

KEY DATES FOR PARISH REGISTERS

The following dates set out the principal changes to the keeping of parish registers of baptism, marriage and burial. These changes frequently have impacts on the information recorded and the completeness of the records which might be encountered at different periods.

The notes in red provide clarification where there may be an impact on family history research.

5 Sep 1538 Mandate issued by Thomas Cromwell to all parishes requiring them to record every baptism, marriage and burial performed. These were to be compiled each week. Very few registers survive from this early date, possibly as a result of destruction following the order of 1597 (see below).

This is the starting point for parish registers. Although records may have been kept before the reformation, there was no mandate to do so and nothing is known to have survived.

1547 Cromwell's mandate was repeated by Edward IV with additional condition that fines levied for non-compliance should be distributed to the poor.

1555 Under the Catholic monarch Mary I, bishops were required to ensure that sponsors were named in the record of each baptism.

The recording of sponsors' names continued following the reestablishment of Catholic churches to England in the 18th century up to the present day in Roman Catholic baptism registers.

1558 Requirement to record sponsors' names revoked following accession of the Protestant monarch Elizabeth I.

25 Oct 1597 [Effective 1598] Under Elizabeth I, an order was issued that the records were to be kept in parchment books.

Copies of all register entries were to be sent to the bishop's registry annually at Easter [Bishops' transcripts];

Earlier records, which were largely recorded on paper, were to be copied into parchment books. It was, however, only mandatory that records dating from the start of Elizabeth's reign in 1558 needed to be copied

Many churches took the easy option of copying their early registers only from 1558 onwards and it is from this date that most churches' surviving records date.

- 6 Dec 1644 (OS) Ordinance which re-stated the requirement for parchment registers and additionally required that baptism registers should include date of birth and the names of the parents and burial registers the date of death. This ordinance was largely ignored.
- Before this ordinance, a baptism record might consist of no more than "Baptised John Smith" with no information as to parentage.*
- 22 Sep 1653 Under the Commonwealth government, the duty of registration of births was transferred to a civil official called the 'Parish Register'. A fee of one shilling was levied on each registration.
- The fee, as well as objection to the imposition of a civil process provided a disincentive to registration. Records for the Commonwealth period are consequently very much incomplete.*
- 29 Sep 1654 Responsibility for marriage transferred from clergy to the Justices of the peace.
- 1660 Parish registration restored following the restoration of Charles II to the throne.
- The return to the pre-Commonwealth arrangements resulted in many children born in the previous seven years, who were possibly not registered under the civil process, being taken for baptism.*
- 1666 [Effective 1667] Burial in Woollen Act required all bodies to be wrapped in a woollen shroud for burial. Plague victims were excepted. A shroud was not required; paupers could be buried naked without penalty.
- The Buried in Woollen Acts were a deliberate attempt to support the English woollen industry and to reduce imports of alternative fabrics.*
- 1677 [Effective 1 Aug 1678] Second Burial in Woollen Act required an affidavit to be signed by a magistrate to confirm compliance with the requirement. £5 penalty for non-compliance.
- Where they survive, the affidavits may provide evidence of a death/burial in the absence of a burial register.*
- Wealthy families were known to have treated the penalty as no more than an overhead and so ignored the requirement and paid the fine. Since half of the fine was paid to the informant, families might inform on themselves and so effectively halve the cost.*
- 1680 Burial in Woollen Act of 1677 amended to permit the affidavit to be signed by a minister in place of a magistrate.
- The Burial in Woollen Acts were not formally repealed until 1814 but were largely ignored from the mid-1700s.*

- 1680 Parents ordered to register the birth of every child with the clergy and to pay a registration fee of 6d. This act proved largely ineffective.
It may, however, have resulted in births not being registered.
- 1694 Tax introduced on each birth, marriage, or burial on a scale of 2s per birth, 2s 6d per marriage and 4s per burial of all non-paupers. Taxes increased on a sliding scale according to wealth and rank. The tax was levied for five years "for carrying on the war with France with vigour".
As with the fees levied during the Commonwealth period, the fees were a disincentive to registration and many births were consequently not registered.
- 25 Mar 1754 Following Hardwicke's Act for the Better Prevention of Clandestine Marriages of 1753 all marriages had to be performed in licensed buildings, invariably Church of England chapels or churches. Marriages between Jews and marriages between Quakers were exempted from this requirement.

