

Analysing a series of wills

Full-text transcripts were made by G.W. Hatton of a total of 556 Northamptonshire wills, covering:

- The villages of Ashby St Ledgers, Barby (including Onley deserted village), Braunston, Crick and Kilsby
- All surviving wills were collected for these villages over the period 1500-1700AD, including both wills stored locally in Northamptonshire at the NRO, and PCC wills stored at TNA Kew.

The transcripts were made as literally as possible, retaining spellings and capitalisation; in addition, each will transcript includes a short introduction summarising key points of interest in the document and identifying links with other wills in the series; finally, the transcripts are interspersed with historical notes illustrating and commenting upon relevant religious, political and environmental events, to aid interpretation of the will texts.

The aim was to provide in-depth data for social study of a contiguous area of around 50 square kilometres over a 200-year span, including a mix of communities of differing sizes and types. A subsidiary aim was to gather data that might be of use in making good the lack of early parish registers for Kilsby and Barby up to the point when Bishop's Transcripts commenced.

Analyses

The analyses carried out range from basic factors such as annual rates of will-making and estimates of the proportion of the communities that made wills, to fine details such as comparing the date at which the will was made with the subsequent date of death, and analyses of the distribution of occupation and wealth through the community, and the ways in which these metrics changed through the study period.

Results

The results are contained in four documents that may be viewed/downloaded:

- [A short PDF document introducing the study](#), setting out the aims, specifying the data-sets, and comparing this study with other recent studies on wills carried out by other

historians.

- [A longer PDF document describing the specific analyses carried out](#) and their results and summarising the main conclusions reached.
- [The full-text transcripts of the wills](#) and accompanying historical notes in MS Word format
- [Analysis of the data contained in each will](#) (against a total of 56 metrics), in MS Excel spreadsheet format

Main aspects

The study revealed an enormous amount of small detail:

- Close-up detail on the changes wrought by successive phases of religious change, and the ways in which this varied from one village to another (including evidence of Kilsby as a hotbed of leading-edge Puritanism from about 1588 onward, and Ashby St Ledger as a stronghold of traditional Catholicism)
 - Study of the increasing effects of literacy
 - Detail of changes in the construction and layout of the home (including some evidence for the so-called 'Great Rebuilding', which was carried forward into a further study)
 - Study of the effects of inflation and taxation, especially through the difficult period 1530-1580
 - Evidence of the steady fragmentation of the previous relatively uniform society of husbandmen, into a broader and more diverse society with a more uneven distribution of land and a higher proportion of labourers and new specialist trades
 - Details of some of the factors that led to the eventual desertion of Onley in the middle of the period under study
 - Some ground-breaking data-sets were extracted, on the changes that occurred in family size and infant mortality over the first part of the period; these too were carried forward into a further study.

Uses in other studies

The data from the transcripts has already been used or is currently being used in five other studies:

- The transcripts provided input data to the study on the desertion of the settlement at Onley - for details, see elsewhere on this site
- They are also being used along with the Crick manorial documents, where the ability to compare and contrast statements on individuals in the community via both court rolls and wills

provides a rich three-dimensional view of the society - for details, [follow this link](#)

- The data-sets on family size and infant mortality were input directly into a further all-England study linking infant mortality with change in vernacular architecture, which is described elsewhere on this site - for details, see elsewhere on this site

- Used in tracing house histories - see details elsewhere of ongoing long-term house-history projects in Crick and Kilsby

- Used in tracing family histories - as direct input to genealogy enquiries received through the individual village pages elsewhere on this website.