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The Compton Census in NW Essex

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In January 1675/6 Gilbert Sheldon, Archbishop of Canterbury, directed that a census be made of the number of inhabitants (or conformists) papist recusants and dissenters in each parish. Much of the administrative work was carried out by Henry Compton, Bishop of London, after whom the census came to be called. The initiative for the census came from Lord Treasurer Danby who was anxious to convenience Charles II of the feasibility of steady support for the Church of England and needed figures to back the argument that the majority of English belonged to the established church. Sheldon also wrote to the Archbishop of York, Richard Steine suggesting that the census be taken in the Northern Province too. Most of England and Wales was therefore covered.

The census was taken by asking each parish three questions relating to: a) the number of inhabitants; b) the number of Popish recusants or persons suspected of recusancy; and c) the number of dissenters. The wording of the questions varied slightly from one ecclesiastical jurisdiction to another, but, in the majority of cases, no guidance was given about the age or sex of those to be counted. In many dioceses the returns were collected during the archdeacon's Easter visitation. This was the case in the diocese of London, archdeaconry of Colchester, of which north-west Essex formed part.

In this area there were two deaneries, Newport and Sampford, comprising a total of 36 parishes, excluding Chrishall, Newport and Takeley which were peculiars and as such exempt from archidiaconal visitation. Returns were received from 25 parishes and details are annexed. The totals for these two deaneries – Newport 1582 conformist, 0 papists and 32 nonconformists; and Sampford 3273 conformists, 0 papists and 165 nonconformists – are also given in the Manuscript in the William Salt Library in Stafford, which is one of the main documentary sources on the census. The 'conformists' figures for the diocese of London in the Salt MS

were almost certainly arrived at by subtracting the numbers of papists and nonconformists from the figures for inhabitants.

It will be noted that there is an unexplained discrepancy between the deanery totals and the 'addition totals' of the 25 parishes whose individual returns are listed. In general the figures obtained in the census must be treated with caution since the returns were made by individual incumbents, curates or churchwardens and edited locally. Different respondents interpreted the questions in different ways e.g. were women to be counted as well as men? Should children be included? Nevertheless the census does provide a point of reference for anyone undertaking a further study of the size of the population and its religious composition.

Diocese of London

Archdeaconry of Colchester¹

	Conformists	Papists	Nonconformists
Ashdon <i>sf</i>	131	00	09
Arkesden <i>np</i>	137	00	12
Bardfield magna <i>sf</i> ²	286	00	07
Bardfield parva <i>sf</i>	93	00	07
Birchanger <i>np</i>	65	00	06
Bumpsted Helion <i>sf</i>	200	00	00
Berden <i>np</i>	100	00	00
Chesterford magna <i>sf</i>	50	00	00
Chesterford parva <i>sf</i>			
Chissell magna <i>np</i>	154	00	02
Chissel parva <i>np</i>	32	00	02
Debden <i>sf</i>	365	00	03
Elsenham <i>sf</i>	174	00	06
Eluidon <i>np</i> ³	170	00	04
Farnham <i>np</i>			
Hadstock <i>sf</i>	148	00	03
Hempsted <i>sf</i>			
Henhams <i>sf</i>			
Haydon <i>np</i>			
Clavering <i>np</i>	367	00	03
Littlebury <i>np</i>	202	00	04
Mannden <i>np</i> ⁴			
Langley <i>np</i>			
Quenden <i>np</i>	73	00	01
Ricklin <i>np</i>	252	00	02
Radwinter <i>sf</i>			
Streethall <i>np</i>	10		
Stanstedmount fithet <i>sf</i>	348		20
Sampford parva <i>sf</i>	132		20
Sampford magna <i>sf</i>	237		31
Ugly <i>sf</i>	169		
Wicken bonaut <i>np</i>	20		02
Wenden magna & parva <i>np</i> ⁵			
Wenden lofts <i>np</i>			
Widdington <i>sf</i>			
Walden <i>sf</i> ⁶	940		60

Source: Whitemen, A. with Clapinson, M. (Eds.), *The Compton Census of 1676: a critical edition, Records of Social and Economic History, New Series X (1986).*

Notes

1. The deaneries of Newport and Sampford are grouped together. sf and np have been used to distinguish parishes in the two deaneries.
2. May include Bardfield Saling chapelry.
3. i.e. Elmdon. The spelling in the Salt MS has been followed throughout this list.
4. i.e. Manuden.
5. i.e. Wendens Ambo.
6. i.e. Saffron Walden.