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MORTALITY (II) THE LEVEL AND COURSE OF DEATH RATES

In view of this melancholy list of afflictions, which is illustrative rather than exhaustive in its scope, it may come as something of a surprise to discover that overall, Kentish mortality rates were low by the standards of the time, if not by those of today, while they were clearly falling from the 1870s. The early years of civil registration revealed that average death rates (deaths per thousand at risk per annum) for the registration county of Kent in 1838-44 stood at 20.9 (for males) and 18.6 (for females). Broken down by individual registration districts, there was a predictable difference between the predominantly urban and rural districts. For example, Canterbury showed an average death rate of 23.5 (male) and 22.1 (female), Maidstone 23.7 and 22.1, Dover 23.8 and 19.8, while the highest Kentish death rates occurred in the Medway district - 25.7 for males (even when deaths taking place in military hospitals were excluded) and 21.8 for females. By contrast, death rates of the order of 17-19 were recorded, for both males and females, in such districts as Elham, Bridge, East and West Ashford, Hollingbourne, Malling, Sevenoaks, Tenterden and Cranbrook.¹³ Taken in the round, Kentish mortality rates were lower by about 8 per cent for males and 12 per cent for females than the corresponding national figures.¹⁴

Table 1 surveys the data on general and infant mortality across a sixty-year period extending from 1850 to 1910. The reduction in the general death rate that occurred between 1866-70 and 1906-10 (some 36 per cent) echoed a national improvement in both its extent and timing, while with respect to the infant death rate, despite a setback in the 1890s, there was actually a rather greater improvement in Kent (32 per cent) than in the nation at large between these dates. Set against national standards, Kent remained favourably placed, and this is reflected in an above-average expectation of life on the eve of the First World War, as is shown in Table 2. It goes almost without saying that the county death rate continued to conceal considerable variations from year to year and at the local level. In the aggregate, in 1913 there were 11.2 deaths per thousand population in the urban districts, and 10.3 in the rural.¹⁵ Yet, among the urban districts suburbanized local authority areas, such as Bromley, Beckenham, Chislehurst and Fooks Cray, showed mortality well below the Kent

¹³ Registrar-General, 9th Annual Report, 1849, 180, 197-8.

¹⁴ As given in B.R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1962), 36.

¹⁵ Registrar-General, 76th Annual Report, 1915, 144-5. These rates were standardized to adjust for variations in age and sex composition.

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urban average despite their very rapid growth rates - as if to vindicate a suggestion made long before by the Registrar-General, that the highest attainable health either was, or might come to be, found in 'a happy combination of both states, *rus in urbe*'.¹⁶ On the other hand, prominent among the places exhibiting disturbingly higher rates, more than ten per cent above the Kent urban average in that year, were Gravesend and Chatham, the latter featuring an infant death rate still as high as 106 per thousand live births.

TABLE 1

General and Infant Mortality in Kent, compared to England and Wales, 1851-1910

	(A) General mortality (deaths per 1,000 population)		(B) Infant mortality (deaths under one, per 1,000 live births)	
	Kent	Ratio, Kent: England and Wales	Kent	Ratio, Kent: England and Wales
1851-5	20.2	89	132	85
1856-60	19.8	91	134	89
1861-5	19.9	93	131	87
1866-70	20.0	89	135	86
1871-5	18.1	91	124	81
1876-80	17.5	86	123	84
1881-5	17.2	89	114	82
1886-90	16.0	85	119	82
1891-5	15.7	84	123	81
1896-1900	15.3	86	135	87
1901-5	14.5	90	118	86
1906-10	12.8	87	92	79

Sources: Calculated from Registrar-General's Annual Reports for specified dates. Figures for England and Wales are drawn from B.R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (1962), 36-7.

¹⁶ Registrar-General, 23rd Annual Report, 1862, xxi.