

Introduction

The Church of England and its parochial structure

The Church of England was established in 1534, when Henry VIII separated the English Church from the Pope in Rome. Several new dioceses were created shortly afterwards, and this diocesan structure remained substantially unchanged until the series of reforms that began in 1836. The Church of England extended over England, Wales and the Isle of Man, and was divided into 27 dioceses, which varied considerably in size. Some dioceses extended over several counties, and some counties were divided between two or more dioceses. The northern dioceses of Carlisle, Durham, Chester, York and Sodor & Man lay in the Province of York, with the eighteen dioceses in the southern half of England, together with the four in Wales, lying in the Province of Canterbury. Larger dioceses were subdivided into archdeaconries, although smaller dioceses had only one. Archdeacons carried out various functions delegated by their bishop, with their powers varying according to diocese.

Most parish boundaries had been established during the Middle Ages, when the density of population in the south of England was much higher than in the north. Southern parishes often covered only a few square miles and sometimes considerably less. The City of London had many small parishes consisting of only a few streets, as did some cities, such as York, Exeter and Norwich. At the opposite end of the scale, the largest parish in England, Whalley in Lancashire, covered 161 square miles. Relatively few new Anglican churches were built before the end of the wars with France in 1815, by which

time many urban churches were extremely overcrowded, with no Anglican churches at all in many industrial areas that had previously been sparsely populated. The period after 1815 therefore witnessed the building of a large number of new churches and the subdivision of many populous parishes.

Chapels serving specific areas within parishes, and licensed for baptisms, marriages and burials, were known as parochial chapelries. In many respects they functioned as if they were separate parishes, usually kept their own registers, and generally became parishes in their own right in the nineteenth century. Additional places of worship, known as chapels of ease, were built in some larger parishes. Baptisms, marriages and burials generally took place at the main parish church, although some chapels were licensed for baptisms. Some areas known as extra-parochial places were outside the jurisdiction of any parish, so their inhabitants did not pay church rates or poor rates, and baptisms, marriages and burials took place in neighbouring parishes. Some parishes or groups of parishes, known as peculiar jurisdictions, lay within the geographical boundaries of a diocese but were exempt from the authority of its bishop. Peculiars were under the jurisdiction of a variety of individuals and corporate bodies, including bishops of other dioceses and deans and chapters of cathedrals. Most extra-parochial places and peculiars were abolished during the nineteenth century.

Before the Victorian era, the majority of Anglican clergy, particularly in the south of England, were graduates of Oxford or Cambridge, which were the only universities in England before 1832. Some clergymen in poorly endowed parishes, mainly in the north of England and in Wales, did not have degrees, and were referred to in ecclesiastical records as 'literates'. The principal clergyman of a parish, known as the incumbent, was designated as a rector, vicar or perpetual curate, and held his living for life. Some incumbents in more populous parishes were assisted by one or more curates, who could be younger clergymen hoping to obtain parishes of their own or older clergymen unable to obtain them. Incumbents were not necessarily resident in their parishes, and sometimes lived many miles away. Non-resident incumbents either employed a stipendiary curate or paid a neighbouring incumbent to perform their duties. Some clergymen were appointed as incumbents of more than one parish, a practice known as pluralism. Pluralists included both socially well-connected clergy with several rich livings, often some distance apart,

and poorer clergy who served two or more poorly endowed parishes in the same area. Pluralism increased towards the end of the eighteenth century, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century, over half of all incumbents were non-resident. Further explanation of clerical terminology can be found in the Glossary, and a detailed account of the clerical profession during the relevant period in a comprehensive work by Jacob.¹

Each parish had two lay churchwardens (parochial chapelries had chapelwardens) appointed on an annual basis, who were responsible to the archdeacon and bishop for the maintenance of the church building, and had various duties in connection with church services and parish registers. Each parish also had a parish clerk, who was a layman with a variety of responsibilities for which he received payment, not to be confused with a 'clerk in holy orders', which is a formal designation for a clergyman. Parish clerks often served for many years, and it was common practice for the position to pass from father to son.

Bishops directly supervised their dioceses by means of 'visitations', which involved the bishop and other diocesan officials touring the diocese over several days and visiting a number of towns. A day was spent in each town, where a defined programme of events and activities took place, which clergy and churchwardens were summoned to attend. A new bishop usually held his primary visitation during the first year after his enthronement, followed by ordinary visitations at intervals of three or four years. Most archdeacons also carried out visitations, including visiting individual parishes to inspect the fabric and furnishings of the parish church. Legal and administrative matters were the responsibility of the diocesan chancellor and registrar, with the registrar responsible for records and archives.

