

Yet Another Inquiry into the Trustworthiness of Eighteenth-Century London's Bills of Mortality.¹

© Jeremy Boulton and Leonard Schwarz

From 1636, virtually all London parishes – the ‘greater London of the seventeenth century’ -² contributed to the capital’s ‘Bills of Mortality’ - an early attempt to ascertain the main causes of death in the capital, and particularly the incidence of plague. The Bills survived the disappearance of the plague, and remain the most comprehensive statistics of baptisms and burials that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could produce. However, as memories of the plague receded, and London expanded, the Bills became more rigid. Criticism of them built up, especially among those who tried to make use of them in the eighteenth century. Subsequent historians have treated the Bills in different ways: in the later nineteenth century they were regarded as more or less worthless,³ in the interwar years, historians were willing to use them. Margaret Buer, in her study of 1926, did so extensively in one of her chapters, and fell back on the argument that they were good in the aggregate, or at least that they indicated trends and were internally consistent,⁴ and she quoted William Heberden (1710-1801) in support. So did Dorothy George, a contemporary of Buer, who also quoted Heberden.⁵ Earlier, George had based much of an article on the Bills, taking contemporary fears about gin very seriously, ignoring the fevers that were so prevalent in the earlier eighteenth century, and setting in motion an historical theory about the lethal effects of the gin craze that lasted for over half a century.⁶ In the 1980s Wrigley and Schofield made use of the Bills, but cautiously, turning to them in order to make use of Rickman’s parish returns (parish register abstracts, which will be referred to as ‘PRA’ here), (which were annual from 1780/but only decadal before this) to calculate the contribution of London to the ‘inflation

factor' required to convert the baptism and burial totals from their 404 parish sample to national totals.⁷ It was not until after this, more particularly in the 1990s, that the Bills were analysed seriously by historians.⁸ Two books doing so emerged, in close succession. The most important of these was published in 1993 by Landers.⁹ Landers made extensive use of the Bills, and defended them in his book. The preceding year had seen the publication of Schwarz's *London in the age of industrialisation* which also used the Bills in its chapter on the capital's population. Since then, Woods has studied the Bills with respect to infant mortality.¹⁰ Our current study, which aims to examine the demography of one parish in detail, also makes use of a rich range of sources which shed more light on the construction and coverage of the Bills.¹¹

What has been lacking is a detailed analysis of how the Bills were actually compiled, whom they included and – just as important – excluded or missed out. Our article seeks to provide this. It will do so by examining one parish in detail, that of St Martin-in-the-Fields, a parish that throughout the eighteenth century had a population of between twenty five and thirty thousand. By itself, it would have been the fourteenth largest city in Britain in 1801.¹² The article will also discuss some important evidence from St Anne, Soho, a smaller neighbouring parish of St Martin's.

The shortcomings of the London Bills derive essentially from the fact that they only record burials (categorically *not* deaths) that took place in Anglican parish churchyards and burial grounds. The critics' main objections to the London Bills are listed below:

1. The Bills omitted parochial burial grounds that were not under the authority of a parish priest

As William Maitland, the author of a two-volume *History of London* and, if length and thoroughness was a measure of worth, a worthy successor to the Elizabethan John Stowe, put it in 1756:

None (of the dead) being mentioned therein but such as are buried in parochial cemeteries, precincts and liberties, by which means many burial grounds belonging to the Church of England (such as St. Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, the Temple Church, St. Peter's ad Vincula, the Rolls and Lincoln's Inn chapel, the Charter-House, and divers others belonging to hospitals) are not only precluded the same...¹³

These latter burials Maitland laboriously counted for 1729, and they came to over 3,000 out of a total of nearly 27,000.¹⁴ A survey for 1794 reported by Rickman gave 3,148 taxed Anglican burials 'and ... (let) it be assumed that, on account of the unregistered Interments, a third part (about 7,000 annually) may be added to the Registered Burials.'¹⁵ However, the listing of the parish registers for burials within the Bills that Rickman produced for 1780-1810, a listing reputedly more complete than the Bills but apparently based on the same parish registers for those years, and reproduced in the 1821 census, put unregistered burials at only 6.1 per cent of all those registered in the Bills.¹⁶

2. Parishes not included

It was a long-standing complaint that the Bills omitted the fast-growing parishes of the West and South. For instance St. Pancras (not in the Bills) had a population of nearly 32,000 in 1801; a century earlier its population had been minimal.

Rickman claimed to have identified another problem in 1801:

‘Because several of the parishes, which form part of it (London within the Bills), extend so far beyond its limits as almost to double the amount of population, if these parishes are included entire: It has, therefore, been necessary to ascertain the increase or diminution upon the entire parishes, and afterwards to apportion it between the City without the Walls and the out-parishes.’¹⁷

The unwary reader can easily be misled by this. Rickman is not saying here that the Bills were inaccurate as such, but that division between the City without the Walls and certain neighbouring out- parishes might be so. As will be shown later, the boundaries between neighbouring parishes, in any case, were very permeable.

There was, however, another problem. Parish returns were sometimes either omitted or were grossly inaccurate. Birch wrote in 1759 of ‘omissions in many [returns], there is good reason to believe, are never supplied or corrected. This is often ascribed to negligence ... What allowance is to be made for these omissions, can be hardly settled; but it is judged, that they are not inconsiderable.’¹⁸

The situation in 1781 was no better. Thus Black:

I made it my business to find out and converse with a variety of parish clerks, in different parts of this metropolis: most of them agreed in opinion with me, that besides radical defects in the christenings and burials, there were many other gross omissions, arising from scandalous neglect in some of their brethren. One instance I shall mention, and many more, though perhaps not altogether so flagrant, I am confident might be collected. The parish clerk of St. Matthew’s, Bethnal Green ... made no return to the general hall during the last year, of either births or burials, and in the year 1769 he returned only four burials; whereas in former years this

parish alone usually returned 3, 4, and sometimes 500 burials. I was assured that the company of parish clerks, in their corporate capacity, *even if willing*, want power to compel their perverse brother of Bethnal-Green to make more regular and correct returns: it seems almost optional.’¹⁹

The figures for Bethnal Green continued to fluctuate in a drastic manner well into the nineteenth century.²⁰

3. Dissenters

The Bills did not include those buried in non-Anglican burying grounds. It excluded Jews (there were separate Jewish burying grounds), Roman Catholics, Quakers, and Protestant dissenters. The question of where Protestant dissenters were buried is an interesting one. In the mid-eighteenth century, Maitland noted the common belief that the number of dissenters in London was about equal to the members of the established Church; he himself calculated that they formed about 12 per cent of the population.²¹ Four pages earlier in his *History*, he had produced a figure for dissenters of 6 per cent of all burials, although in making this estimate he had admittedly erred on the side of caution. Historians have not let themselves be crucially hampered by this. Wrigley and Schofield found, on the basis of a random sample of nonconformist registers, that under-registration of births was more affected than under-registration of deaths by non-Anglican groups, particularly after 1780, and included the estimates in their list of correction factors.²² Landers accepted their list, adjusting it for London.²³ It obviously makes a difference to total figures. For example, the large dissenter burial ground at Bunhill Fields, whose gravedigger informed Maitland in 1729 that between seven and eight hundred burials took place each year, was omitted.²⁴ However, in the absence of civil registration and a religious census for the second half of the eighteenth century, we

cannot easily know the extent to which dissenters absented themselves from Anglican burial grounds.²⁵ The dissenting burial grounds would not have employed clerks who were members of the Parish Clerks' Company. The extent of dissenter burials will be returned to later, but for now it should also be remembered that the local impact of religious dissent may well have varied across the metropolis.

