

Catholic Statistics

Priests and Population in England and Wales, 1841 - 2001

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Abstract: This paper presents tables and graphs for the number of Catholic clergy and Mass Centres in England and Wales 1841-2001 and the total Catholic population 1901-2001 of England and Wales, based on figures published in the *Catholic Directory* over this timespan. The figures are also normed against the total (all faiths) population of the province.

Key words: *Catholic population; England and Wales; clergy; priests; Mass centres; census; Catholic Directory.*

The recent publication of the 2001 UK National Census provides an opportunity to compare the Catholic population of England and Wales with the total population. Using figures available in the *Catholic Directory* published every year, originally by private companies and later by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, we can consider the Catholic population throughout the 20th Century. The *Directory* also makes it possible to consider trends for the number of clergy and Mass centres back through much of the 19th Century.

We can presume that the *Directory's* figures for total numbers of priests (secular and religious combined) and total number of Mass centres (both parish churches and other chapels) should be fairly accurate, deriving from official sources. Figures available since 1901 concerning the number of Catholics present in the province of England & Wales constitute "softer" data. Gordon Heald¹ has noted how these figures are based on estimates supplied

¹ *The Tablet*, 19th June, 1999, p. 863.

by parish clergy, which vary enormously in particular parishes but when pooled give a steady indication nationally. His article² presents statistics for Mass attendance and reception of various sacraments from 1944 to 1998, which I do not reproduce in this paper.

For our present purposes I have taken data from the *Directory* at 10-yearly intervals starting in 1841 (the 1831 *Directory* gave no compiled statistics), choosing the decennial year to correspond to that of the British National Census. In some cases I have had to make a linear interpolation of missing data points; details of the sources of the data are appended in Table I. Data for the UK National Population, based on Census figures, is sourced from a table compiled by Seattle Community College.³

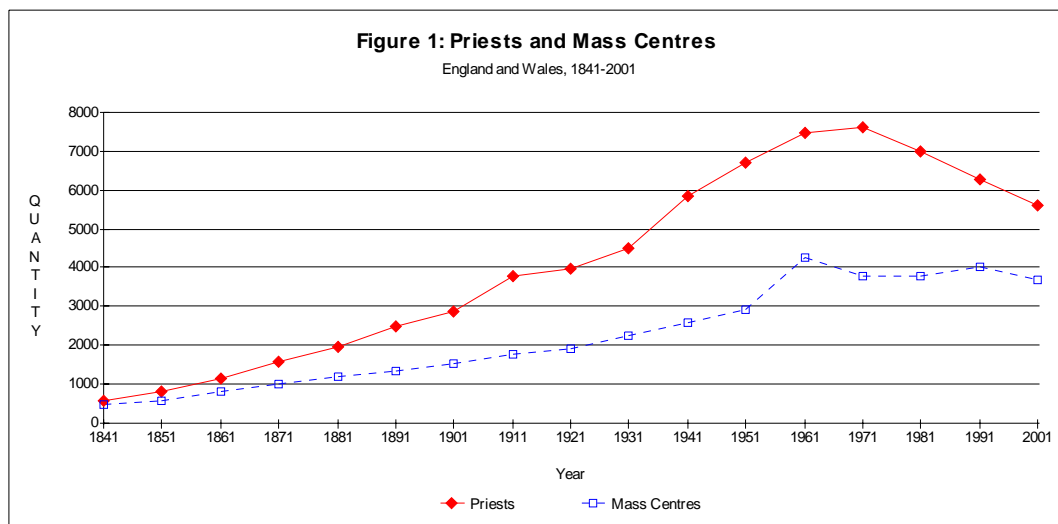


Figure 1 and Table II show the listed numbers of priests and Mass centres from 1841 to the present day. In the decade leading up to the 1850 restoration of the hierarchy, the Church in England and Wales grew by 265 extra priests and 123 mass centres. The slope of the graphs indicates that the growth then accelerated slightly and continued steadily at its new rate up to 1901. During the 20th Century, the number of vocations grew even more rapidly until numbers levelled off in the 1960s.

² *Op. cit.*, pp. 860-863.

³ <http://www.seattlecentral.org/qelp/sets/007/007.html>

The figures shown include retired clergy, so a graph of "active clergy", including all new vocations, would peak and fall somewhat earlier. Post-World War II population expansion seems to have triggered a major expansion of Mass Centres, which have remained fairly stable in number from the mid 1960s until the present.

