

Marriage à la mode: parochial and irregular marriage among the inhabitants of Clerkenwell from 1550-1753

Gill Newton, Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure

Abstract

London has a long history of irregular marriage which predates the parish register period but is not well-documented until the 17th century. The aim of this paper is to investigate whether choice of marriage solemnization has an effect on subsequent demographic behaviour. Whether irregular marriages deserve their haphazard and even sordid reputation is also considered, and it is suggested that the Fleet registers in particular compare favourably with contemporary parochial registration and are worthy of more detailed study than they have hitherto received.

In Early Modern London large numbers of people chose to marry not at their parish church, but at centres of irregular or clandestine marriage. Huge numbers of Londoners took advantage of the opportunity to marry at the Fleet and, by the 1740s, it is estimated that over half of all London weddings were taking place there. The inhabitants of Clerkenwell were no exception to this, but not all were deserting their parish churches, and church marriages continued to take place alongside clandestine unions.

Those marrying irregularly in the large suburban parish of Clerkenwell are compared to those marrying in their home parish, using a family reconstitution of the large that is uniquely supplemented by marriage records from all London and Middlesex locations in which Clerkenwell inhabitants could be traced. Status and occupational indicators are investigated. Age at first marriage, age difference between spouses and family formation patterns of those marrying irregularly are compared, including rates of prenuptial pregnancy. Irregular marriage is judged to have been popular primarily for reasons of privacy and convenience.