4. Infants

Rickman commented that 'children who die before baptism are interred without any religious ceremony, and consequently are not registered.'²⁶

Berry and Schofield long ago demonstrated that in the eighteenth century the birth-baptism interval widened, though with great local variations, concluding that it averaged out at a month.²⁷ Their data showed that London parishioners were at least as dilatory as their provincial counterparts in baptising their children. Much ingenuity was shown by Wrigley in accounting for early neonatal deaths that appeared in neither baptism nor burial registers.²⁸ However, stillbirths and abortive children *do* appear in large numbers in the Bills - not necessarily all of them - and that coverage seems to vary over time so that, assuming that such entries really do refer to children born dead (rather than those who lived for a few hours or even longer) it seems reasonable to assume that most of those born live were also registered at burial. Neonatal mortality calls for detailed and informed demographic investigation now underway.²⁹

5. Burials exported from the area of London covered by the Bills

This will be considered at more length later but Maitland noted it in 1756 and Thomas Birch, an early compiler of the Bills, in 1759:

Thus Maitland:

I have for divers Years observed, that the number of persons carried from London to be inhum'd in other parts of the country, is greater than that of those brought from all other places in the kingdom to be buried in this City and suburbs.³⁰

And Birch:

Many are frequently removed from one parish to be buried in another, that are both within the bills; which makes no alteration upon the whole. But great numbers are carried from parishes in town to be buried in the country. This number has probably increased, as the fashion of having country-houses has more prevailed'

He gave an example of 'one of the largest and most populous parishes in Westminster...in which as careful a register made as in any, the account is found to stand thus:'

an annual average of 1074 burials had taken place over the last ten years, but a further 261 bodies were exported from the parish, 124 bodies were imports.

Birch commented on these figures, attempting to draw general conclusions from this and other evidence:

Those, who are brought in to be buried, are carefully registered; those who are carried out, are not so. Such are entered by themselves in the burial account, as come to the knowledge of those, whose business it is to attend to these matters: but of these, many are heard of but by accident, and some not at all. Supposing the number of persons carried away, and not brought to account, to be one sixth ... this will make the whole one fifth more than are registered in the bills.³¹

Given the recent ‘resurrection’ of the Bills we would argue that they need to be examined in more detail. They have not been examined on their own terms. The reason for this is that the Bills only survive as simple aggregated numbers. What is needed for a proper analysis is the raw material that went to make up the Bills – the lists of interments recorded by each parish, whose details were summed and returned by the parish clerk to the Parish Clerk’s Company Hall every week.³² This can be done, for some London parishes, because of the survival of detailed sextons’ books. Here it is proposed to examine one such set in detail, that belonging to the parish of St Martin-in-the-Fields. The value of these books is that they supply a great deal more information than do parish registers about those who died and those who were buried in the parish.³³ They also record stillbirths, which the parish register did not. Above all, these books enable us to distinguish between deaths and burials, in a manner that the aggregate figures given in the Bills do not.

The sextons’ books.

The parish of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in Westminster had a population between 1725 and the end of the century, of between twenty five and thirty thousand.³⁴ The sextons’ books, at least for St Martin’s, contain the name, address and other details of individuals who died, or who

were buried, locally. The fullest books survive more or less intact from 1747 to 1825 and contain 69,350 entries. From 1806 these data have been supplemented with 3,478 burials of paupers and others interred at a new parish burial ground located in Camden Town, who were registered separately. Figure 1 presents the annual totals in the Sextons' books as a percentage of those burials returned to the Parish Clerk's Company and subsequently published as the returns made by St Martin in the Fields, listed in the Bills.³⁵

FIGURE 1

Figure 1 shows that there was a pretty close concordance until the late 1760s, and then a growing disparity. What was going on?

In the first place, there was the burial ground in Camden Town. These data, which were kept in a separate register for the burial ground, was not included in either the Sexton's books or the Anglican parish register. The burial ground was situated outside the Bills of Mortality, and was opened in 1806, and is separately recorded in the (then LCC's) *Survey of London*.³⁶ One would therefore expect a disparity to commence in that year.

Clearly the opening of the Camden Town burial ground meant that the Bills increasingly underregister deaths for St Martin's from 1806, but there is a significant mismatch from the 1760s. A large part of the answer stems from the fact that from 1767 the Sexton's books record a good proportion of all *exported* corpses, labelling them as 'certificate' burials.

As noted above, contemporaries were aware of burial exports. However, the number of corpses exported outside the London area was probably relatively small. Much more significant were

those Londoners who died in one London parish but were buried in another one, often in fact a neighbouring one. These exported corpses were listed as ‘certificate burials’, recorded by the sexton but not included in the returns made by the parish clerk in the Bills of Mortality. The aggregate figures in the London Bills of Mortality which list the number of burials contributed by each parish mask this fact. Under the rules of the parish clerk’s company, those dying in one parish but who were buried elsewhere in London were supposed to be issued a certificate by the exporting parish, testifying that the body had been searched and details of cause of death and age duly recorded.³⁷ If the separately registered Camden Town burials, and certificate burials are omitted from the sextons’ total, listed from all, we get Figure 2.

FIGURE 2

There is now a close correspondence between the totals in the Bills of Mortality and the number of burials recorded in the Sexton’s books. This is clearer when a five-year moving average is taken. Burial customs and practices, therefore, caused a significant under-reporting of *deaths* in the London Bills for this large West End parish which we can only identify accurately from 1767. Before 1767 individuals dying locally but exported elsewhere do not appear in the Sexton’s books (or the local parish register). From 1806 the totals returned in the Bills become still more misleading due to the omission of all those who were transported to the parochial burial ground of Camden Town, and registered separately.³⁸

So the London Bills record only local burials, and omit the deaths of those who were carried out of the parish for interment. This is not unexpected, but the volume of this traffic was very considerable. The obvious corollary, of course, is that many of those buried locally did not

die locally. We know this because the Sexton's books commonly identify those individuals imported from elsewhere for burial. The Bills are thus (at least in most cases) reliable records of parochial *burials*, but not necessarily of parochial *deaths*. The extent to which incoming burials cancel out exported corpses was significant and helped to reduce the deficit caused by burial export. Nonetheless it is surely important to bear in mind when using the Bills at a parochial level that they may be, at best, only crude guides to the number of local *deaths*. This has a wider significance since analysis of deaths by district or parish is greatly complicated if corpses are moving in quantity across parish boundaries.

