

SOME DIFFICULT CONFINEMENTS IN
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY YORKSHIRE¹

by

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PARISH REGISTERS can provide the historian of the pre-census era with a wealth of information about many aspects of population change. The registers can be processed to provide data relating to infant mortality and to the incidence of post-natal deaths among mothers. Many registers also list the burials of still-born children. But very few registers give more detail than this. A survey of 354 Yorkshire registers for the middle decades of the seventeenth century has revealed only a single register which provides extended comment about child-birth. This is the register for Hackness, a village some five miles west of Scarborough, situated in the hills that rise to the north of the Vale of Pickering.² From 1630 until 1676 the Hackness registers were kept by John Richardson, the parish clerk,³ and, especially during the 1650s and 1660s, he enlivened his entries with descriptions of terrible storms, of strange deaths, and of the young lady who fainted during her wedding.⁴ He also noted down the details of seven difficult confinements, during the years 1655–7, which are the subject of this note.

I

Three of the difficult deliveries recorded by John Richardson relate to his daughter Mary who had been baptized in October 1626.⁵ Richardson's wife Margaret died in June 1651, aged fifty-one, and it seems likely that Richardson, who did not remarry, focused his affection and anxiety on his daughter Mary and her difficult confinements. Mary Richardson was married to William Cockerell of Wykeham, a village some six miles south of Hackness, on 4 March 1652.⁶ Cockerell seems to have settled in Hackness for he is subsequently referred to in the register as "William Cockerell of Hackness".

Mary's first confinement seems to have been normal and did not draw any comment from John Richardson except that John Cockerell was born on Wednesday 7 June 1653 "about five of the Clocke in the morneinge" and was baptized five days later.⁷ This John Cockerell seems to have survived the early years of life.⁸ Unfortunately, her next confinement had an unhappy ending and John Richardson recorded that: "A yonge sonne of William Cockerells of Hacknes beinge a large child dyed before it was borne: and was borne the jⁱ of July [1655]". The child was buried on the evening of the same day.⁹

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In the following year Mary's third confinement ended the same way and John Richardson recorded that the labour had been difficult: "A daughter of William Cockerell of Hacknes dyed the same day before it was borne the xxiiith day of May [1656], and his wife was then in greate daunger of her life before it was borne".¹⁰

Just over fourteen months later Mary was in labour again, but this time, after a difficult confinement, she bore a live child. "Francis the sonne of William Cockerell of Hacknes was borne the vjth day of Auguste [1657] aboute ix of the Clocke in the morneinge, of a goodly, large, greate child and his wife was in a daungerous Labour, but the Lord in his mercie did give her faith, patience and strength to beare yt, thanks be unto God, and was baptized the xvjth day of the same".

But this child did not live very long. Before the year was out John Richardson wrote the following pathetic account in the register:

Francis the sonne of William Cockerell of Hacknes fell into a longe sleepe in his Cradle on Monday the 23th November [1657], and after he awaked begann to be very unquite, and soe continued to be in greate paine, and laide very mornefully and in greate anguish day and night; and a little before yt dyed, which was on Thursday night after, beinge the 26th day of the same, yt gave a pretty smile, and lifted up one of the handes and soe departed into everlastinge joye. I am purswaded he was a stronge large child, neer a yard longe when he dyed beinge aboute xiiij weekes old and was buryed the next day. And seeinge it pleased the Lord to take that comfort from us, by his good providence my sonne John came to Hacknes to us . . . the next day.¹¹

Mary Cockerell was now aged thirty-one and in the next twelve years she had five more children, but because of the gap in the burial entries between 1662 and 1678 it is impossible to say whether or not they all survived infancy.¹² John Richardson did not record any further difficulties in these later confinements although Mary gave her family a scare in 1661 during the last month of her sixth pregnancy. Her father recorded that:

William the sonne of William Cockerell of Hacknes borne on Thursday morneinge aboute fower a Clocke xxiiijth October, and Baptized the xxvijth day, beinge the Lordes day. Aboute three weekes before, my daughter Mary as shee was Rideing to Wykham, with her husband, her mare stumbled, and fell, and soe did shee; and her shoulder was put out of the joynt and her husband gott a good bone setter at Wilton or Allerston, that put it right againe with my sonne Williams [ie son-in-law] helpe, and she mended well againe god be thanked, without any hurte to the Child which was her greatest feare.¹³

II

John Richardson did not merely note down difficult confinements experienced by members of his own family. He gave details of four further cases, the most extraordinary of which was his record of a Siamese birth in December 1655.

