Sextons' Day Books for 1685–1687 and 1694–1703 from the Parish of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London

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British burial records of past centuries were kept by parish ministers, clerks, and sextons and conventionally included only names and dates. However, the ages of the deceased and the supposed causes of their deaths sometimes were also noted. When this was done regularly for periods of a year or more, the parish officer obligingly if unknowingly provided grist for the mills of medical and social historians. The sextons’ day books for the Parish of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London, kept at least partly as ledgers of the burial fees that were collected, also list dates, full names, identification of the deceased as “C” (child), “M” (man), or “W” (woman), place of habitation, and the supposed cause of death. Irregularly, the occupation or title of the deceased, the actual ages of children, and such incidental designations as “Infant” or “Chrisom” (a baby less than a month old) were also included, but such information was too intermittent to be of much assistance.

The four volumes whose contents are analyzed in this paper are identified in the Archives Department of the Westminster District Library as 419/229 (June 1685 through July 1687), 419/230 (June 1694 through 18 November 1697), 419/231 (19 November 1697 through July 1699), and 419/232 (August 1699 through March 1703). Thus, the record is missing for the period August 1687 through May 1694. The books are bound in vellum, contain approximately 125–200 paper folios each, and measure 9 × 15, 7 × 12, 6½ × 8, and 7¾ × 10 in., respectively. Judging from the handwriting, various individuals took turns, each usually keeping the record for a month. The spelling is casual but phonetic, e.g., coft (coughed), risinlits (rising lights), measill, stoppidg, Ann a bortiv (an abortive), cansur, feaver, and tenpenny (typan). Probably because the record

1 The kind permission of the Vicar and Churchwardens of the Parish of St. Martin-in-the-Fields to reproduce information and quotations from these records is gratefully acknowledged. Miss Margaret Swarbrick, Archivist, Westminster City Library, London, graciously made the records available and arranged for them to be microfilmed. The cost of microfilming and some other incidental expenses were met from USPHS Grant RR-5358-10.

2 Sex could nearly always be determined from the given name, although, as Hollingsworth and Hollingsworth (1) observed in regard to other registers, the context showed that “Francis” was sometimes a female. “Youth” and “Maid” were arbitrarily counted in the present study as adults.

3 Later day books continue the record well into the nineteenth century.

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books were expensive, the entries are crowded and margins scarcely exist.\(^4\) Horizontal pen lines separate the entries. Some pages are foxed, infrequently so badly at the corners that one or more words are illegible. Such deficiencies were counted as blanks in my tabulations.

The supposed cause of death was probably determined by “searchers” (2), although these functionaries were mentioned only once in the day books I examined: “The Searchers brought a note” (19 August 1685). However, it seems reasonable to assume that the system described by Graunt in 1676 (3) was still in operation in London at the end of the seventeenth century.

When anyone dies, then, either by tolling, or ringing of a bell, or by bespeaking of a grave of the sexton, the same is known to the searchers, corresponding with the said sexton.

The searchers hereupon (who are antient matrons, sworn to their office) repair to the place where the dead corps lies, and by view of the same, and by other enquiries, they examine by what disease or casualty the corps died. Hereupon they make their report to the parish clerk, and he, every Tuesday night, carries in an account of all the burials and christnings happening that week, to the clerk of the hall. . . .

I say, it is enough, if we know from the searchers but the most predominant symptoms; as that one died of the head-ach, who was sorely tormented with it, though the physicians were of opinion, that the disease was in the stomach. . . .

To conclude, in many of these cases the searchers are able to report the opinion of the physician, who was with the patient, as they receive the same from the friends of the defunct: and in very many cases . . . their own senses are sufficient. . . .

There is no mention of autopsies. “Causes” are recorded, probably by the clerk, in a handwriting different from, and more careful than, that of the rest of the entry.