For the sake of brevity, in the rest of this book the term 'parish' can be assumed to encompass parochial chapelries, and the term 'churchwardens' to include chapelwardens.

1. W.M. Jacob, *The Clerical Profession in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1680-1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Parish registers

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a parish register as ‘a book recording the christenings, marriages and burials taking place in a parish church’ (and also ‘the registrar of a parish’, now obsolete). Parish registers are sometimes referred to as parish records, but that term has a much wider meaning, and includes all the historical records that were generated within parishes. Other parish records include churchwardens’ accounts, vestry minutes, poor law records and glebe and tithe records. Parish registers were originally required to be kept in a locked chest, which was often used for storing other parish records. The miscellaneous material kept in the parish chest, other than the registers themselves, is often referred to as ‘parish chest material’. Although this type of material can be extremely valuable in local and family history research, there has never been any legal requirement for it to be preserved, so there is considerable variation between parishes in the extent to which it has survived.

The three events recorded in parish registers are baptisms, marriages and burials. Births and deaths only began to be routinely recorded in England and Wales when civil registration was introduced in 1837. Although the terms ‘baptism’ and ‘christening’ were generally used interchangeably, a subtle distinction between these terms began to be made in the records of some parishes towards the end of the eighteenth century, as explained in Chapter 3.

At the time parish registers were first introduced, church and state were completely intertwined, with everyone assumed to be a member of the Church of England. During the seventeenth century, various separate denominations of Protestant Dissenters (also known as Nonconformists) evolved, and were allowed certain freedoms under the Toleration Act of 1689. The main groups of Dissenters during this earlier period (commonly referred to collectively as ‘Old Dissent’) were Quakers, Presbyterians, Independents (Congregationalists) and Baptists. However, the freedoms enjoyed by Protestant Dissenters did not extend to Roman Catholics, for whom penal restrictions only began to be lifted in 1778. Methodism began as a movement within the Church of England, but a number of separate Methodist denominations (commonly referred to as ‘New Dissent’) evolved in the late eighteenth century.

The existence of other religious groups resulted in some baptisms, marriages and burials not being recorded in Church of England

parish registers. Most other denominations kept their own records, detailed accounts of which can be found in the second and third introductory volumes to the *National Index of Parish Registers*.² In relation to births and baptisms, Quakers did not practise baptism, and Baptists did not baptise infants. Otherwise, baptism of children fairly soon after birth was the norm, and unless the parents were members of other denominations, children were routinely baptised in their local parish church. Between 1660 and 1754, the majority of Nonconformists, apart from Quakers, married in the Church of England. Between 1754 and 1837, all marriages, apart from those of Quakers and Jews, were required by law to take place in an Anglican church. Most Quaker meetings established their own burial grounds, but many churches of other denominations did not have graveyards, and few cemeteries were opened before the mid-nineteenth century. Most burials before 1837 therefore took place in parish churchyards.

It might therefore be assumed that, between 1660 and 1837, all baptisms of children born in England and Wales whose parents were not associated with other denominations, and almost all marriages and burials, would have been recorded in the parish registers of the Church of England. The reality, however, was somewhat different. Although most children were baptised, usually shortly after birth, but sometimes much later, others were not baptised at all. Some couples took advantage of legal loopholes to marry in locations other than parish churches. However, even when baptisms, marriages and burials took place, they were sometimes not recorded in the parish register, usually as a result of clerical negligence.

Under-registration of baptisms, marriages and burials in parish registers as a result of nonconformity will be taken as given, and will not be discussed further in this book. Other significant causes of under-registration, in relation to events that should have taken place not taking place, or events that did take place not being recorded, are discussed in subsequent chapters.

2. D.J. Steel, *National Index of Parish Registers*, vol. 2, *Sources for Nonconformist Genealogy and Family History* (London: Phillimore, 1973). D.J. Steel and Edgar R. Samuel, *National Index of Parish Registers*, vol. 3, *Sources for Roman Catholic and Jewish Genealogy and Family History* (London: Phillimore, 1974).

This book is concerned with the entries made in parish registers in relation to baptisms, marriages and burials, and not with other memoranda, annotations and lists that were sometimes included, such as lists of former incumbents, accounts of notable events that occurred in the parish, details of glebe lands, ‘briefs’ recording collections for worthy causes, etc. Further information on other historically relevant material that may be present in parish registers can be found in some of the books referred to below, and a volume containing many examples from Wiltshire has been published.³ The admissibility of parish registers as evidence in the courts of law, which has been discussed elsewhere,⁴ is also beyond the scope of this book.

