

Parish Registers

Civil Registration began in England and Wales on 1st July 1837, which is good news if you are looking for evidence of your ancestors' birth, marriage or death through certificates after that date, but not good news if you are trying to track them down prior to this. That's where parish records come into their own.

The Early Days

Back in 1538, Thomas Cromwell, ordered that every wedding, baptism and burial should be recorded. This meant that the Parish Priest or Parish Clerk had to ensure that all such activities that had taken place during the preceding week were recorded in the Parish Register. However, it is best to remember that all of these events were recorded together and, although you may find separate pages for births, marriages and burials, it is more likely that you will not, so patience is the key.

In 1597 it was decreed that a second copy had to be made and sent to the Bishop. If you find that a Parish Register is illegible - or even non-existent - then you may find that these transcripts will help you out.

Marriage Records before 1754 just contained the names of the bride and groom and the date of the marriage. Some very early registers (in the 1500s) can contain entries like "John Smith married his wife". This is not too helpful for the family historian... However, there was one exception - if the bride or groom were from different parishes than where the marriage was being performed, then the parish of where the person was living at the time was stated.

The year 1754 saw the introduction of Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act. This meant that marriages were entered into separate volumes (often with banns), whilst baptisms and burials continued to be recorded together in the same volume. So don't think that burials are missing – they could be hiding behind the baptisms.

What is in them?

From 1754 to 1812

Baptisms included the Father's occupation and Mother's maiden name. If you were lucky, an enthusiastic Parish Clerk may also include a date of birth or even a note that the babe was illegitimate with a purported father being.....

Marriages included the parish of both parties, names, status (e.g. bachelor, widow, etc), ages, signatures/marks, and those of two witnesses. The witnesses may have been a parent or other relation, but this is not always the case.

Burials included age, occupation and abode. By the way, between 1678 and 1814 an affidavit was required to be sworn that the deceased was buried in wool or a fine of £5 was given.

Marriages are either by banns or by licence:

Banns can found in the Parish Register with the couple's intention to marry being read on three occasions in the parish churches of both the bride and groom. The wedding traditionally took place in the bride's Parish, so if you find those Banns and the groom was living in a different Parish, it should state where this was. A word of caution: these were the Parishes where the happy couple were living, which were not necessarily where they originated from.

Licences were sometimes handed to the couple marrying and have not therefore always survived. However, a search can be made for its bond or allegation, which will give information of the value of the bond and the names of those who stood surety, as well as the names of bride and groom and place of marriage. Sometimes the occupations both of those who stood surety and of the groom were also given.

After 1812

In 1812 George Rose's Act required that baptisms, marriages and burials were entered in separate, specially printed books with eight entries on each page and that they included more information. This makes checking the individual registers for the baptisms, marriages and burials a whole lot easier.

Where can they be found?

Parish Registers may be lodged at the local County Archives or Record Office, but this is dependent upon whether the books are full or not. Some small Parish Churches hold their original registers as they are still using them. Some parish registers have been copied or transcribed and are available to view on Family Search or on Pay Per View or Subscription websites. Other copies might be held by the appropriate Family History Society.

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If you are not able to find the record that you are looking for or live too far away to check the original registers, someone else might be able to help you. Register for FREE at <http://www.genealogy-specialists.com/> and post details of your ancestor and which record(s) that you are looking for. The members will do their utmost to find them for you!

If you would like to find out more about Parish Registers, understanding what was written and the best ways of finding your elusive forebears, listed below are some products that will certainly help you along your way and all of them are available from [www.parishchest.com](http://www.parishchest.com). Just pop the reference number in the website search box to see the details.

- Parish Registers Ref: FHP-125
- Parish Registers: A history and guide Ref: SR-SR04
- Key to the Ancient Parish Registers of England and Wales Ref: ANG-ARA01
- List of Parish Registers and Other Works Ref: ANG-ARA 517
- The History of Parish Registers in England Ref: ANG-ARA05

Also, Parish Chest has a complete section dedicated to Parish Registers, which is broken down by county. Take a look on [www.parishchest.com](http://www.parishchest.com) to find the area in which you are searching.