Marriages to follow the calling of banns or issue of a marriage licence by an ecclesiastical court.

Marriages to be recorded in printed registers in a common format and each entry signed by two witnesses.

Before 1754 it was possible to contract a legally recognised marriage simply by the exchange of promises and consummation of the union. Marriages by unbeneficed ministers, so called "Fleet" marriages were also an irritation to the authorities as the liberty of the parties to contract to marriage was seldom explored.
- 1777 The Archbishop of York, directed that the system of recording baptisms proposed by Rev. William Dade should be introduced throughout the York diocese. The registers were to include child's name, seniority (e.g. first son), and dates of birth and baptism. Additionally, the father's name, profession, place of abode and descent (i.e. names, professions and places of abode of his parents). Similar information was to be recorded about the mother, and her parents. Similar information was to be recorded in burial registers.

"Dade Registers" can be found in parishes in the counties of Yorkshire, Cheshire, Lancashire and Nottinghamshire. They can also be found in some parishes in Surrey, Gloucestershire, Devon, Essex and Dorset, all of which are in the Province of Canterbury. A list of parishes with Dade Registers can be found at :
<http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/YORKSGEN/2002-12/1040220389>

Not all parishes followed the direction to keep their registers according to Dade's system, but in those parishes which did, the information they contain is invaluable to family historians. The introduction of printed registers following George Rose's Act of 1812 brought about the end of the practice.

- 1 Oct 1783 A duty of 3d levied on all registrations. Repealed the following year.
- 1798 The Bishop of Durham (Bishop Barrington) passed a decree stating what information was to be included in the baptism and burial registers kept in his diocese, which included Northumberland. These details were; date of birth and baptism, abode of the family, child's name, father's name, occupation and native parish and mother's name, native parish and her parent's names.
- As with Dade Registers (above), compliance was less than 100% and the system came to an end with the introduction of printed registers 15 years later.
- 1 Jan 1813 Following George Rose's Act of 1812, all baptisms and burials were to be recorded in printed registers using a standardised format.
- Although these registers are usually easier to read and guarantee the inclusion of certain basic details, prior to their introduction many ministers would include additional details in their registers, for example the date of birth in a baptism register.*
- 1 July 1837 Marriage became a civil process administered by the church in parallel with its religious rites. Licenced Church of England churches and chapels could continue to perform marriages but were required to record them in a standardised register and submit copies to the local Registrar at the end of each quarter. The concession extended to marriages between Jews and between Quakers was retained.
- The new arrangements required the church to maintain two copies of the marriage register. One was deposited with the Registrar once completed and can only be accessed by obtaining a copy certificate from the Registrar or from the GRO. The other register was retained by the church and would generally be deposited in the diocesan record office. These copies are open to free public inspection and so provide a means to bypass the need to purchase a copy certificate.*
- Although births and deaths were now also to be recorded under a civil process, churches continued to perform baptisms and burials and to maintain registers (in the 1813 format) as before.*

- 1907 Deceased Wife's Sister Marriage Act allowed a widower to marry his deceased wife's sister.
- Couples faced with this problem might marry in a parish in which they were not known or marry abroad. The painter William Holman Hunt, for example, married his deceased wife's sister in Switzerland in 1875.*
- 1921 Deceased Brother's Widow's Marriage Act allowed a widow to marry her deceased husband's brother.
- The act of 1907 did not legalise the marriage of a widow to her late husband's brother.*
- 1929 Marriage Act. Replaced the right to marry with parental consent at 14 for males and 12 for females with a common age of 16. Marriages subsequently contracted under the age of 16 to be void.
- 1945 Marriage Act. Consolidated the 1929 Act. Parental consent required for marriages contracted between persons aged under 21.
- 1 Jan 1979 Parochial Registers and Records Measure requires parish registers completed more than 100 years ago to be deposited with the diocesan record office unless proper provision is made for their retention at the church.
- Churches which have chosen to retain their registers are under an obligation to respond to enquiries concerning the events recorded, subject to the payment of specified fees.*