Figure 3 counts the number of imported burials and expresses them as a percentage of the total number of records in the Sexton's books (including Camden Town) between 1747 and 1824.

FIGURE 3

The proportion of burial imports ran at about ten per cent of all burials until the early 1760s. Imported burials exhibited a surge between the mid 1760s and 1778, with a particularly sharp peak 1769-70. After 1778 the proportion of imported burials fell back to previous levels. The surge in imported burials coincided with, and was almost certainly related to, the opening of a new parish burial ground in Drury Lane, which may have been perceived as relatively salubrious by those living outside the parish. Not until 1771, too, were strangers using the ground charged double fees. That ground probably became less attractive, and increasingly overstocked, from 1778, when the parish closed the burial grounds adjacent to the parish workhouse. From this date most parishioners buried locally were interred at Drury Lane. Perhaps worst of all, from the point of view of non-parishioners hoping to inter relatives at

Drury Lane, was that from 1778 local workhouse paupers were being buried there, probably in a reserved spot. This is not the place for a detailed investigation of the ‘commodification of burial’ in Georgian London³⁹ but it is worth noting in passing that this raises the possibility that both the imported and exported might have had a different age or cause of death or social profile to the locally interred population. This is obviously particularly serious if one is using the Bills to make a spatial analyses of mortality, since a proportion of those buried in any one London parish actually died in another. Preliminary analysis, however, suggests that the age and cause of death profile of both imported and exported burials in the parish was reasonably representative of the wider population.⁴⁰ In terms of social status, however, it seems likely that the ‘moving dead’ were rarely (at least before 1806) drawn from the poorest sections of society. It is also clearly the case that one cannot necessarily assume that all peaks and troughs in any given London parish burial series are caused by changes in local mortality patterns – they could be caused by changes in local interment practices.

London burial customs are sufficiently important to merit an article of their own. The desire to be buried in one’s ‘home’ parish might say a great deal about attitudes, both towards the parish and towards the treatment of human remains.⁴¹ Our study suggests that the ‘traffic in corpses’ in London was not by any means constant. Only a detailed analysis can uncover the reasons that might have caused the dying to be carried away for burial, and why there are apparently local and long term-variations in the volume of such traffic. Preliminary results suggest that the relative size of burial fees in neighbouring parishes could well explain some of the surges and dips in the popularity of extra parish burial.⁴² A particularly extreme example of the effect of the ‘traffic in corpses’ can be found in the neighbouring parish of St Anne, Soho, and it is to this parish that we now turn.

Commodification of burial and ‘clandestine burial centres’ in Georgian London

The totals of burials returned in the London Bills for one West End parish suggest that they can be very misleading guides to the number of deaths that occurred locally. This will not be a great surprise to students of later nineteenth-century London, where removals to institutions, such as hospitals, and death in those hospitals can easily lead to a misleading interpretation of an area's health.⁴³ Our evidence from St Martin's, suggests that the proportions of imported and exported bodies in the parish varied over time, often quite significantly. Landers, in his chapter on 'spatial variations in mortality', does not take this phenomenon into account, though he does group parishes together, and it is difficult to see how he could have done more.⁴⁴ We should note, in this connection, that even the St Martin's sexton's books probably *under* record the export of corpses even after 1767, since it is clear that some exported corpses escaped local 'certification' - a problem that was recognised by the Parish Clerk's Company in the late seventeenth century.⁴⁵ It is clear that, in particular metropolitan localities, surges in burial exports and imports might be misinterpreted as fluctuations in local death rates. For instance, if only a purely aggregate count was undertaken, the disappearance of CamdenTown burials in the early nineteenth century in St Martin's might suggest a very significant improvement in the local mortality experience. A particularly extreme example of the effect of the 'traffic in corpses' can be found in the neighbouring parish of St Anne, Soho.

St Anne, Soho (otherwise St Anne, Westminster) had one single churchyard adjoining the parish church throughout the period. It was roughly half the size of St Martin's, with a population of just over 15,000 in 1801.⁴⁶ The parish shared a boundary with St Martin-in-the-Fields, St James Piccadilly, St Giles-in-the-Fields, St Pancras and St Marylebone (both of the latter outside the London Bills of Mortality). It also had the distinction of being what might

be termed a major ‘clandestine burial centre’ in Georgian London.⁴⁷ The parish authorities in St Anne seem to have been charging relatively low burial fees in the eighteenth century: in particular they do not seem to have been charging ‘strangers’ the customary double fees for interment in the parish churchyard. The effect of this fee structure was that the churchyard attracted huge numbers of burials from neighbouring parishes. The practice of charging strangers double fees was introduced in 1791, and, as a result, the import of corpses from the surrounding area ceased almost at once.⁴⁸ What makes Soho such an interesting case is that it can be demonstrated that (contrary to the experience of St Martin’s) few, if any, of the imported interments were returned in the London Bills of Mortality. As a result huge numbers of burials were omitted from the London Bills altogether - so many, in fact, that for a number of years one burial in twenty *from the entire London area* can be shown to have been interred ‘clandestinely’ in Soho’s parish churchyard.⁴⁹ Figure 4 shows the details.

FIGURE 4

Figure 4 shows that the absolute numbers of interments in Soho reached very high levels. At its peak, in the 1760s, more than 1500 burials *per year* were recorded in the parish register. Of these the overwhelming majority were imported from other London parishes. Between 1750 and 1791 between sixty and eighty per cent of this huge number were from neighbouring parishes. This on its own would be an interesting contribution to the macabre literature on ‘traffic in corpses’, but it is of peculiar importance for London’s demographic experience that few of these were returned in the Bills. Figure 5 shows that from the 1750s until 1791 the totals returned by the parish in the Bills were often only 20 per cent of the true total found in the parish register. For some reason, the clerk(s) at Soho omitted thousands of interments in his/their returns to the London Parish Clerks’ Company. Soho returns in the Bills thus massively undercount local burials. Since most of these burials were imports from

surrounding parishes, and since we know from the rules operated by the London Parish Clerk's Company that those burials were not (at least in theory) supposed to be returned by exporting parishes, it follows that the 'missing' Soho burials were probably omitted entirely from the London Bills of Mortality. This would only *not* be the case if the exporting parishes *were* returning as local burials those not in fact buried locally to the Parish Clerks' Company. The evidence from St Martin's, at least, shows that exported burials cannot have been returned and that their clerk was following the prescribed rules of the Parish Clerks' company designed to avoid significant double counting.⁵⁰

FIGURE 5

It is instructive to compare the known missing burials to the overall totals of burials in London returned in the Bills. Figure 6 does precisely this. It depicts the number of burials that were not returned in the St Anne Soho returns (i.e. the parish register total minus the Bills total) as a percentage of the total number of burials returned in the London Bills (for the purposes of the calculation of percentages, the missing Soho burials have been added to the totals recorded in Marshall, *Mortality in the Metropolis*).