The Catholic Directory did not include statistics for the estimated number of Catholic laity until the start of the 20th Century, so it is only possible to norm the numbers of priests against the total Catholic population (not necessarily practising, but known to the clergy returning figures) from 1901. Table III gives the population data from 1901 to 2001.

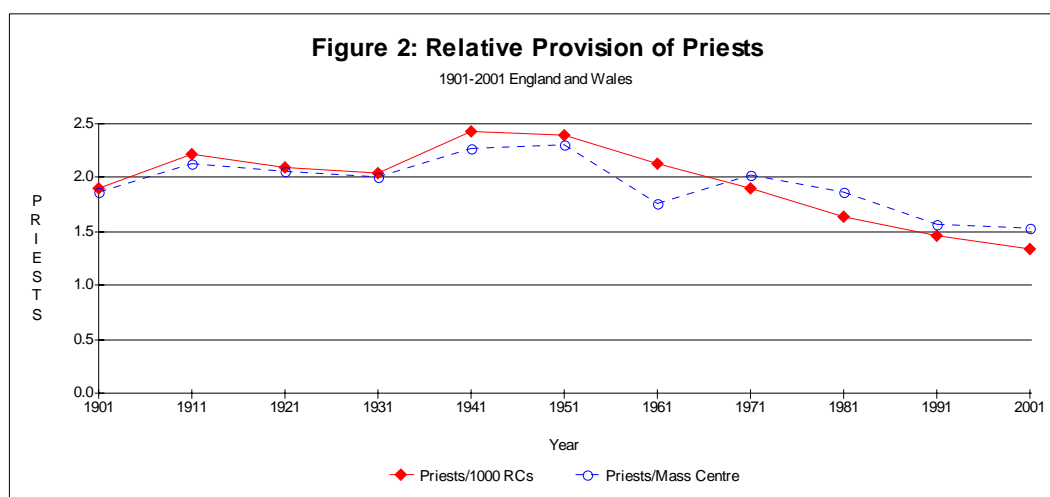
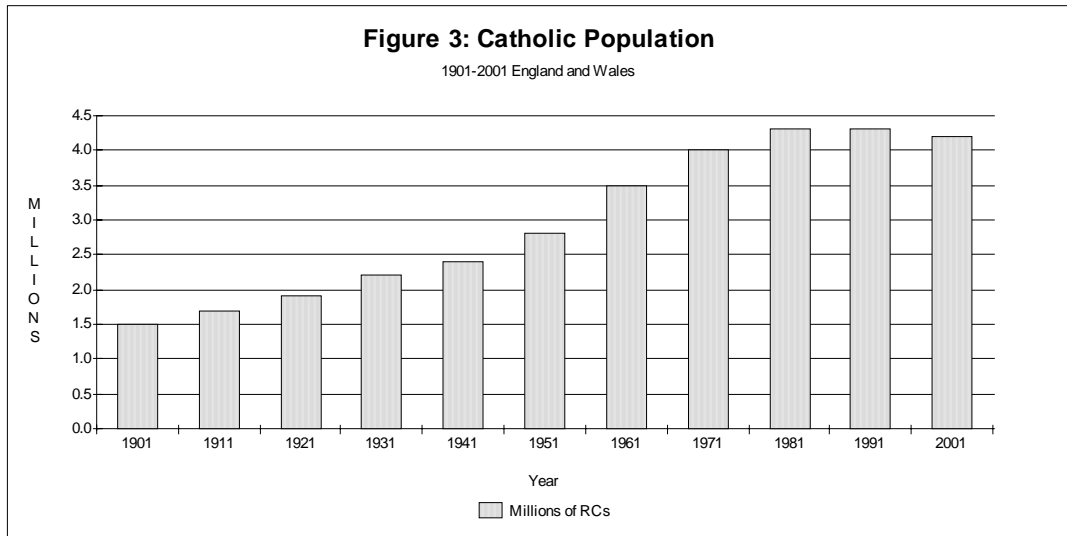
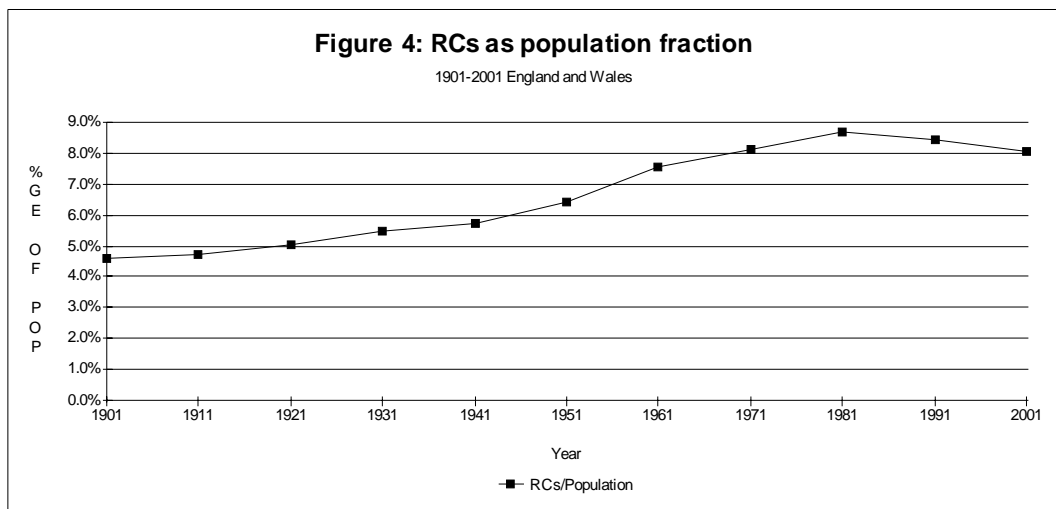


