

CORRECTING MAJOR FOULDS

PLEASE NOTE: The word “illegitimate”, used in this paper, has fallen out of general use because children are no longer stigmatised by irrelevancies of their parentage. However, in any discussion of the historical position 200 years ago it is a fact that “legitimacy” was considered an important issue, and any paper which discusses those times cannot avoid using the term. So this paper uses “legitimate” and “illegitimate” – and their derivatives – freely, and should be read with the understanding that views today are more enlightened than they were at the time of the period depicted herein.”



Major Mathias Foulds

St Helena’s history has long drawn the interest of medically trained men, with figures like Philip Gosse and Arnold Chaplin standing out. Less well known is Matthias (also Matthew) Frederick Foulds (1877–1953), who qualified as a doctor at the Royal College of Surgeons in 1900. The conclusions he reached through his research of St Helena’s history a century ago were widely publicised and remained unchallenged – until now.

The Boer War had been raging for a year when Foulds enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps, joining as a lieutenant in June 1901. Within nine months, he suffered severe injuries during the Battle of Harrismith, leading to the amputation of his right leg. Undeterred, he was promoted to Captain in 1904 and later served in India and Aden. In 1906, he published a medical note advocating the use of iced-water enemata to treat

sunstroke.¹ He next worked as a specialist civil operative surgeon in Belfast before returning to military service at the outbreak of war in 1914. Posted to St Helena (1914–1918),² he not only fulfilled his army medical duties but was twice appointed acting Colonial Surgeon, overseeing the island’s civilian population.³ In 1915, he tackled the issue of venereal disease in the military at St Helena, arguing that prevention was better than cure. His solution? Treat all soldiers with tincture of iodine before allowing them out on leave.⁴

FOULDS: REVEALING AND MISLEADING THE ISLAND HISTORY

Beyond medicine, Foulds became fascinated by the island’s history, albeit like many before and since, his main focus was the five and a half years of Napoleon’s exile on St Helena. According to Dr T. H. Arnold Chaplin (1864–1945)⁵, Foulds was granted unrestricted access to the island’s archives, where he unearthed Andrew Darling’s diary. Darling, Napoleon’s undertaker, had been briefly mentioned in the first edition of Chaplin’s *A St Helena Who’s Who* (1914).⁶ Foulds sent the diary to Chaplin in the UK, who promptly published its full account of Napoleon’s funeral in *The Times Literary Supplement*.⁷

Perhaps emboldened by this discovery, Foulds soon reported two more remarkable finds to Chaplin. First, he uncovered evidence of an extraordinary moral transformation on the island, driven by the clergy. This campaign, beginning shortly before Napoleon’s arrival and lasting for over a decade, had a dramatic impact on the number of recorded illegitimate baptisms - plummeting from 198 in 1813 to just three in 1823. Chaplin enthusiastically included these findings in the second edition of *A St Helena Who’s Who* (1919):

*On the state of morality existing in St. Helena, the British occupation appears to have had a most salutary effect, and there can be no doubt that the outspoken utterances of Mr Boys contributed in no small degree to this great improvement. Let, therefore, statistics bear their testimony to the good work of the iconoclastic cleric. Major M. F. Foulds has inspected the parish registers in Jamestown so far as regards the illegitimate baptisms taking place between the years 1813-1827, with the following results:*⁸