Grace the wyffe of William Baxster, beinge aboute three weekes before her tyme, was brought in bedd the First day of December aboute three of the Clocke in the afternoone of two Children, Their bellies were growne and Joyned together, from their breastes to their Navells, but their Navells might be seen, and their faces were together, but the supposed manchild was not soe longe as the daughter, soe that his face reatched but to the Chine of the other. And of the backe partes, from the shoulders of the supposed manchild, was a lumpe almoste as bigg as the head, was softe, and verily thought by the Middwife to be the Coddess and members, beinge turned on the

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backe partes, wronge placed, and out of eyther side the sayd Lumpe was a smale legg and a foote, and the feet were turned backwardes, but noe thighe to be seen, and had noe fundament nor passage for water, but had a prettie face, and head, shoulders, body, breaste, Armes, handes and feete, but the daughter was a large Child, and had all the Proportion of a Child; the Midd-wives name was Jaine Cockerell, who is a good old woman, and after the Children were borne, she told me, she tooke them in her handes and sayd to the wives, wee muste take heed we mingle not truth and falshood together.¹⁴

The final comment in this quotation is most interesting. The midwife was obviously counselling the other women present against over-reacting to what would be considered a monstrous birth. Unfortunately it is impossible to say anything about the midwife's earlier life for there were a number of Jane Cockerells at Hackness, although John Richardson probably referred to her death in 1660 when he recorded that "Jaine Cockerell that good old widdow dyed the third of October and was buryed the iiiijth of the same".¹⁵

Confusion about the sex of the Siamese children was repeated in the burial entry: "The two abortive Children of William Baxster that were growne and Joyned together from their breastes to their navell the on[e] of them beinge a female Child, and the other as yt was supposed to be a male child were buryed the Second day of December."¹⁶

Grace Baxter, formerly Esthill, had married her husband William in February 1641 but it may be that she had had at least one child before that date. The only earlier reference to a Grace Esthill records that a son of Grace Esthill, widow, was buried in July 1639.¹⁷ After her marriage to William Baxter, Grace had five children (baptized in January 1642, August 1644, May 1647, February 1651, and August 1653) before the Siamese birth.¹⁸ It may be that Grace was drawing towards the end of her child-bearing period in 1655 for the register does not record any further births for her. Later references to the family make it unlikely that she left the area and it seems probable that she was the Grace Baxter whose burial was recorded in June 1690.¹⁹

III

John Richardson recorded another interesting case early in 1656: "Henry the sonne of John Carlill borne the xixth day of January and Baptized xxvijth January. The woman when she was sicke and in her travaile did not thinke shee had been with Child."

The child seems to have survived but this episode had a sad ending for Richardson had to record that: "Katherine the wyffe of John Carlell dyed xxvijth day of January and was buryed the same day."²⁰

There are only two other references to this couple in the Hackness register. A son, John, had been baptized in January 1652 and a daughter, Elizabeth, was born in January 1654.²¹

IV

The next case recorded by John Richardson relates to a difficult delivery involving twins: "William Consetts wyffe was brought in bedd of two Children the xiiijth day of January [1656] the one was an abortive sonne borne dead, and the other was a daughter, and was Baptized the xiiijth day of the same, and Named Ann."