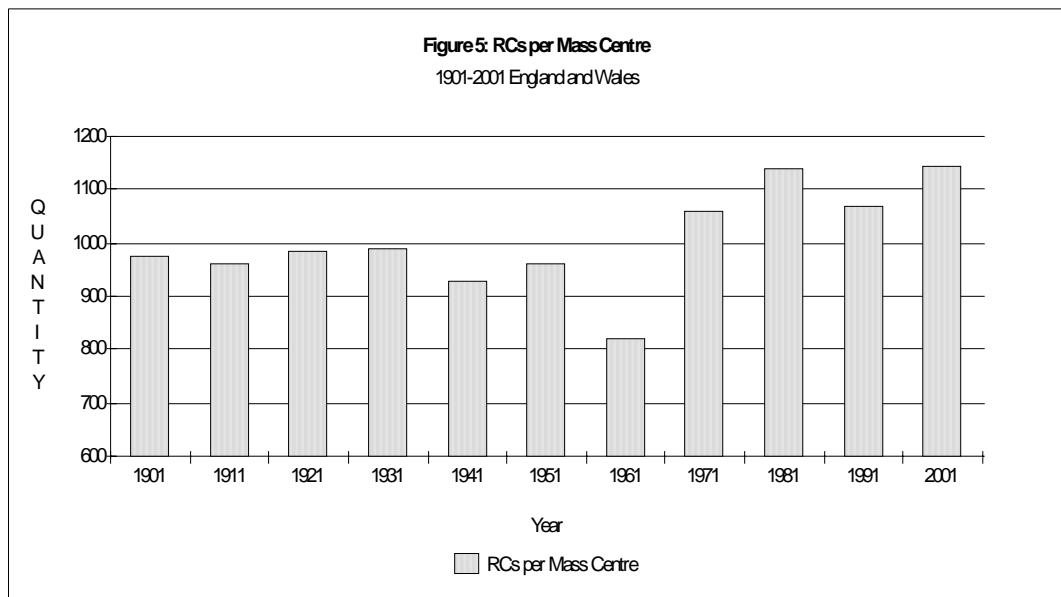
Figure 2 shows both the number of priests per thousand Catholics, and the number of priests per Mass Centre. 1931-1961 was a boom period with the Church being particularly well supplied, while the ratio since 1971 has been poorer than at the start of the century, and continues to decline.



As for the Catholic population itself, Figure 3 shows the actual numbers: again, the rate of growth increased after World War II, but the population seems to have plateaued or begun to decrease since 1981.



Reckoned as a fraction of the total population of England and Wales, Figure 4 shows that the first half of the century saw a gentle rise from 5% to 6%, followed by a post-war boom, ultimately peaking at 8.7% in 1981 and declining since then. Finally, Figure 5 shows how the number of Catholics served by a Mass Centre has remained relatively stable at around the 1000 mark (note the Y-axis starts at 600).



