

(population)

Population

[The following is taken from the final report to the E.S.R.C. in 1983 by Alan Macfarlane]

We shall be exploring at some length the changing population of Earls Colne and the accuracy of various sources for estimating population. The combination of parish registers with all other surviving records makes it possible to undertake very intensive analysis of fertility, nuptiality and mortality at the parish level and we will be pursuing this. The most general findings confirm the work of the S.S.R.C. Cambridge Group, namely that there are a number of peculiar features in the English situation. In contrast to much of the continent and many developing societies, population growth during this period was slow, marriages were at a very late age and mortality and fertility were well below the high levels found elsewhere. There was an absence of a relation between high fertility and high mortality in 'crisis' years. There were large numbers of never-married persons. Many of these features are thought of as 'post demographic transition' phenomena and it is curious to find them in English parishes in the period before the eighteenth century. At present our central thesis is that the peculiar demographic features were linked to peculiarities in the social and economic system. The stress on private property and an individualistic ethic had broken the link between economic, social and biological reproduction. There was thus a contrast to 'peasant' or 'tribal' systems where the stress on communal ownership and the family often leads to a great pressure to have children. In the latter situation population characteristically builds up until a crisis (war, famine, disease) decimates it; it then starts to build up again. The disincentive to have children, the delaying in marriage until a person was mature and independent, these are features which we can explore in relation to other parts of the society.