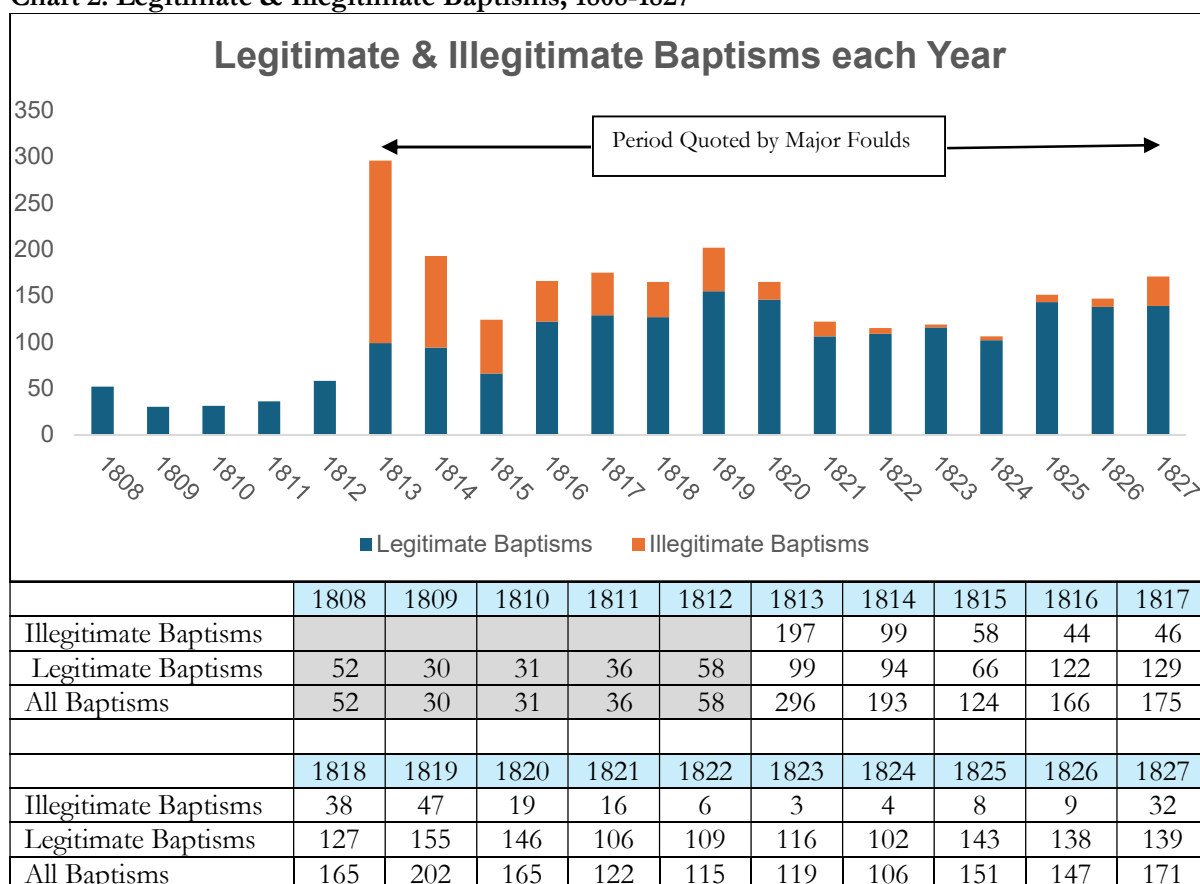
Chart 1: Major Foulds's Illegitimate Baptism Numbers

1813	198	1814	101	1815	58	1816	46	1817	53
1818	39	1819	50	1820	17	1821	16	1822	6
1823	3	1824	4	1825	7	1826	17	1827	33

The role of Reverend Richard Boys is far from clear-cut. In 1813, he was merely the junior chaplain, making it far more probable that any efforts by the clergy to reform moral standards were led by his senior colleague, Reverend Samuel Jones. Though Boys is the better-remembered figure, both men shared an equally brash, tactless, and moralising zeal. If a campaign to improve morality indeed began in 1813, it seems likely that Jones was the driving force - at least until he was forcibly retired in April 1815, when his reputation for being even more difficult than Boys led to his abrupt dismissal. At that point, Boys stepped up as senior chaplain, taking full control.

As for the dramatic decline in illegitimate baptisms reported by Foulds, he overlooked several crucial details - ones that are glaringly obvious from even a cursory glance at the church records. Most notably, no illegitimate baptisms were recorded in the church records in the years immediately preceding 1813. Chart 2 maps both legitimate and illegitimate baptisms over a 20-year span. It includes not only the 15 years Foulds examined (1813–1827) but also the five years before (1808–1812, shaded grey in this table), which he seems to have ignored.