Previous works on the history of parish registers

The first comprehensive work on the history of parish registers was published in 1829.⁵ Its author was John Southerden Burn, a solicitor and antiquary who had a particular interest in this topic. A second edition followed in 1862.⁶ A pamphlet written by Robert Edmond Chester Waters, based on an earlier article in *The Home and Foreign Review* in 1863, was published in 1870. Few copies of this pamphlet appear to have survived, but a new edition, rewritten and enlarged, was published in 1883.⁷ A book by T.F. Thiselton-Dyer, largely concerned with the historical information that could be gleaned from parish registers, was published in 1898.⁸

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3. Steven Hobbs (ed.), *Gleanings from Wiltshire Parish Registers* (Chippenham: Wiltshire Record Society, 2010).
 4. Peter J. Bilbrough, ‘The Admissibility of Parish Registers as Evidence in Courts of Law’, *Genealogists’ Magazine*, 17 (1973), 371-76.
 5. John Southerden Burn, *Registrum Ecclesiae Parochialis: The History of Parish Registers in England* (London: Edward Suter, 1829).
 6. John Southerden Burn, *Registrum Ecclesiae Parochialis: The History of Parish Registers in England*, 2nd ed. (London: John Russell Smith, 1862).
 7. Robert Edmond Chester Waters, *Parish Registers in England: Their History and Contents* (London: Fred. J. Roberts, 1883).
 8. T.F. Thiselton-Dyer, *Old English Social Life as Told by the Parish Registers* (London: Elliot Stock, 1898).

A book titled *Key to the Ancient Parish Registers of England and Wales* was published in 1908.⁹ The main part of this work comprised a list of registers in alphabetical order by parish, indicating the county and the date of the earliest entry, but an introductory chapter on the history of parish registers was also included. Two quite different books on parish registers were published in 1910. The first was written by the antiquary J. Charles Cox, in the expectation that it would 'whilst based upon the labours of my predecessors, Burn and Waters ... strike out a wider line of its own, and aim at a better arrangement and at a fuller explanation'.¹⁰ The second was written specifically for genealogists by William Bradbrook, and published as volume 7 of *The Genealogist's Pocket Library* by C.A. Bernau.¹¹ This was more of a reference work, and included information on a range of topics related to parish registers and their history. The classic work by W.E. Tate on the records produced in connection with parochial administration, *The Parish Chest*, was first published in 1946, with subsequent editions in 1951 and 1969.¹² This book covered the full range of parish records, and included a chapter on parish registers.

The first comprehensive guide to genealogical research in England and Wales to be written during the twentieth century was *Genealogical Research in England and Wales*, by Gardner and Smith, published in Salt Lake City in three volumes between 1956 and 1964. These volumes were written primarily to assist members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who have a duty to research their ancestry, to trace their ancestors in England and Wales, where traditional genealogy, largely the preserve of gentlemen of leisure, was only beginning to evolve into the more popular and accessible pursuit of family history. The first of these volumes included several chapters on parish registers, and would seem to be the earliest published work

9. Arthur Meredyth Burke, *Key to the Ancient Parish Registers of England and Wales* (London: Sackville Press, 1908).

10. J. Charles Cox, *The Parish Registers of England* (London: Methuen, 1910).

11. William Bradbrook, *The Parish Register* (Walton-on-Thames: Chas. A. Bernau, 1910).

12. W.E. Tate, *The Parish Chest: A Study of the Records of Parochial Administration in England*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

to draw attention to the more detailed parish registers introduced in certain parts of the country in the late eighteenth century.¹³

The most recent book to cover the history of parish registers in any detail is the work by Steel, published in 1968 as the first introductory volume to the multi-volume *National Index of Parish Registers*, an ambitious project undertaken by the Society of Genealogists.¹⁴ A more recent unpublished research paper on the extent of recording of the father's occupation in baptism registers, by historical demographer Peter Kitson, has proved extremely valuable in identifying dioceses and archdeaconries in which initiatives for the improvement of parish registers may have taken place.¹⁵

All the books published before the First World War referred to above are now out of copyright, so most have been digitised and are freely available online.

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13. David E. Gardner and Frank Smith, *Genealogical Research in England and Wales*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1956).

14. Steel, *National Index of Parish Registers*, vol. 1.

15. Peter Kitson, *The Recording of Occupations in the Anglican Baptism Registers of England and Wales, 1690-1799* (Cambridge: Campop, 2007), www.campop.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/occupations/outputs/preliminary/paper14.pdf.