Whether considered “internally” (tally of priests and Mass Centres) or “externally” (Catholics in the national population), then, the data show a peak in the recent past, with a net decline on all measures between 1981 and 2001. Although Figure 5 shows a numerical increase of more Catholics per Mass Centre, this constitutes an overall decline, given the relative rates of decline of Mass Centres and Catholic population.

This paper is made available in order to make the statistics accessible rather than to provide any deeper analysis. Further study would be needed to ascertain the relative contributions of factors causing population change: lapsation of adults; trends in the number of children borne to Catholic parents; failure to baptise children; reception of converts. The data presented here merely forms a snapshot of Catholic practice (in terms of worshippers, buildings, and clergy) insofar as the statistics are available.

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Table I: Sources of Statistical Data

The *Catholic Directory for England and Wales* has been published by different London-based companies over the time period studied here, and has changed the format in which the statistical data is presented. The following table gives the page references from which the data has been obtained to produce Tables II and III, and hence plot the graphs presented in this essay.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Publisher</u>	<u>Clergy</u>	<u>Centres</u>	<u>RCs</u>
1841	R	69	68	-
1851	R	108	107	-
1861	R	xiv	xiv	-
1871	B&O	296	296	-
1881	B&O	314	314	-
1891	B&O	268	268	-
1901	B&O	416	416	68 ^E
1911	B&O	591	591	55 ^S
1921	B&O	571	571	572
1931 ^a	B&O	576	576	576
1941	B&O	700	700	700
1951	B&O	579	579	579
1961	B&O	727	727	727
1971 ^v	B&O/U	^z	^z	^z
1981	U	667	667	667
1991	G	523	523	523
2001	G	928	930	930

Key:

Year - cover date of the Directory. The actual statistics will be one or two years old.

Publisher - firm publishing that Directory: R = private publication; B&O = Burns & Oates; U = Universe Publishing; G = Gabriel Communications.

Clergy - page reference for table of number of priests

Centres - page reference for table of number of Mass centres (= churches plus other chapels plus borrowed venues)

RCs - page reference for estimated Catholic population

Notes to Table I

- a. From 1931, separate figures were given for regular and secular clergy. I have aggregated the figures.
- E. Although the tabulated data refers to “England” alone it is presumed to include Wales implicitly.
- S. The tabulated data is aggregated with figures for Scotland; a figure for England has been interpolated from neighbouring entries in the table.
- v. Data for 1971 has been interpolated from the 1970 (pub. B&O, p. 803) and 1973 (pub. U, p. 808) volumes. No 1971 directory was produced because of the change of publishers.
- z. Figures have been interpolated from neighbouring years.

Note on systematic errors: The delay in passing figures to the compilers may vary from diocese to diocese, preventing a figure from being a precise snapshot of a particular year; nevertheless, these inconsistencies should be small enough that we will still be able to see clear trends in the data. The figures for the number of Catholics is most prone to error, being quoted only to the nearest 0.1 million.

Table II: Priests and Mass Centres 1841 - 2001

Year	Priests	Mass Ctrs	Ratio
1841	561	474	1.2
1851	826	597	1.4
1861	1165	798	1.5
1871	1551	947	1.6
1881	1979	1175	1.7
1891	2494	1335	1.9
1901	2856	1536	1.9
1911	3766	1773	2.1
1921	3989	1932	2.1
1931	4484	2228	2.0
1941	5839	2580	2.3
1951	6728	2910	2.3
1961	7465	4258	1.8
1971	7618	3772	2.0
1981	7016	3775	1.9
1991	6261	4016	1.6
2001	5600	3673	1.5

Table III: Catholic Population, Priests and Mass Centres 1901 - 2001

Year	RCs	E&W Pop	Clergy	Mass Ctrs	RC/POP
1901	1.5	32.612	2856	1536	4.6%
1911	1.7	36.136	3766	1773	4.7%
1921	1.9	37.932	3989	1932	5.0%
1931	2.2	39.988	4484	2228	5.5%
1941	2.4	41.748	5839	2580	5.7%
1951	2.8	43.815	6728	2910	6.4%
1961	3.5	46.196	7465	4258	7.6%
1971	4.0	49.152	7618	3772	8.1%
1981	4.3	49.634	7016	3775	8.7%
1991	4.3	51.099	6261	4016	8.4%
2001	4.2	52.085	5600	3673	8.1%

Figures for RCs and E&W Pop are in millions.