The present Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, built in 1728, stands at the northern corner of Trafalgar Square, on the site of an earlier church. The old churchyard was removed in 1829. In it or within the edifice itself were buried several celebrities including Nell Gwyn (1650–1687), Robert Boyle (1627–1691), Jack Sheppard (1702–1724), the notorious thief, and John Hunter (1728–1793), anatomist and surgeon (4,5).\(^5\) An entry for 10 December 1686 states in part: “Henry Covent[ry] Secretary of State in the hay market. . . . Age.” Coventry Street is named for this Secretary of State to Charles II (5,6). There is a scattering of titles among the names of those buried, but it appears that in general the parish was not well to do.

Located in the City of Westminster, in 1604–1606 the parish comprised only 26 acres and was one of London’s smallest (7). A report that in 1680 it had 40,000 inhabitants (5) must have been exaggerated.

\(^4\) Blank pages did occur at the beginning and end and challenged, as they would now, the doodler and the aimless scribe. Sarah Walker wrote her name neatly enough but repeatedly. Underneath another hand added unluckily, “a slutt a goossip.”

\(^5\) The day book covering the dates when Boyle and Mistress Gwyn died unfortunately is missing. The body of Hunter was moved in 1859 from a vault in the church to Westminster Abbey.
Occasionally the day books record that a body was taken away for burial in another parish. The “causes” of death of these individuals are not given, and their deaths are not included in my study. The remaining burials total 15,856, including those of aborted and stillborn fetuses, for June 1685 through July 1687 and for June 1694 through March 1703, the equivalent of 11 years. On this basis there was an average of 1441 burials a year. The total annual numbers of burials listed in the London Bills of Mortality for the parish (8) for the complete years that I counted differ by from 0.3 to 3.1% from my counts, the latter being lower in 7 of the 9 years. Some but not all of the discrepancies are due to the fact that when two individuals, e.g., a mother and child both dead in childbirth, were buried in the same grave, I counted each individual separately but the clerk apparently did not.

Of the total of 15,856 burials, 7895 (49.79%) were those of males and 7752 (48.89%) were those of females while the sex of 209 (1.31%) individuals was not recorded.

The day books mention both “abortives” and “stillborns,” but the basis for the distinction is only implied. Probably “stillborn” referred to infants judged to have died at or near term. Of 280 “abortives,” 50.7% were male, 36.3% were female, and 12.9% were not identified as to sex. Of the 513 stillborn infants 49.5% were male, 37.2% were female, and 13.3% were of unspecified sex. Unless nearly all of the unidentified abortive and stillborn fetuses were female, there occurred the preponderance of males characteristic in a large series of fetal deaths (9). Unfortunately, we do not know the number of births in the parish during these years and hence cannot determine the ratio of livebirths to fetal deaths. However, the 513 stillborn deaths comprise 3.2% of the 15,856 deaths from all causes, a rather high proportion. In Greater London in 1968, by comparison, 1.9% of the deaths from all causes were stillbirths (10).

Now let us consider the proportion of deaths among infants and children to all deaths. In England and Wales in 1968, deaths from 0–14 years of age comprised 3.5% of all deaths; from 0–18 years, 3.88% (10). In the Parish of St. Martin-in-the-Fields during the period under study, 8718 deaths, or 55% of all deaths, were those of infants and children. The comparable figure in another London parish in 1600–1625 was 54.3% (2). The day books for St. Martin’s Parish do not reveal the age at which childhood was considered to end, but it almost certainly would have been in the early teens. For reasons that will be discussed below, it is likely that most of the children who died in the parish were not more than 2 or 3 years old. Of the 8718 burials, 52.03% were those of males, 47.02% were those of females, and the sex of 0.95% was not reported.

Burials are recorded for 6313 adults, all but two identified as to sex. The ratio was 100 males to 113.4 females.

In Fig. 1 the percentage of all deaths occurring in each month during the complete years 1686 and 1695–1702 is presented graphically and is compared with the monthly distribution of deaths in England and Wales in 1962–1966 (11). A curious feature seen here and in analyses of two other sets of early mortality records is the modest but definite peak in March that interrupts an otherwise steady

*In comparing for two different periods the proportions of deaths due to a given cause, it should be remembered that changes in the size of the other causes will influence the proportion of the cause under comparison.
decline during the first half of the year (12,13). One also notes that the percentages for St. Martin-in-the-Fields fluctuate less widely, month by month, than do those for modern times.