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The daughter did not survive very long; she died on 21 January and “was buried at night”.²² Little can be discovered about this couple. William Consett was baptized in May 1623 but his marriage is not recorded in the Hackness register and his wife’s name is unknown. However, the couple had at least two more children; a daughter was baptized in April 1653 and another daughter was born in August 1659.²³

V

The final entry in which John Richardson provided details of a difficult delivery related to the wife of Thomas Birkeld. The history of this man is rather difficult to trace because the Hackness register records the baptism of two Thomas Birkelds—one in November 1608 and one in May 1609. One of these men married Alice Whittekar in July 1637. This couple had three children (baptized in July 1638, March 1640 and April 1642) before a still-born child was buried on 4 October 1645. Less than a month later, on 1 November, Alice Birkeld was buried. The following November one of the Thomas Birkelds, probably Alice’s husband, married Mary Ellis. Mary had at least three children (baptized in September 1647, October 1648 and May 1653) before John Richardson recorded that: “Mary the wyffe of Thomas Birkeld (he beinge in Sumersittshier) was brought in bedd of a daughter the xth day of June, the Child beinge dead before yt was borne, and she was alsoe in greate daunger of her life, before the Childe was borne”.²⁴ Unfortunately there are no further references in the Hackness register to Thomas or Mary Birkeld.

VI

Although John Richardson recorded the difficult confinements of his daughter Mary in both 1655 and 1657 it is the events of 1656 that are particularly interesting. In that year he recorded only eleven births without additional comment and gave details in the five cases listed above which include Mary’s second difficult confinement, the Siamese birth and the birth of the Consett twins.²⁵ No doubt this was an exceptional year although John Richardson’s apparent disinterest in difficult confinements post 1657 may well have been because his daughter experienced less trouble during labour than she had previously. If that is so, Mary’s gain is our loss for after 1657 the birth section of John Richardson’s register becomes as uninformative as other Yorkshire registers. Had the daughters of more parish clerks had such difficult confinements as Mary Cockerell of Hackness perhaps we should know far more about the difficulties of child-birth during the seventeenth century.

REFERENCES

1. I should like to thank my colleague Janet Blackman for commenting on a draft of this note. The information given below is taken from the printed parish register for Hackness in the North Riding of Yorkshire: C. Johnstone and E. J. Hart (eds.), *The Register of the Parish of Hackness*, Leeds, The Yorkshire Parish Register Society, vol. 25, 1906—hereafter referred to as *Register*. However, all quotations have been taken from the manuscript registers kept in Hackness church and I am grateful to the Rev. W. H. J. Mercer for allowing me to consult them.
2. Ordnance Survey reference SE 969906.

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3. John Richardson first signed the register as parish clerk in June 1630 and signed it for the last time in January 1675. However, his handwriting continues in the register until August 1676. Richardson probably died in that year but unfortunately the burial entries for 1676 are missing. *Register*, pp. 57, 88.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 85–86, 99, 101–106.
5. John Richardson married Margaret Wansforth in August 1625. She was baptized in February 1600 but Richardson's baptismal date is not recorded in the Hackness register. After the birth of Mary in 1626, their next two children did not survive for long—Hanna was baptized November 1628 and buried November 1629; John was baptized January 1632 and buried April 1632. Their last recorded child, John, was baptized in October 1633 and survived into manhood. *Register*, pp. 32, 54, 56–57, 59, 60.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
8. There is a gap in the burial section of the register between January 1662 and March 1678 which makes it impossible to make definite statements about the survival of Mary Cockerell's children.
9. *Register*, pp. 89, 100.
10. The child was buried on 25 May, *Register*, pp. 90, 101.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 91, 102.
12. The later children were Mary, born December 1658; William, born October 1661; Thomas, born January 1664; Joseph, baptized November 1665; and Francis, born May 1670. *Register*, pp. 92, 93, 95, 97.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 65.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 67, 69, 71, 73.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 90, 101.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 72, 89.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 90, 100.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 52, 72, 92.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 40, 63, 64, 66, 68–71, 73, 90.
25. In 1655 he recorded fifteen live births plus the still-born child of Mary, while in 1657 he recorded twenty-three live births, including Mary's son, and one further still-born child which he listed but did not comment on in detail. *Ibid.*, pp. 89–91.