Chart 2: Legitimate & Illegitimate Baptisms, 1808-1827



Unfortunately, Foulds was not very good at counting the numbers. The illegitimate baptism figures quoted in Chart 2 are accurately counted and it will be noticed they differ slightly from those given by Foulds in Chart 1.

Since nearly every baptism record included the names of the parents, it is reasonable to assume that most of those baptised were infants.

Over the five years 1808 - 1812, a total of 207 baptisms were recorded - an average of 41 per year. In stark contrast, over the later period 1813 – 1827 reported by Foulds, the number soared to 2,417, averaging 161 baptisms annually. In other words, Foulds seems not to have noticed that the overall rate of baptisms (legitimate plus illegitimate) rose fourfold over the years following 1813.

Even more striking is the absence of any recorded illegitimate baptisms in the years that immediately preceded 1813. Indeed, from 1680, when records began, until 1812, only sixteen baptisms had ever explicitly been described as illegitimate. It was only from the year 1813 that high numbers of illegitimacies suddenly began appearing in the church registers.

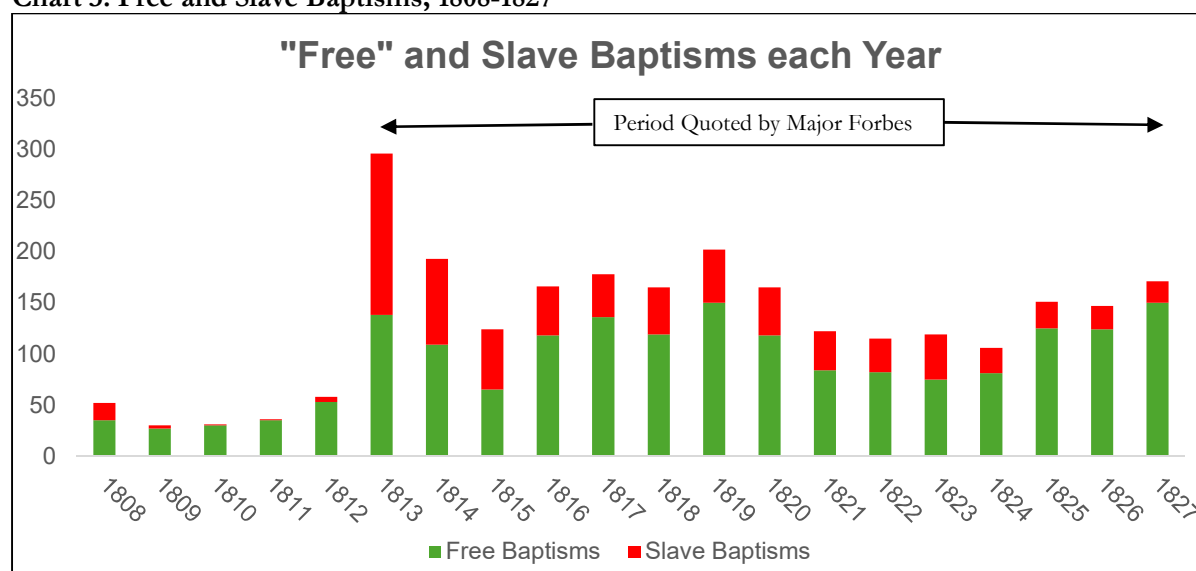
This suggests that the clergy made two significant changes in 1813. Firstly, they dramatically increased the number of children being baptised each year, an initiative that lasted for at least fifteen years. Secondly, they began systematically recording illegitimacies in the baptism registers.

Where did all the added baptisms come from? Foulds should have seen this at once – overnight in 1813, large numbers of slave children began to be baptised, almost all of whom were described as illegitimate. In the preceding period 1808-1812, an average of only 5.4 slave children were baptised each year. Over the later period 1813-1827, an average of 49.7 slave children were baptised each year.