Table 1 summarizes all "causes" of death and makes evident the inexactness with which such "causes" were stated. Several of the latter, e.g., "gripes" and "convulsions," obviously are symptoms rather than diseases. Others simply indicate the course of an illness, as "decline" or "suddenly." Not unexpectedly, consumption, often identified as "tissick" (phthisis), leads the list, with flux, gripes, and colic not far behind. The numbers of deaths ascribed to these gastrointestinal symptoms were conspicuously higher in August and September.

The deaths of many hundreds of infants were reported as due to teething. Even at the end of the eighteenth century, a medical authority observed that

above a tenth part of infants die in teething, by symptoms proceeding from the irritation of the tender nervous parts of the jaws, occasioning inflammations, fevers, convulsions, gangrenes, &c. . . . [14].

Deaths from "teeth" were reported most frequently in March, April, May, and August.

The causes of "convulsions" are not apparent, but the latter were alleged to be responsible for the deaths of great numbers of children and relatively few adults. Birch (8), commenting on the London Bills of Mortality for this period, remarked, "The large article of deaths by convulsions belongs chiefly, if not solely, to children under two years of age." Buchan wrote in 1793, "Though more children are said to die of convulsions than of any other disease, yet they are for the most part only a symptom of some other malady" (14). Convulsions caused from 120–173

1 A similar March peak was observed in a graph prepared from an unpublished study of 581 male and female deaths in the workhouse of the Parish of St. Leonard Shoreditch, London, in 1821–1827.
TABLE 1

"Causes" of Death in Order of Frequency

| No.  | Percent |          |
|------|---------|----------|
| 2636 | 16.6    | Worms    | 59     |
| 2112 | 13.3    | French pox | 45   |
| 1643 | 10.4    | Gangrene | 44     |
| 1637 | 10.3    | Jaundice | 40     |
| 1511 | 9.5     | Palsy    | 37     |
| 863  | 5.4     | Pleurisy | 37     |
| 848  | 5.8     | Rupture  | 36     |
| 513  | 3.2     | Strangury| 30     |
| 447  | 2.8     | Lunatic  | 27     |
| 438  | 2.8     | Fistula  | 24     |
| 340  | 2.1     | Suddenly | 23     |
| 337  | 2.1     | Stone    | 17     |
| 280  | 1.8     | Measles  | 14     |
| 271  | 1.7     | Rheumatism| 13   |
| 267  | 1.7     | Quinsy   | 10     |
| 250  | 1.6     | Gout     | 7      |
| 217  | 1.4     | Tymanpy  | 7      |
| 203  | 1.3     | Decay, decline, lethargy | 6  |
| 167  | 1.1     | Scald head | 4   |
| 97   | 0.6     | Cough    | 2      |
| 87   |         | Asthma   | 1      |
| 87   |         | Cholera  | 1      |
| 63   |         | Falling sickness | 1 |
| 60   |         | Spotted fever | 1 |
| Total|         |          | 15,856 |

deads annually in complete years; the considerable variation in incidence suggests that infectious diseases were largely responsible.

Annual variations in the numbers of fever deaths of from 103 to 171 occurred. Again contagion can be suspected. Fevers took their highest toll in the month of May. Smallpox was endemic; epidemics flared up in 1694 and 1698. The greatest numbers of deaths occurred in July and August. Of all smallpox deaths, 70.1% were those of children.

"Rising lights" or "rising ye lights" is a puzzling term. "Lights," of course, is an old name for lungs. Seventeenth century physicians could not agree whether rising of the lights was the same as the affliction variously known as rising of the mother (uterus), choking of the mother, the hysterical passion (hysteria), etc. or was a related malady (15-17). Sennert (16) spoke of the rising of

malignant vapors up through the Veins and Arteries to the Lungs, and by communication thence to the Heart, and this upon the least commotion or unusual motion of the mind or body; which being the cause also of that Distemper which hath been hitherto supposed to be seated in the Mother. . . .