FIGURE 6

Figure 6 demonstrates that Soho's 'clandestine' burials occasionally accounted for one in twenty of all dead Londoners reported in the Bills, and that between the late 1750s and late 1770s, the London Bills of Mortality under-register burials by between three and five per cent due *entirely* to the 'Soho effect'. After fees were raised to prevent this flood of corpses in 1791 burial imports declined, and the phenomenon ceased abruptly. Clandestine burial 'centres' such as Soho will surely have an impact on attempts to use the Bills to look at patterns of mortality within the metropolis.⁵¹ The 'Soho' effect on the Bills, as it happens, was noticed by a former (anonymous) Master of the Parish Clerk's Company. This individual went on to repeat Birch and Black's point about the compilation of the Bills, namely the

inability of the Company to enforce accurate returns in the eighteenth century. He claimed, in a letter in the *Gazette and New Daily Advertiser*, Jan 29th, 1765 that:

'Our Court of Assistants want power, not inclination, to punish delinquents, and those of the greater sort; I mean, Sir, Clerks in Orders of large parishes; they for the most part baptize and bury without their deputy Clerk, and therefore their returns are greatly deficient. The return of St. A- W----- in the last Yearly Bill is only 348, and yet I am assured, by an antient inhabitant of that parish, that they buried near 700 last year.⁵² When I was Master of the Company, many weeks we had no returns from thence. I ordered Mr Mackie, our Clerk, to remonstrate upon such neglects; he did, but it was in vain. The deputy Clerk not being one of our body, could not be fined; and the Clerk in orders is above our reach...'

In conclusion, what has this parish-based study suggested about the reliability of London's Bills of Mortality in the eighteenth century? Firstly, the Bills do reflect, for most parishes but not all, the number of burials that took place locally. However, it is also clear that, as contemporaries suspected, burials that took place in distant and extra parochial churchyards might be omitted. In St Martin's the totals returned in the Bills completely omit all burials at the distant Camden Town burial ground from 1806 - even though in theory the site was parochial it was located outside the increasingly archaic boundary of the London Bills.

Secondly, the data from the parish of St Martin in the Fields suggest that although the totals given in the Bills do represent burials that took place locally, this number may not correspond that closely with the number of local *deaths*. This was because the volume and direction of the local traffic in corpses in St Martin's proved to be on a significant scale: large numbers of bodies were both imported and exported from the parish. If this phenomenon was general this

could distort local totals reported for any given parish in the London Bills. A second point that has more general application is that both the St Martin's evidence, and particularly that from Soho, suggested that the traffic in corpses could fluctuate considerably over time – there was certainly no linear trend in its observed volume. Local fluctuations given in the London Bills of Mortality for any given parish might sometimes reflect alterations in local interment practices, rather than fluctuations in local mortality rates.

Perhaps the most dramatic finding here is that one London parish was actively profiting from the market for cheap interment to such an extent that it became a very significant clandestine burial centre. Data from St Anne, Soho revealed what was in effect a huge demographic sink hole in London's West End, which drew in corpses in large numbers from neighbouring parishes. It was a sink hole, because the parish clerk's of St Anne's ignored the rules, and indeed the pleas, of the London Parish Clerk's company and returned only a fraction of the thousands of imported burials to the London Bills. Thousands of burials were thus omitted completely. We do not know if there were other sinkholes in London of this sort and only a comprehensive survey of all available parish register evidence would uncover them. It is certainly the case, however, that other parishes attracted disproportionate numbers of corpses from neighbouring parishes by levying relatively low burial fees. Clearly further work on London's Bills would need to investigate such a possibility. Lastly, we surely still need to know more about the traffic in corpses, both in London and in the rest of provincial England. Surely the local historians of Britain can find more parish registers with the requisite detail to test and amplify Schofield's now classic study of Barming?

FIGURES

Figure 1. *London Bills of Mortality totals as a percentage of deaths recorded in the Sextons' books for St Martin in the Fields, 1748-1824*⁵³