This campaign to baptise the enslaved population echoes an earlier drive between 1802 and 1806 – probably under the influence of Governor Robert Patton - when 598 people, both adults and children, were baptised.⁹ That earlier effort focused solely on baptism, with only four slave marriages recorded in the church registers during those four years. In contrast, the drive launched by Samuel Jones and Richard Boys in 1813 was sustained for a much longer period, continuing until at least 1827. They also actively encouraged more enslaved couples to marry in church - between 1813 and 1827, 153 enslaved marriages were recorded (an average of 10.2 per year), compared to just seven marriages between 1808 and 1812 (1.4 per year).

Even so, these church marriages accounted for only a small fraction of the enslaved population. Since most enslaved parents had never gone through a church marriage, it is suggested that Jones and Boys - given their strict doctrinal views – would regard the vast majority of slave children as illegitimate. Chart 3 illustrates this pattern, showing the recorded baptisms divided between enslaved and “free” children. The five years 1808–1812 preceding Foulds’ analysis are once again shaded in grey.

Chart 3: Free and Slave Baptisms, 1808-1827



	1808	1809	1810	1811	1812	1813	1814	1815	1816	1817
Slave Baptisms	17	3	1	1	5	158	84	59	48	42
Free Baptisms	35	27	30	35	53	138	109	65	118	136
All Baptisms	52	30	31	36	58	296	193	124	166	175
	1818	1819	1820	1821	1822	1823	1824	1825	1826	1827
Slave Baptisms	46	52	47	38	33	44	25	26	23	21
Free Baptisms	119	150	118	84	82	75	81	125	124	150
All Baptisms	165	202	165	122	115	119	106	151	147	171

In addition to the sharp rise in the number baptised slave children, significantly greater numbers of “free” children also began to be baptised after 1813. This suggests that the clergy simultaneously began to search out unbaptised “free” children, at the same time checking whether their parents had gone through a church marriage.

The evidence further shows that, at least in the early years of this campaign, the clergy did not merely baptise baptising newborns but also their siblings. One can almost picture the clergy going door to door, rounding up unbaptised children, and marching them down to the font en masse. Taking the year 1813, the following table provides a summary of all baptisms where groups of children belonging to the same common parents were baptised.

Baptisms in 1813	No. Families	No. Children Baptised
Common parents, multiple children baptised	55	136
Common parents, one child baptised	160	160
Total	215	296

On a small island like St Helena, word would have spread quickly that the clergy were rounding up unbaptised children. However, access to church records was jealously guarded, so it is less clear how soon the wider population realised that illegitimacies were now being formally recorded. A clue that this knowledge took some time to filter through comes from my own St Helenian ancestry.

My great-great-grandfather, George Randal Bruce, never married but fathered at least nine children with five different women between 1813 and 1833. The baptism records for his first four children were marked as illegitimate - yet, perhaps only in 1823 did he discover this. From that year on, when his five youngest children were baptised, he named their mothers as “Mrs Mary Bruce” or “Mrs Sarah Bruce,” presumably creating the polite fiction of marriage to avoid further stigma.

Chart 2 reveals that 1823 marked the lowest recorded number of illegitimate baptisms, with only three noted. This raises two key questions: Firstly, were other parents, like George Randal Bruce, falsely claiming marriage by that year? Secondly, did the clergy counter this by verifying whether parents had indeed married through a church service?

Both questions can crudely be answered by cross-checking baptism records against church marriage records. Since baptism entries usually named both parents, their names should appear in earlier marriage records. Taking 1823 as an example, when only three illegitimate baptisms were recorded, there were 119 baptisms in total. Running the parents’ names through the church records reveals only 62 had matching church marriages, i.e., only 62 out of 119 baptisms were demonstrably legitimate.