Not unrelated was "the vapors," a form of melancholy caused, it was believed, by gas in the stomach or intestines. In the nineteenth century the term "rising of the lights" was still in popular use and referred to "a sense of fulness in the throat, accompanied by oppressed breathing, arising from disordered stomach" (18,19) or even to croup (14,20-22).
“Stoppage” or sometimes “stoppage of ye stomach” evidently meant some form of obstruction. “Surfeit” could be due to food or drink.

Deaths in childbed presumably included fatalities both during delivery and in the puerperium. The proportional mortality rate, 1.3% of all deaths, of course, was very high. The comparable figure for England and Wales in 1968 was 0.0144%, or roughly \( \frac{1}{7,000} \) what it was in St. Martin’s parish around the end of the seventeenth century.

A few other “causes” require comment. “Evil” was “the king’s evil,” or scrofula. An “impostume” was an abscess. “French pox” was syphilis, at that time confused with gonorrhea. It was given as the cause of death of 45 adults, two-thirds of them females. “Strangury” was difficult and painful urination. Of the 30 deaths ascribed to it, one was in a male child, 23 were in male adults, and six were in female adults. It is curious that no deaths from strangury were reported until 1697; thereafter there were a few each year. “Tympany” was acute abdominal distention by gas. “Scald head” was a skin disease, and “spotted fever” was an old name for typhus.

The causes of death by violence sometimes are recorded very briefly. When only the word “kild” appeared, one could not be certain whether an accident, manslaughter (homicide without malice expressed or intended), or murder occurred. Graunt (3), reviewing violent deaths listed in the Bills of Mortality for the City of London at roughly this period, distinguished between “killed by several accidents” and “murdered.” I have assigned “kild” to the category of accidents. Deaths by violence in St. Martin’s Parish were in the proportion of 1 in 73. Walford (23) quotes figures from which it may be calculated that for the City of London and its suburbs in 1683–1703 the proportion of deaths by violence to all deaths was 1 in 68. So St. Martin’s Parish was a little less beset than metropolitan London as a whole. In England and Wales in 1968, 3.9% of all deaths, or 1 in 25, were caused by violence. In the 1685–1703 period in the parish, 72.8% of such deaths were male; in 1968 55.6% of such deaths were male (10). Hair (24) has noted an increase in the past century in the proportion of females killed in land-travel accidents.

“Overlaid” referred to the suffocation of an infant by an older person pressing on the baby in bed. Tables 1 and 2 reveal that “overlaid” was the most frequent cause of death by violence (21.2%). Twenty-nine of the victims were males, 16 were females, and one was of unspecified sex. It was not unusual in earlier times for several people including children to occupy the same bed, or what passed for a bed, and for some of them to be intoxicated. Hair (24) and Langer (25) believed that overlying was a popular form of infanticide during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period when large numbers of unwanted babies were disposed of by starvation, exposure, or violence. From one to eight “overlaid” infants were buried annually in St. Martin’s Parish. In retrospect, it also seems possible that some of these children may have been victims not of negligence or worse but of what is now being called “Crib Death” or “Sudden Infant Death,” a poorly understood malady.

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1 It should be noted that this is not a maternal mortality rate; the latter requires a knowledge of the population at risk.