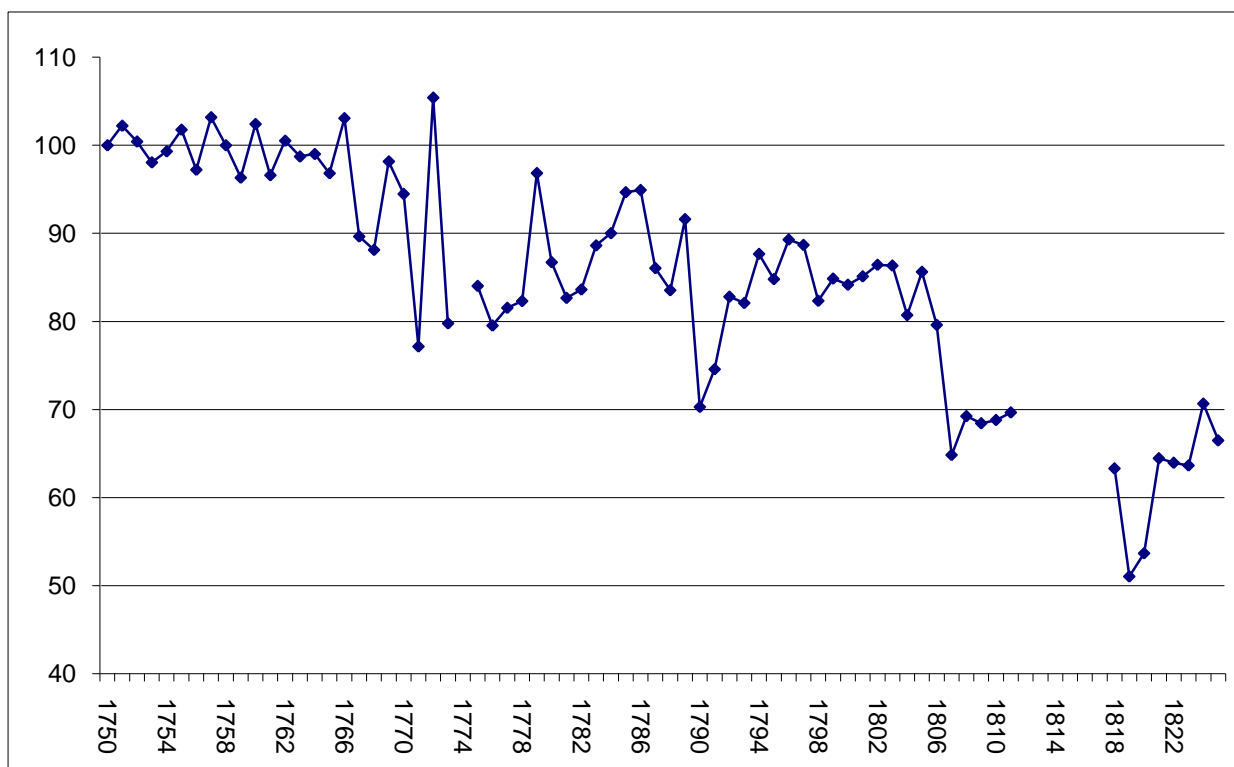


Figure 2. *London Bills of Mortality totals and five-year moving average as a percentage of burials recorded in the Sextons' books for St Martin in the Fields, 1748-1824, omitting 'certificate' and Camden Town burials.*⁵⁴

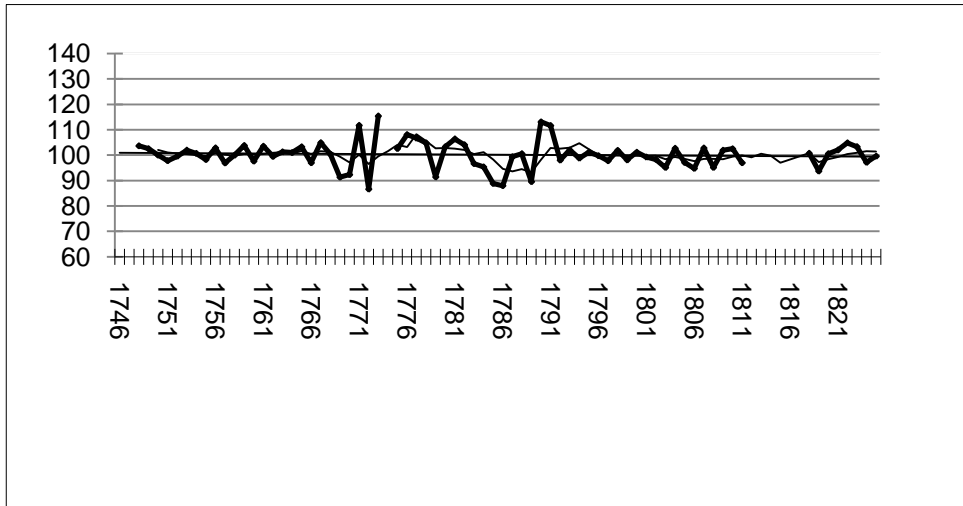


Figure 3. Percentage burial imports in St. Martins 1748-1825 (Burials from outside parish against totals recorded in Sextons' books (and Camden Town registers from 1806)).

