

Have You Got an Ancient 18th Century Ancestor?

Then the Annual Register is the place to look between 1758, when it was founded, and 1794 when, due to editorial changes, the practice was discontinued. This annual journal gave a synopsis of the previous year's events as culled and plagiarized from newspapers, magazines, letters from correspondents, government publications and other sources and is an invaluable, if biased, source of events as they happened. There are a variety of other worthy topics, such as science, literature, agriculture, discoveries, promotions, births, deaths and marriages of the aristocracy, and a chronicle of miscellaneous events month by month, which includes death notices of centenarians. These monthly accounts also have accounts of bad weather, floods, shipwrecks, fires, accidents, robberies, murder, mutiny, trials and executions, and other entertaining disasters much in the style of media today. They are entertaining read and give an evocative picture of life at the time.

Of course the Register is not a reliable source to a person's true age as exaggeration was a common feature of the period. Thomas Fuller, writing in 1647, (quoted in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* under Thomas Parr, allegedly born in 1483, who died in London 1653 after too much good living). said

"Many old men ... set the clock of their age too fast when once past 70 and growing ten years in twelvemonth, are presently fourscore; yea, within a year or two after, climb up to a hundred"

One Nicholas Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580-1637), commenting on Parr's age when he was exhibited in London, claimed that a man in Persia was believed to be 400 years old. But don't expect any of these people to appear in the Guinness Book of Records any time soon. Another problem is duplication, i.e. Captain Thomas Forbes, of Harwich, who died aged 102 or 109, is listed four times between August 1772 and September 1776.

Old age was a topic of great interest at the time because of the general brevity of life due to high infant mortality, accident rates, vulnerability to infectious diseases, poor health, mortality during childbirth, war and the general lack of respect of a person's right to life.

Editors were fascinated by the fact that such people could live life to the fullest with undimmed faculties, senses and memory up to the day of death; eyesight was particularly prized, as was the occasional third set of teeth. And the phenomena was not limited to people; a Jamaican macaw is reported, in October 1768, as having arrived in Coleraine, Ireland, in 1694 making it at least 74 years old. It had gone completely gray but, alas, there is no mention of its eyesight.

It has to be said that the early editors of the Register were very credulous and included a wide variety of remarkable wonders including claims of great ages by living persons, birth deformities, post menopausal pregnancies, disparate marriages, and other oddities, but as time went on they became more rational and, by the mid-1790s, these type of reports are no longer included making the Register a more reliable, but duller, magazine.

By this time it was mostly well known people that were being regularly included but as they are much better documented elsewhere they are not included in this index.

Taking them all together there is no pattern to achieving longevity, which appears to be a combination of physical constitution and fate. It helps to have come from a long living family but place, diet, occupation or lifestyle are not particularly relevant, though a positive frame of mind and being active does benefit.

The sole purpose of the index is to list these 1,218 people who would not appear in other sources, except, perhaps, in laconic entries in burial registers. They often include miscellaneous items of biographical interest that bring people to life with all their qualities, faults and numerous progeny. Others are listed if they were in their 80s or 90s plus a few of the very obese, very large or small, or had interesting diseases or funerals. Further research on any of these people is possible in local newspapers and other sources that may be found listed in national and regional archives.

