

MARRIAGE LICENCES, BONDS AND ALLEGATIONS

Marriage by licence was introduced in the fourteenth century. A special licence, issued by the Archbishop of Canterbury, allowed the marriage to take place at any convenient time or place; they were rare. A common licence usually named several churches where the marriage could take place (but usually only one after 1754), although in practice this constraint was often ignored.

A licence allowed a couple to marry without the need for banns to be called on the necessary three Sundays. This could be because the bride was pregnant or the groom was going away with the army or navy. There was a minimal requirement for residence in the parish, reduced in 1823 to just 15 days, so wishing to be married away from home was another reason for using a licence. It also enabled people to marry on a Fast Day or in Lent. The couple may have been Roman Catholic or non-conformist and did not want to have banns called in the parish church. Sometimes it was regarded as a status symbol. The licence was valid for three months. It was given to the couple and there was not usually an official duplicate, although registered copies were kept in some dioceses. Not many licences have survived.

One of the couple, usually the groom, had to submit an allegation when applying for the licence. This was a sworn statement that there was no impediment to the marriage. An allegation usually stated the names, ages, occupations, status (single or widowed), places of residence and where the marriage would take place. If one or both were under 21, i.e. not "of 21 and upwards", the consenting parent or guardian was named. No licences were granted during the Commonwealth (1653-61).

A bond may also have been submitted. This was a sworn statement, usually by the groom and a relative or friend, that there was no impediment to the marriage and that the marriage would take place in a specified church. The signatories were bound by a sum of money, payable if the terms of the licence were not complied with. The sum was substantial, usually £100 or £200. Bonds were not required after 1823 although a few dioceses continued to use them.

The existence of a licence, allegation or bond does not mean that the couple actually did marry and a parish register entry should still be sought.

Most Diocesan Registries/County Record Offices have at least some allegations and bonds, usually on film. Records tend to be from the 16th/17th centuries. There may be an index, but generally they are sorted by year in alphabetical order of groom's surname. See Jeremy Gibson's guide to locations of Bishops' Transcripts, Marriage Licences, Bonds and Allegations, published by the FFHS. Sixteenth and early seventeenth century bonds and allegations are written in Latin.

People living in different dioceses had to apply to the Archbishop of Canterbury or York. These were issued by the Archbishop's Vicar-General and thus are known as Vicar-General licences. If the couple lived in different ecclesiastical provinces, i.e. one in Canterbury and one in York, the application had to be made to the Archbishop of Canterbury's Master of Faculties, these being known as Faculty Office licences. The records of the Canterbury Vicar-General and the Faculty Office are kept at Lambeth Palace Library. Indexes to the records (over 670,000 names) are available on the internet at British Origins (www.britishorigins.com) under the heading "Marriage Licence Allegations". The records of the York Vicar-General are at the Borthwick Institute.

After the start of civil registration in 1837, superintendent registrars issued licences for marriages in registrar's offices, in churches if banns were not called and in unlicensed non-conformist churches.

For more information, see "Ancestral Trails", by Mark Herber, which has examples, and Pauline Litton's articles in Family Tree Magazine, April and May 2000. There is also a useful guidance leaflet, in Acrobat .pdf format, at the University of York's Borthwick Institute website www.york.ac.uk/inst/bihr (or go direct to www.york.ac.uk/inst/bihr/guideleaflets/marriagebondguidance.pdf). This has annotated examples of documents.