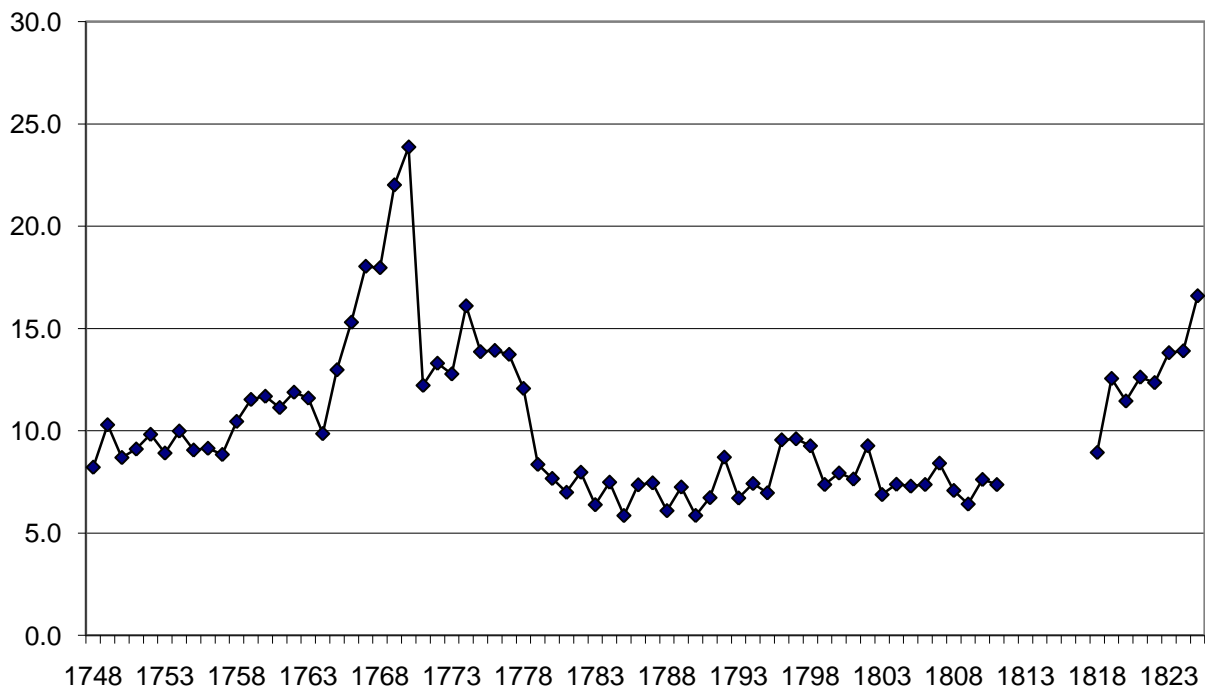


Figure 4. *Burials recorded in St Anne, Soho, parish register, 1747-1825*

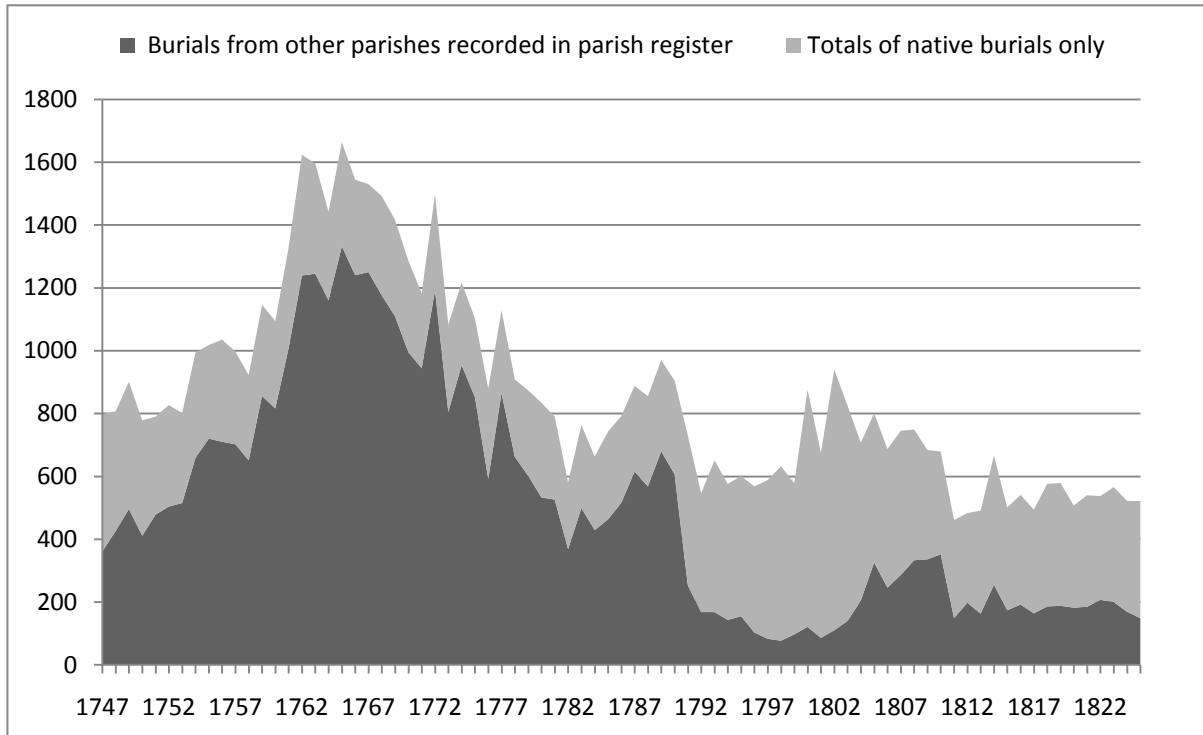


Figure 5. *Parish register burials omitted from St Anne, Soho's return in the London Bills of Mortality.*⁵⁵

Comparison between St Anne parish register and burials returned in Bills
(St Anne Bills *100/St Anne PR totals)

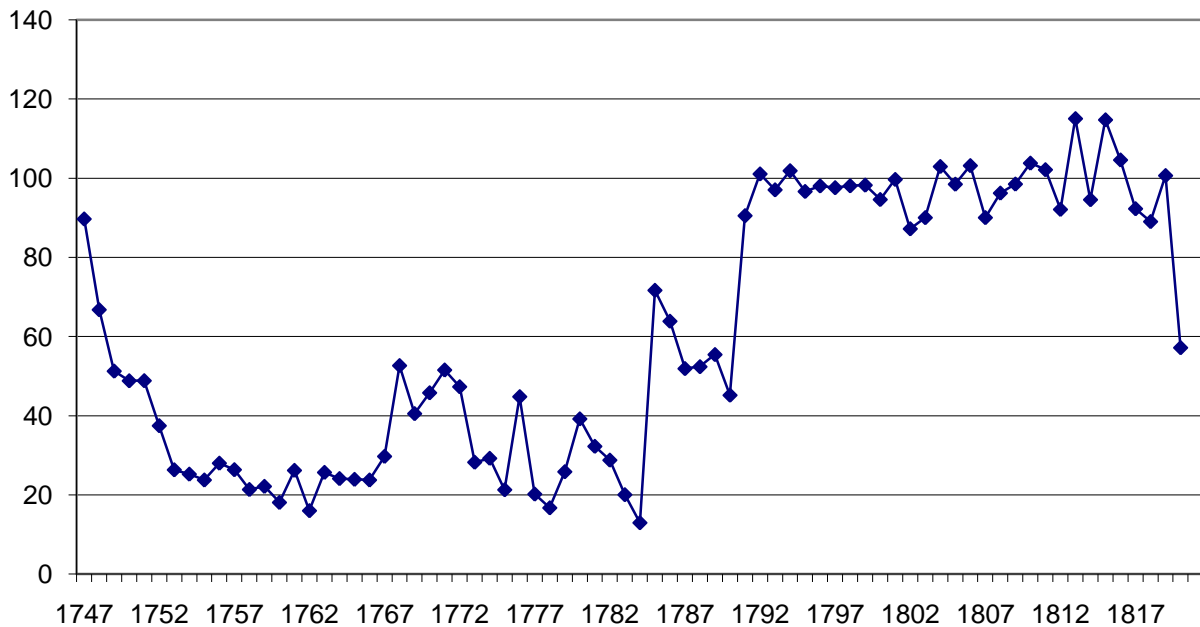
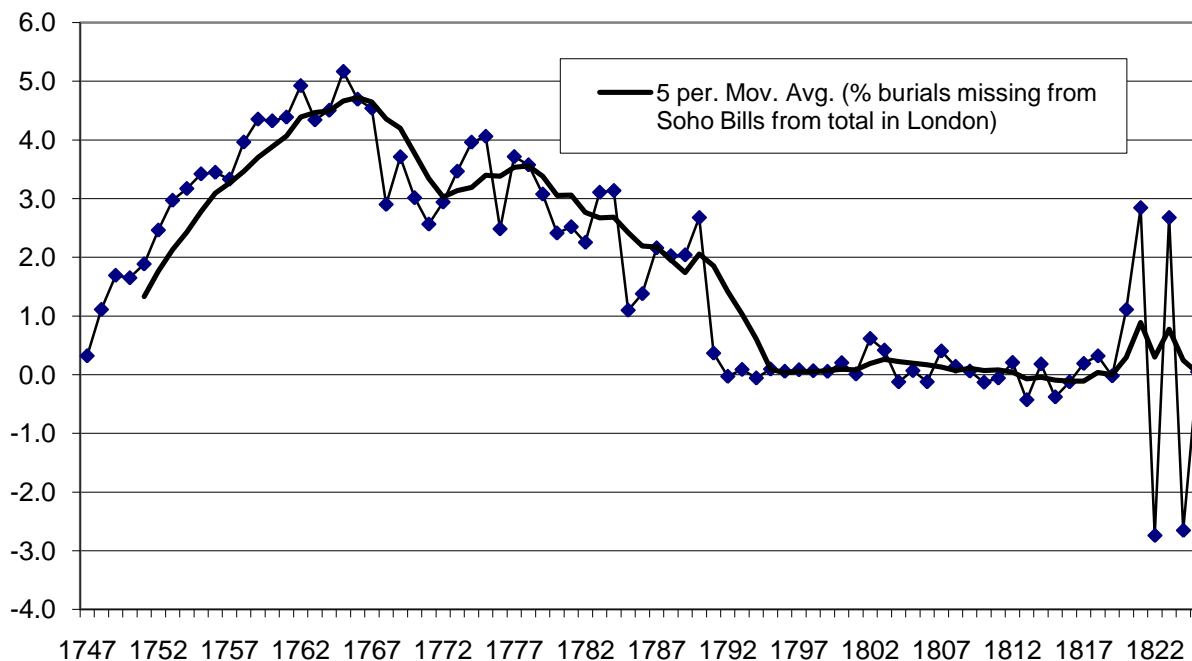