1823 Baptism record quoted both parents’ names, their marriage also being found in the St James marriage records	Legitimate children	62
1823 Baptism record quoted both parents’ names, their marriage NOT being found in the St James marriage records	Potentially illegitimate children	42
1823 Baptism record quoted both parents’ full names, their surnames being different	Potentially illegitimate children	2
1823 Baptism record only quoted the name of the single mother.	Potentially illegitimate children	7
1823 Baptism record only quoted the parents’ first names, no surname	Insufficient information	6
All Baptisms		119

Of course, this is only indictive because some parents will not have married on the island; also, some mothers might have been recently widowed and so were listed as single. Nevertheless, this indicative exercise answers the two key questions. Firstly, it is true that a substantial number of parents indeed falsely claimed they were married when having their children baptised. Secondly, by 1823, the clergy either took these claims at face value or, in blatant cases where parents had different surnames or single mothers presented children for baptism, no longer bothered to record the term “illegitimate.”

In short, the surge in recorded illegitimacies from 1813, as claimed by Major Foulds, was driven by a determined effort by the clergy to baptise the children of enslaved parents and a concerted push to find unbaptised “free” children. Within a few years - perhaps following the departure of Reverend Samuel Jones - the clergy’s vigilance waned, while the population grew more adept at sidestepping the associated stigma.

Obliterating the Church Records

The alleged reduction in illegitimacies was just the first of Major Foulds' "discoveries." He also claimed to have made a second, far more scandalous discovery - evidence of misconduct by senior officials under Governor Hudson Lowe. Once again, Chaplin believed these, publishing them in the 1919 edition of *A St Helena Who's Who*. Presumably persuaded that the Reverend Richard Boys, both as junior and senior chaplain was responsible for the changes claimed by Foulds to be seen in the church records, Chaplin decided to expand the biography of Boys from a brief section to an entire chapter.

In his capacity of spiritual head in the Island, Mr Boys, in the plainest terms, inveighed against the moral lapses prevalent, and from his pulpit did not hesitate to single out prominent examples of evil living, and to assail them in his sermons. The case of Rear-Admiral Plampin was one which excited his righteous anger to a considerable degree. This high official lived in irregular union with a lady who came out with him to St Helena.

[...] Lowe's fear that Mr Boys would make damaging disclosures will be well understood when it is stated that as senior chaplain it was his duty to make the official entries in the Parish Registers of all the births taking place on the Island. When, as it sometimes happened, Mr Boys was called upon to record the births of illegitimate children of slave women, begotten of men who were some of the highest and most trusted of Lowe's lieutenants, the chaplain in his righteous indignation did not hesitate to write in bold characters in the registers the titles and high positions of the sires. In these old registers, which have been inspected for me by Major Foulds, it is amusing to observe "the damaging evidence. But Mr Boys was determined to write for all time, and the precise titles and positions of the fathers, in spite of the attempted erasures, can still be plainly distinguished. This was probably the real reason for the ostracism of Mr Boys by the high St. Helena society, and the fear of his outspoken tongue evinced by Sir Hudson Lowe.¹⁰

This is an intriguing story, but it does not withstand scrutiny. A careful review of the online photographic St Helena baptism records reveals no evidence of ink blots or penknife marks.¹¹ In fact, most clergy carefully safeguarded the church records. Even if officials were granted access, it seems highly unlikely that they would have been allowed to make the kind of changes described by Foulds. Indeed, had such changes been made, the indignation of the outspoken Richard Boys would have been palpable. His complete silence on the matter only strengthens the argument that no erasures were made. This situation recalls Sherlock Holmes' famous observation about "the curious incident of the dog in the night-time" - the one that did not bark.

The assertion that Boys "boldly wrote in the registers the titles and high ranks of the sires" suggests a straightforward way to test these claims. Over the fifteen-year period from 1813 to 1827, 2,417 children were baptised, with 612 described as illegitimate. As summarised below, an analysis of these illegitimate baptisms reveals that only fourteen fathers held any official position on the island. Of these, in five cases the mother was indeed listed as a slave (marked with an asterisk below). However, none of the fathers either served in Hudson Lowe's administration or held senior government positions. More to the point, not one of these fourteen baptism records were in any way obliterated.

