) derived their living from the sea: 28 were fishermen and 62 were mariners, including master mariners. The others were mostly officials, including six pilots, and there were also four shipwrights and a sailmaker.

Compared with these, there were 114 men (48%) engaged in 'land-based' occupations. Almost half of these were farmers and farm workers, while the remainder

were 'professionals', tradesmen and shopkeepers, and building workers.

The missing 6% were merchants with shipping interests (including coal merchants) and coal porters (musical or otherwise), land-based perhaps, but dependent on the sea nevertheless. If the supposed additional absent seamen are also considered then it could be argued that sea-based livelihoods were in the majority. And no doubt tradesmen, shopkeepers and building workers would have been fewer in number without their maritime customers. So perhaps Blakeney's seabord location accounted for somewhere near 60% of all jobs taken by men.

Other insights can be gained by linking occupations with birthplace and age structure. It is notable, for example, that all the fishermen were born either in Blakeney or within ten miles of it, as were nearly all the mariners. Taking the two groups together, 71% were born in Blakeney. Agricultural workers, on the other hand, show a rather different pattern: of 55 such workers only 45% were born in Blakeney. The difference between these two figures (notwithstanding the small sample) suggests that Blakeney men may have preferred to go to sea, despite the attendant dangers, leaving others to take up agricultural jobs.

The census figures also show that a relatively high proportion (36%) of the professional and skilled workers came from beyond the ten-mile radius, and that only 28% were born in Blakeney. This tendency can be seen in the maritime sphere as well. The coast-guard and the customs officer, as well as two of the four shipwrights, came from more than ten miles away, as did the rector, schoolmas-

ter, druggist, barber and shepherd, for example. This need not imply that Blakeney was incapable of producing such people – only that mobility was greater in such occupations.

As well as being the most 'local' of the main working groups, the fishermen also had a distinctive age structure: over 60% were aged 55 or over – and only two were under 30 (one being the teenage son of a fisherman). Conversely, almost 90% of the mariners were aged under 55, presumably an indication that being a sailor was preferable to being a fisherman. Yet though these statistics tell us (roughly) 'how many' they do not tell us 'why'. Perhaps mariners were more than happy to convert to fishing once they had seen the world – and could afford a boat of their own.

To some extent the pattern at sea was paralleled ashore: agriculture was essentially a young man's occupation. Agricultural workers and mariners together comprised over 60% of the 15-19 age group, whereas these two groups formed only 20% of the similar number in the 55-64 age group. Many of the older men were tradesmen and shopkeepers – had some started life in agriculture?

Population Changes

Every census represents just one moment in the continuous process of population change, a 'still' from a moving picture. Looking at one census in isolation gives no indication of what these changes might be, and a much longer article would be needed to give a fair account of them. All that can be done here is to make just a couple of points with the help of the census taken 100

years before 1871 and the one taken 100 years after. The 1770 census was taken by the Church.² Each household is listed, with all adults named and a count of the number of children living there (stated to be those under 16). It appears to represent the usually resident population regardless of whether they were at home at the time. The 1971 census is part of the decennial civil series begun in 1801. Much information is available by parish although that relating to individuals, of course, cannot be seen until 2071.

The total population in 1770 was 458, including three women in the Townhouses and six children who appear to be orphans. This implies that the population nearly doubled between 1770 and 1871, although other census totals show that the peak of Blakeney's population was around 1850.³ In the following 20 years Blakeney 'lost' some 250 people – where did they go? By 1971 the total had declined further to only 660 (or thereabouts).

The only two elements of the population which can be compared directly in all three censuses are the proportion of children and household size. In 1770 those under 16 (169) comprised 37% of the village total; by 1871 the child population had risen to 295 but still formed 37% of the total. By contrast, in 1971 there were only 110 children under 16, just 17% of the total.