Figure 6 *London Bills of Mortality and the 'Soho' effect*

¹ We would like to thank Drs. John Black and Peter Jones for so conscientiously entering the data for St. Martin's, particularly John Black for checking for duplicates, certificate burials, and also for collecting the data for St. Anne Soho. We would also like to thank Prof. Robert Woods and Dr Romola Davenport and unknown *LPS* referees for commenting on earlier drafts of this article, well as Dr. Peter Razzell for generously sharing his work on London's demography.

² M. Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1965), 35.

³ W. Ogle, 'An Inquiry into the Trustworthiness of the Old Bills of Mortality', *Journ. Roy. Stat. Soc.*, 55 (1892), 451: 'It is then abundantly clear that...these imperfect records of burials supply no trustworthy basis for a comparison between the past and present mortality in London.'

⁴ M. Buer, *Health, Wealth and Population in the early days of the Industrial Revolution* (1926), 22-35.

⁵ M. Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1965), 36. The first edition of the book appeared in 1925. Both came out of the LSE. George thanked Lillian Knowles for reading the MS; Buer dedicated her own book to Knowles' memory. Heberden believed that the Bills were more or less accurate in aggregate; (their) 'agreement with each other is quite inexplicable

upon any supposition than that of their being drawn from the uniformity of nature and truth': William Heberden, 'On the mortality of London', *Medical Transactions of the College of Physicians*, iv. 103, also quoted in George, *London Life*, 36

⁶ M. Dorothy George, 'Some Causes of the Increase of Population in the Eighteenth Century as Illustrated by London', *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 127 (Sept., 1922), 325-352. She repeated this in *London Life*, ch.1.

⁷ E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871. A reconstruction.* (1981), 77-83

⁸ Earlier attempts to exploit the London Bills include those by Ian Sutherland, 'When was the Great Plague? Mortality in London, 1563 to 1665' in D.V. Glass and R. Revelle, eds., *Population and social change* (London: Edward Arnold, 1972), 287-320; Andrew Appleby, 'Nutrition and disease : the case of London 1550-1750,' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6 (1975), 1-22; Patrick R. Galloway, 'Annual variations in deaths by age, deaths by cause, prices and weather in London, 1670-1830.' *Population Studies*, 39 (1985), 487-505.

⁹ L.D. Schwarz, *London in the age of industrialisation* (Cambridge, 1992), ch.5 , with a specific defence of the Bills on 125; John Landers, *Death and the metropolis: studies in the demographic history of London, 1670-1830* (Cambridge, 1993). Landers' use of the Bills is defended on 91-93.

¹⁰ R. Woods, 'Mortality in eighteenth-century London : a new look at the Bills'. *Local Population Studies*, 77 (2006), 12-23.

¹¹ <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/pauperlives/>

¹² Figures taken from B.R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1988), 26-27

¹³ W. Maitland, *The History and Survey of London* (1756), ii 740

¹⁴ Maitland, *History*, ii. 742. These burials have been added to Maitland's total.

¹⁵ 1801 census, PRA, p. 200; 1821 census: the survey was carried out in the last six months of 1794. In the 1821 census Rickman repeated the estimate of a third: 1821 census, 160.

¹⁶ 1821 census, p. 160.

¹⁷ 1801 census , 199.

¹⁸ Birch, *Collection*, p.6.

¹⁹ William Black, *Observations medical and political, on the small-pox, and the advantages and disadvantages of general inoculation, especially in cities...*, 2nd edition (1781), pp. 270-271, See also below, p. xxxx.

²⁰ For instance, from 454 burials in 1796 to 277 in 1805: J.Marshall, *Mortality of the Metropolis*(1832), 81.

²¹ Maitland, ii 745-746.

²² Wrigley and Schofield, *Population History*, 89-92

²³ For instance Landers' construction of infant mortality: *Death and the Metropolis*, 184-195, 351-357, where dissenters are not mentioned . Landers uses Wrigley and Schofield's correction factors in ch.5 of his book, specifically 163-166. He adjusted his IMR estimates for effects of non-Anglican baptisms and burials.

²⁴ Maitland, *History*, ii. 741.

²⁵ If, as is not unlikely, Anglican burial grounds moved to the outskirts of towns in the earlier nineteenth century, the remaining nonconformist burial grounds would have increased their significance: *Select Committee on Improvement of the Health of Towns*, P.P. 1842, .P. 1842(327), x. qq. 187, 190-1,

²⁶ 1801 census, parish register returns, P.P.1801-2, vii. 6

²⁷ B.M. Berry and R.S.Schofield, 'Age at baptism in pre-industrial England', *Population Studies* 25 (1971), 453-463 and 473 for the detailed account on which the dilatoriness of Londoners is based; E.A.Wrigley, 'Births and baptisms: the use of Anglican burial registers as a source of information about the number of births in England before the beginning of civil registration'. *Population Studies* 31 (1977) , 281-312, at 281; Wrigley and Schofield, *Population History*, 96-97.

²⁸ Razzell has claimed that 'about a third of all births were omitted from the baptism registers', 1760-1834: 'The Evaluation of Baptism as a Form of Birth Registration through Cross- Matching Census and Parish Register Data: a study in Methodology', *Population Studies* 26 (1972), 145. Wrigley also found that the Registrar General, who was of course supposed to collect all deaths accurately,

produced an endogenous infant mortality for Hanover Square in 1841-2 less than half that of England and Wales, while St. George-in-the-East was half the level of Hanover Square! Wrigley, 'Births and baptisms', 299.

²⁹ By Dr. Romola Davenport. See also Chris Galley, 'The stillbirth rate in Early Modern England', *LPS*, 81 (2008), pp.75-83 and the references therein, particularly Wrigley and Schofield, *Population History* and E.A.Wrigley, R.S.Schofield, R.S.Davies, J.E.Oeppen, *English Population History from family reconstitution* (Cambridge, 1997), C.Galley and N.Shelton, 'Bridging the gap: determining long-term changes in infant mortality in pre-registration England and Wales.' *Population Studies*, 55 (2001), 65-77.

³⁰ Maitland, *History of London*, ii.742.