1. 1813: O. Beale: Lieutenant*	8. 1819: Lancelot Matthewson: St Helena Artillery
2. 1815: Brimmer: Sergeant*	9. 1819: William Ridge: St Helena Artillery*
3. 1816: Scott: Sergeant	10. 1820: Edward Doolan: Carpenter
4. 1818: Anthony Emmett: Major	11. 1820: John Calvert: Royal Artillery
5. 1819: Alexander Bacler: General Superintendent Hospitals*	12. 1820: Thomas Bates: Sergeant
6. 1819: John Robert Le Strange: Captain, 66th Regiment	13. 1821: Henry William Davie: Lieutenant, 66th Regiment, Foot
7. 1819: John Melliss: Lieutenant St Helena Regiment*	14. 1824: John Chapman: St Helena Regiment

CONCLUSION

Some might excuse Foulds for misinterpreting the decline in the number of illegitimate baptisms in the church registers after 1813. Perhaps he not only overlooked the rarity of this designation before that year but also failed to notice the large number of slave children baptised afterwards.

Based in the UK, Chaplin might be assumed to have relied entirely on Foulds' account of the St Helena church records. However, the East India Company had received duplicate copies of these records, later archived in three volumes at the British Library. Had Chaplin taken the trouble to verify Foulds' claims, he would certainly have recognised the extent of the misinformation.

Foulds' separate allegation - that senior government officials tampered with church records to hide their relationships with enslaved women - collapses under scrutiny. A close examination of the original records held at St Helena makes it clear that no such interference occurred. This is not a case of misinterpretation but outright fabrication. As for why Foulds made such a claim, one can only guess.

1. M. F. Foulds, 'A Little-Known Treatment for Sunstroke', *BMJ Military Health* 7, no. 6 (1906): 604–5.
2. *British Medical Journal*, 22 June 1901, 1590; *The Lancet*, 11 January 1902: Issue 4089, 115; *The Lancet*, 14 May 1904, 1376; *The Lancet* 21 April 1906, p1133; *The Lancet*, 22 December 1906, 1740; *The Lancet* 30 March 1907, 907; *The Lancet*, 16 October 1909; *The Lancet* 5 August 1915, 986; *British Medical Journal*, 1922, p39; *The Lancet*, 1933, p271.
3. '1914 Annual Colonial Report: St Helena, No 847' (London: Colonial Office, 1915), 14; '1916 Annual Colonial Report: St Helena, No 933' (London: Colonial Office, 1917), 9.
4. M. F. Foulds, 'Tincture of Iodine and the Prevention of Venereal Diseases', *BMJ Military Health* 24, no. 1 (1915): 62–63.
5. *The British Medical Journal*, July 3–December 25, 1915, vol. 2 (BMJ Publishing Group), 552, http://archive.org/details/sim_british-medical-journal_july-3-december-25-1915_2.
6. Arnold Chaplin, *A St Helena Who's Who, or a Directory of the Island during the Captivity of Napoleon*, 1st Edition (London: Privately Published, 1914), 62, <https://archive.org/details/asthelenawhoswho00chapiala>.
7. 'Napoleon's Funeral – a Lost Record', *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 September 1915; Arnold Chaplin, 'Correspondence - Napoleon's Funeral', *British Medical Journal* 2(2858) (9 October 1915): 552. No trace of this diary has been found in any library/archive either in the UK or St Helena.
8. Arnold Chaplin, *A St Helena Who's Who, or a Directory of the Island during the Captivity of Napoleon* (London: A. L. Humphreys, 1919), 231, <https://archive.org/details/sthelenawhoswho00chapiala>.
9. Colin Fox, *A Bitter Draught - St Helena: The Abolition of Slavery 1792-1840* (Elveden, Norfolk: Society of Friends of St Helena, 2017), 28.
10. Chaplin, *Who's Who*, 1919, 220–32.
11. This was first noted on a blog: John Tyrell, 'Rev Boys and Illegitimacy on St Helena', 13 June 2019, <https://johntyrell.blogspot.com/2019/06/rev-boys-and-illegitimacy-on-st-helena.html>.