2 But the relatively higher rate in 1968 was presumably due in part to a disproportionate reduction in nonviolent deaths.
|                     | Male adult | Female adult | Male child | Female child | — child | Total |
|---------------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|---------|-------|
| **Accidents**       |            |              |            |              |         |       |
| Overlaid            | 29         | 16           | 1          |              |         | 46    |
| Killed              | 40         | 1            | 3          |              |         | 44    |
| Drowned             | 16         | 4            | 2          | 1            |         | 23    |
| Fell                | 8          | 3            | 2          | 1            |         | 14    |
| House collapsed     | 4          | 3            | 2          |              |         | 9     |
| Burned, scalded     | 1          | 1            | 1          | 4            |         | 7     |
| Vehicle             | 3          | 1            | 1          |              |         | 5     |
| Horse               | 3          |              | 1          |              |         | 4     |
| Gunpowder           | 1          | 1            |            |              |         | 2     |
| Suffocated          | 2          |              |            |              |         | 2     |
| Fencing             | 2          |              |            |              |         | 2     |
| Poisoned            |            |              | 1          |              |         | 1     |
| Shot                | 1          |              |            |              |         | 1     |
| **Total**           |            |              |            |              |         | 160   |
| **Suicides**        |            |              |            |              |         |       |
| Hanged              | 8          | 4            |            |              |         | 12    |
| Shot                | 1          | 1            |            |              |         | 2     |
| Drowned             |            |              | 1          |              |         | 1     |
| [Not stated]        |            |              | 1          |              |         | 1     |
| Stabbed             |            |              |            |              |         | 1     |
| **Total**           |            |              |            |              |         | 17    |
| **Murders**         |            |              |            |              |         |       |
| [Not stated]        | 14         | 4            | 4          | 3            | 3       | 28    |
| Kicked              | 1          |              |            |              |         | 1     |
| **Total**           | 15         | 27           | 43         | 28           | 4       | 57    |
| Executed            | 8          |              | 2          |              |         | 10    |
| War Wounds          | 1          |              |            |              |         | 1     |
| **Total**           | 115        | 27           | 43         | 28           | 4       | 217   |

It is unfortunate that there is no indication of how 44 persons were killed. Quite possibly there were no coroners’ inquests in these cases and the individuals keeping the day books did not wish to assume responsibility for establishing and recording a definite cause of death even if rumors abounded. As with violent deaths generally (Tables 1, 2), the large majority of those “kild” were adult males.

Falls were variously from windows, a loft, a ladder, stairs, and so on. That three houses collapsed and caused nine deaths in the few years covered by our records says much, or little, for the housing in the parish. Other victims were run down by carts, a dray, and a coach or died from the “stroke,” i.e., kick, of a horse. A man was “blown up” and a woman was “kild . . . at a [gun] Powder Shop.” One adult male, presumably suffocated, was “found ded in ye funnell of a chimney.” The funnel is the flue between the fireplace and the chimney proper; perhaps the victim was a chimney sweep. Another man “stifled to Death in a house of office,” that is, a privy. Two men were killed, apparently accidentally, while fencing.

Death by suicide was regarded with great abhorrence in the eighteenth century. This is why the day book entries recording suicide usually make it clear that the victim was mentally unbalanced—“Hanged him selfe being distracted,” “drowned her selfe in a pale of water being distracted”—and hence not responsible for his
or her action. A total of 17 suicides among 15,856 deaths from all causes, 0.11%, is a remarkable low proportion; it is likely that other suicides were concealed by such brief notations as "drowned" (23). The comparable figure for England and Wales in 1968 was 0.79% (10).

It is notable that at least five of the 10 children who were murdered were infants. In only one of the 29 homicides was the manner of death specified in the day books. Homicides constituted 0.18% of all deaths; for England and Wales in 1968 the figure was 0.05% (10).

If the number of executed persons buried in St. Martin's graveyard during this short period seems large, it must be remembered that capital punishment was a commonplace at the time.

The sextons' day books reveal and help to make explicit the often high proportional mortality rates of seventeenth and eighteenth century London. Although the actual causes of many deaths remain obscure, the appalling mortality figures for infants and children, for women in childbed, and indeed for the general public are clear enough. Consumption, gastrointestinal ailments, fevers, and other infectious diseases took a heavy toll. Deaths from violence were relatively much less frequent, but this was in part due to the heavy mortality from nonviolent causes. It is also quite possible that homicide, including infanticide, sometimes went undetected or at least unrecorded.

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