³¹ T. Birch, *A collection of the yearly bills of mortality, from 1657 to 1758 inclusive*. ... (London: Millar, 1759), 5. We would like to thank Dr. Peter Razzell for this reference.

³² There are good reasons to suppose that not all clerks complied, see below, xxx.

³³ These are held at City of Westminster Archives Centre (COWAC), F2469, 419/233-244.

³⁴ It was much more than this at the start of the century, but in 1725 Hanover Square, something like a quarter of the parish, was detached. The population estimates for St Martin's are based on a multiplier from parish baptism data. This is, of course, imprecise, but it should be noted that St. Martins was a built-up area of London throughout our period. The reader should, however be aware that these population estimates are reliant on both a stable birth rate and the applicability of Wrigley and Schofield's inflation ratios, which latter are very high in the early nineteenth century. It is very likely that our estimates exaggerate population growth after 1800, something suggested by the 1821 census, which is lower (at around 28,800) than our lowest estimate for that year.

³⁵ Marshall, *Mortality in the Metropolis*, 76, 80.

³⁶ For the Camden Town registers, see, WAC 419/123. For the history of the Camden Town burial ground, see 'Camden Town', *Survey of London: volume 24: The parish of St Pancras part 4: King's Cross Neighbourhood* (1952), 134-139. URL:

<http://www.britishhistory.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=65574> Date accessed: 19 November 2009.

³⁷ R. H. Adams, *The Parish Clerks of London. A History of the Worshipful Company of Parish Clerks of London*, (London, 1971), 59-60. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, parish clerks were to obey the order that ‘no *Parish-Clerk* do presume to Receive, or suffer any Corpse to be buried in the Parish of which he is Clerk, unless a Certificate be first obtained under the Hand of the *Parish-Clerk* where the Party died, testifying that the Corpse has been Viewed and Searched, pursuant to several Orders of the Lord-Mayor and Court of Aldermen from time to time, enjoining the same’, Adams, *Parish Clerks*, plate IX.

³⁸ Even though the Camden Town ground was, initially, made an extra parochial district of the parish.

³⁹ For the suggestion that ‘complete commodification of burial’ proceeded apace from the late seventeenth century, see Vanessa Harding, *The Dead and the Living in Paris and London, 1500-1670* (Cambridge, 2002), 272.

⁴⁰ The main differences seem to be that stillbirths were rarely moved post mortem, and that, at least in St Martin’s, adult males were more likely to be exported..

⁴¹ Harding, *The Dead and the Living*., esp. 94 - 101. For eighteenth-century burial customs, see in particular Keith Snell, ‘Gravestones, belonging and local attachment in England 1700-2000’, *Past and Present* 179 (2003), 97-134.

⁴² See Jeremy Boulton, ‘The commodification of burial in Georgian London? Burial choice in the West End 1747-1825,’ unpublished paper given to BSPS conference, 7th July 2010, London.

⁴³ Graham Mooney, Bill Luckin, Andrea Tanner, ‘Patient pathways: solving the problem of institutional mortality in London during the later nineteenth century’. *Social History of Medicine*, 12:2 (1999), 227-269.

⁴⁴ Landers, *Death and the Metropolis* 301-350.

⁴⁵ Adams, *Parish Clerks of London*, 59-60 says that numerous breaches of the system led to a standard certificate being introduced in 1690. Boulton ‘Burials of a Consumer Society’ shows that linking known St Martin’s burials found in neighbouring parishes to named certificate burials recorded in our Sexton’s books produces an *undercount* of between 25 and 40%.

⁴⁶ Marshall, *Mortality in the Metropolis*, 44.

⁴⁷ It was certainly not the only one. In the early part of our period, St Paul's Covent Garden buried relatively large numbers of non-parishioners, but operated on a smaller absolute scale: see Boulton 'The commodification of burial in Georgian London'.

⁴⁸ See COWAC A2203/50-3. Double fees were introduced in February 1791. The revision of fees seems to have followed the death of the Sexton, a Mr. Joseph Palmer. Candidates for his position were asked to swear an oath that 'We whose names are undersigned do agree that if the Choice of Sexton falls to any one of us that we will abide by the Order of the Vestry on Monday last and which was carried unanimous, that Non-parishioners (Church and Vault excepted) shall not be buried in future in the Church Yards of this parish without paying double dues'. The references to churchyards may relate to spatial distinctions in the existing churchyard. St Anne's still had only one graveyard in 1843, Robert Bard, *Graveyard London. Lost and forgotten burial grounds*, London, 2008, 133.

⁴⁹ These are *maximum* totals, since burials from St Pancras and St Marylebone in Soho would not normally have been included in the London Bills. That said, such burials would have offset burials from the London area found in St Pancras and St Marylebone. Maitland found that St Marylebone and St Pancras buried together over 400 Londoners in 1729, Maitland, *History of London*, iii, 538.

⁵⁰ It should be noted in this regard that London *might* have been unusual in avoiding significant double counting. Wrigley and Schofield stated in 1981 that 'When a person died and was buried in a 'foreign parish' it was quite common for his burial to be recorded in his home parish as well as in the parish where he died' (*Population History of England*, 1981, 102, n21). Keith Snell, however, wrote in this journal in 1984 that in the event of post mortem mobility 'the registration occurred in the parish to which the corpse was removed' (Keith Snell, 'Parish registration and the study of labour mobility', *Local Pop. Studs.*, 33 (1984), 29-43 at 33. Roger Schofield's study of the traffic in corpses in Barming, Kent in the same issue of *LPS*, reported that the exceptionally detailed register 'does not allow us to observe the export of corpses from Barming for burial elsewhere'. (R Schofield, 'Traffic in corpses: some evidence from Barming, Kent, 1780-1812,' *LPS* 33 (1984), 50) Both of these studies

suggest, therefore, that even in provincial England, it was actually exceptional to register exported corpses: double counting of burials must therefore have been rare.

⁵¹ Landers, *Death and the Metropolis*, 168-83, 242-350.

⁵² The total of 348 is exactly the total reported for 1764 in Marshall, *Mortality and the Metropolis*, 76. However, the parish register records no less than 1442 burials in 1764, not 'near 700'.

⁵³ All the sextons' data are derived from City of Westminster archives: The published totals are from J. Marshall, *Mortality of the Metropolis* (London, 1832), 76, 80

⁵⁴ The Sexton's books are expressed as proportion of the Bills totals, where 100 represents exactly matching totals. A score of 125 would thus mean that the Sexton's books totals exceed the Bills totals by 25%, or put another way, that the Bills totals require multiplying by 1.25 to reach the Sexton's totals.

⁵⁵ It will be noted that there is considerable fluctuation in figure 6 in the early nineteenth century. This is almost certainly due to Soho returning zero returns in two years, and double returns in the intervening years.