In contrast to the fluctuating total population, average household size has been falling steadily. In 1770 the average was 4.1 people per household, in 1871 it was 3.6, and by 1971 only 2.3 (since when it has fallen further). The main reason for this inexorable trend is the

rise in the number of people living alone, especially older people. Table 1 illustrates the changes that have been taking place. These include an increase in the number of single-person households from 6% of all households in 1770 to 29% in 1971. Conversely, households with four or more people fell from 56% of households in 1770 to 17% by 1971. Such figures are a reminder of how society has evolved towards the more solitary living conditions typical of today. They also explain why communities need ever more houses even if their population is falling – quite apart from any demand for second homes or holiday accommodation.

Comment

This article has no ‘conclusion’ in the conventional sense for there is no story being told, no particular conclusion to be

reached. Rather it is a reminder that census material can shed light on many questions – but only if it is approached with such questions in mind. Even a brief study of census material can produce useful and perhaps unexpected insights into the way people in the Blakeney area lived during the nineteenth century.

Notes

1. The figures in this article may not be exactly the same as those which appear in census volumes but if the author has not been exact in his transcription neither are enumerators infallible in their additions.
2. Norfolk Record Office, PD.619.31.
3. A graph of population change in Blakeney during the nineteenth century can be seen in an article by Monica White, *Morston Road, Blakeney: Building in the 18th and 19th Centuries* The Glaven Historian No. 5, 2002.

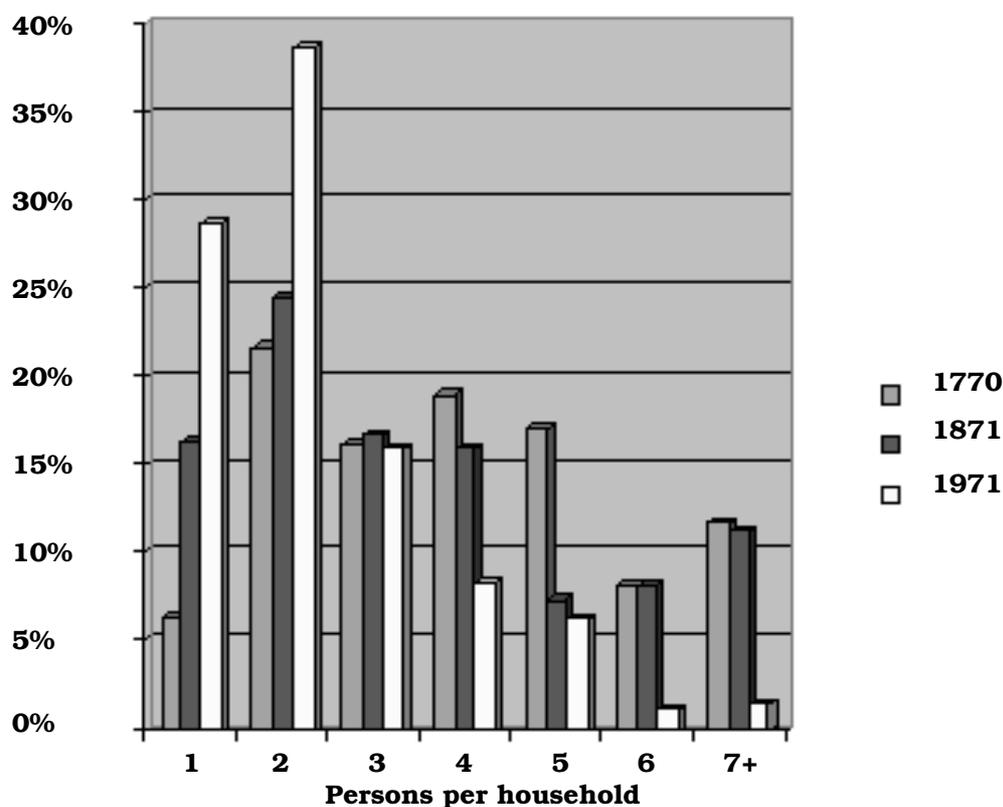


Figure 1. Blakeney: Households by size (as a percentage of the Total).