

PARISH REGISTERS

HISTORY

Parish registers were instituted in 1538 by Thomas Cromwell, Vicar-General to Henry VIII. The requirement was, and still is, to record baptisms, marriages and burials. Not all parishes complied initially. The first registers were on paper; a 1598 edict required the use of parchment. Previous registers were to be transcribed, but some were already illegible and others were only transcribed back to the accession of Queen Elizabeth 1st in 1558. They have been maintained ever since except 1653-1660, during the Commonwealth. Most from the late 16th century onwards have survived.

Also from 1598 annual lists were required to be sent to the appropriate bishop or archdeacon. These are known as Bishop's Transcripts (BTs). Some parishes failed to make returns, and some only every 2 or 3 years. BTs ceased soon after the start of civil registration in 1837.

Scotland: a few registers were kept from 1553 but most start after 1600, some as late as 1780. Many people in 18th/early 19th centuries did not register baptisms. However, when baptism was recorded, mother's maiden name usually given, also names of godparents. Usually only marriage proclamations (banns) were recorded, not the actual marriage. It was also possible to "marry" without a church service. Few burials were recorded. There was no requirement for BTs.

Ireland: Anglican churches were required to record baptisms and burials only, from 1634. Many records were destroyed in a fire in 1922. Few BTs were made, some of which were also lost in the fire. Although most people were Catholic, records were not required, but a few were made.

MARRIAGE BANNS AND LICENCES

Banns have been required to be called in the marriage church since 1215 but were rarely recorded until 1754. From 1823 they were required in both parishes if the spouses were not from the same parish. Records of banns are useful if the spouses were from different parishes; male ancestors often married away from their home parishes. Banns were valid for 12 months.

Marriage by licence was introduced in the 14th century. A special licence allowed the marriage to take place in any church; they are rare. A common licence usually named one or two churches where the marriage could take place, although in practice this constraint was often ignored. Associated with licences were allegations and bonds.

FORMATS

Until 1812, the format of the register was up to individual churches. Most used just one book, generally starting a new section each year (which up to 1751 meant on the 25th March) with separate pages for baptisms, marriages and burials. In the early years material was expensive so entries are usually cramped. They sometimes overflowed the allotted space or page, so have to be searched thoroughly around the time of interest. BTs tended to be neater, being transcribed at one go, but for various reasons do not always agree exactly with the register – either could be correct.

Entries were usually in Latin until the early 1700s. The entries usually follow a standard format; there is a booklet, "Simple Latin for Family Historians", by Eve McLaughlin, which helps.

In 1754, Hardwicke's Marriage Act specified that records of banns and marriages had to be kept separate from those of baptisms and burials. The banns were recorded either in a separate register or with the marriage records. From 1813, Rose's Act required incumbents to use specially printed registers, with separate books for the three events. These are much easier to read than earlier registers. The formats were changed again in 1837.

Spelling was frequently phonetic and the same surname could be rendered in many ways over the years, particularly when the incumbent changed.

Individual records were sometimes made on bits of paper or entrusted to memory, the register being brought up to date later on. This sometimes resulted in incorrect entries, particularly for baptisms, e.g. not quite the right name for the child or the wrong name for wife.

LOCATIONS

Registers were kept for centuries in the parish chest. In recent years, most have been deposited elsewhere for safe keeping and most have been microfilmed. BTs are kept in Diocesan Archives, which in general means that they are in County Archives. They too have usually been filmed. The films are kept at County Record Offices (CROs). In general, access to the original registers is not allowed, but permission may be given if a particular entry is unclear on film. Many registers were transcribed before the advent of filming; most transcriptions were printed but some remain in manuscript only. Copies of printed transcripts, also manuscripts, are usually held at CROs; manuscripts may not be on the bookshelves. Films and printed versions may also be found in Local Studies libraries. At the Family History Centres run by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, i.e. the Mormons), films can be ordered in for viewing on their premises.

BAPTISM ENTRIES

Up to 1812, generally all that was recorded apart from the date was the name of the child and the father. Sometimes even the father's name was omitted; sometimes the mother's name was also included, this becoming normal by the 18th century. The keener or more thorough incumbents sometimes added the date of birth and the father's occupation. Illegitimate children were typically recorded as "bastard son (or daughter) of" the mother, although many other adjectives were used. From 1813, the parents' names, abode and occupation of father were required to be entered.

Private baptisms could be made if a new-born child was too ill to be taken to church. A later baptism, in church, may have taken place subsequently. Thus, two baptism entries for the same child may be found, the first of which should be noted as "Private" or just "P". Baptisms did not always take place soon after birth and sometimes not for many years, if at all. Sometimes several children were baptised at once.

MARRIAGE ENTRIES

Until 1754, the entry usually only recorded the names of the man and the woman. Occasionally other information was recorded, e.g. groom's occupation, or whether the marriage was by banns or licence. From 1754, the spouses' parishes of residence, their status, whether the marriage was by banns or licence, and the groom's occupation were required. The signatures or marks of the spouses, two witnesses and the clergyman were also required. In 1837 a revised form of register was introduced, matching the new Civil Registration form; from this date, the ages of the spouses was required.

BURIAL ENTRIES

Early registers usually only recorded the name of a deceased man and the date. Occasionally his age and/or occupation was included. A woman was usually recorded as "the wife of...", and a child's father's name was recorded. From 1812 abode and age were required. There may be a suffix "poor" or just "p", indicating that the deceased was a pauper and that the burial was paid for by the parish. From 1666 to 1814 the Burial in Woollen Acts required the dead to be buried in shrouds of pure wool; the suffix "aff" or just "a" means that an affidavit had been sworn before a JP that the Act had been complied with.

THE INTERNATIONAL GENEALOGICAL INDEX (IGI)

The LDS spent many years extracting birth and marriage information from Parish Registers. Years covered are from the earliest available up to about the mid 1800s, although a few go up to about 1900. Coverage of counties varies from complete to, in the case of Cheshire for example, only about a third. Only the child's and parents' names were extracted for baptisms, and spouses names for marriages. There is no other information, such as occupation or age. Very few burials are included. The data are available on microfiche, on CD-ROM at LDS Family History Centres only, and on their website. Note that dates prior to the change from the Old Style Julian calendar to the New Style Gregorian calendar in 1752 may have been converted to the New Style. Note also that there are many other entries in the IGI. If the Batch No. of a particular record starts with P, C or M, it is referring to a parish register; the span of years should be noted alongside. E, J and K may also be parish registers. Other formats of Batch No. refer to sources which may be less reliable, as any LDS member can submit data whether sound or not.