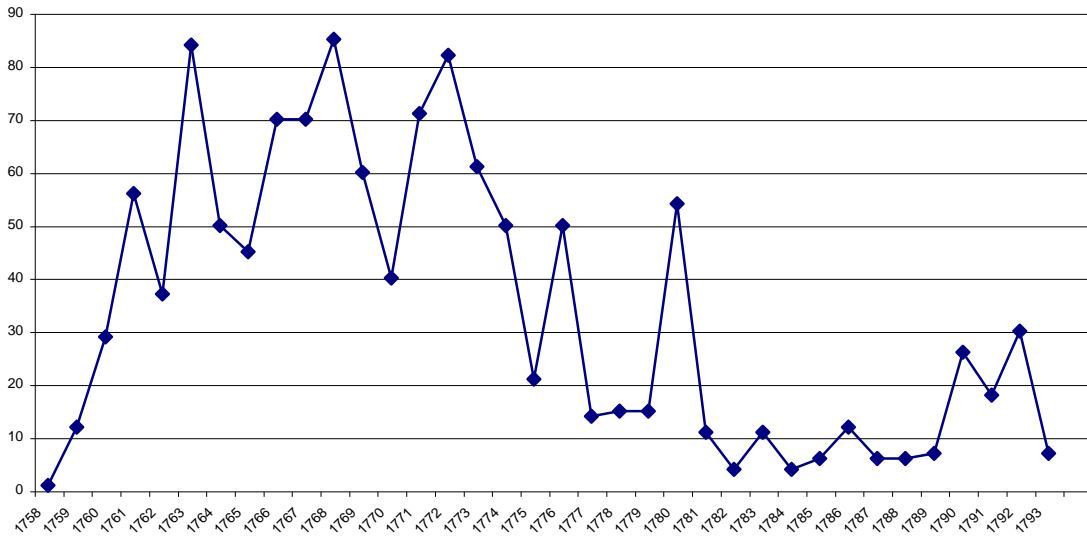
Only named people are included as to know that lately a peasant in Italy died aged 109 is not of great help, there are four exceptions that are possibly traceable. Entries are indexed by name, place and the month/year it appears in the Register. Names are indexed by surname and first name; while places are indexed by name, if it is near a big town, region (shire, county, province, etc., if given) and country (if given) and are spelled exactly as given in the Register. Due to restrictions of text within columns extra long entries are in a separate text file.

No attempt has been made to trace any of these places except to identify the modern country (often very different in the 18th century). When there is no address, or only a street, than London may be presumed. Often first names are not given, in which case Mr., Mrs., Rev., captain, widow, etc., is used, when known. Mrs. was used for both married and unmarried women at that time.

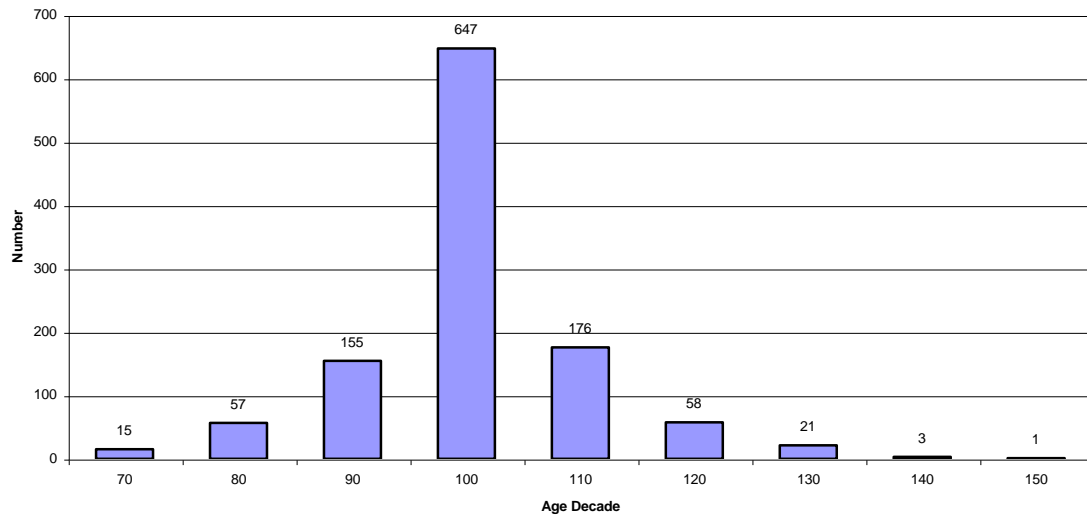
Finally three charts are appended. The first graph gives the number of deaths listed per annum, and could be sub-titled the (in)credulity index, the second the ages of death, and the third records the country of origin.

About 65% come from England (a high proportion from London and environs) while 86.5% come from the UK (as it was then constituted). The main European countries listed are Belgium, France (mostly prior to the Revolution), Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Spain, with a scattering of others from Austria, Croatia (Turkey), Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Russia (Prussia), Scandinavia, and Switzerland, which include some Irish expatriates and family. There are 17 from the USA (mostly prior to the Revolution) and about a dozen others from Algeria, Barbados, Brazil, Dominica, Granada, Honduras, Jamaica (5) and India, mostly of European origin.

Number of deaths listed per annum



Ages of Death by Decade
(n=1,133)



Country of Origin

