

Dorset History Centre - Guide to Sources

Parish Registers

What is a Parish?

- A 'parish' is an area of land served by a church and it's **Incumbent** (a vicar, rector or curate)
- It is the smallest unit of **church administration**. The system of ancient parishes began before the Norman Conquest. However, the boundaries of parishes have changed over time and parishes vary considerably in size
- Each parish was managed by a **Vestry**, which included the incumbent, churchwardens and leading inhabitants
- The parish **taxed** its local inhabitants to pay for the upkeep of the church, care for the poor and sick, maintain the highways and pay the constable
- Until the late 19th century, the parish church was at the centre of people's lives. It was also an **important meeting place** where people worshipped together, baptised their children, got married and were buried!

What are Parish Registers?

- Parish registers are volumes kept by the incumbent of each parish to record baptisms, marriages and burials
- **1538, Thomas Cromwell**, a Minister in the Government of Henry VIII, ordered that a record of baptisms, marriages and burials should be kept by each parish
- Most entries were recorded on paper, some on loose sheets which were subsequently lost or destroyed
- **1597**, baptisms, marriages and burials were to be recorded in bound parchment volumes and previous records copied into them

- **1598**, copies of all events recorded in the registers were to be sent to the bishop so beginning the records known as **Bishop's Transcripts**
- **1653**, responsibility for keeping registers was transferred to a secular official, the '**Parish Register**'. Elected by local ratepayers and approved by a JP, the minister or parish clerk usually took this role
- **1660**, the 1653 Act was repealed when **Charles II** was restored to the throne
- **Hardwicke's Marriage Act 1753** required that both marriages and banns be recorded. From **1754** marriages were to be recorded in a **separate bound volume** on standard printed sheets. The registers had to be signed by both parties and witnesses. Baptisms and burials still recorded together in a separate volume
- **Rose's Act 1812** required that both baptisms and burials be recorded in **separate bound volumes**. From **1813** a new standard format for baptism and burial registers was introduced
- **1837**, Introduction of the civil registration of births, marriages and deaths. Marriage registers were created in duplicate, one copy being passed to the **Superintendent Registrar**

Where are they now?

- The **Diocesan Record Office** should hold most parish registers for their area. The local **County Record Office** usually acts as the Diocesan Record Office on behalf of the Bishop
- A small number may still be with the parish, check with your local County Record Office who will be able to tell you where the registers are kept

What do they tell us?

- Early registers are normally very brief. Baptisms, marriages and burials were **recorded in one register** on blank sheets of paper or parchment

- Some Incumbents recorded more than others. Incumbents and parish clerks also varied in ability for spelling, handwriting, accuracy and completeness
- After 1754 **marriage registers** record the names of the bride and groom, the parishes in which they lived, marital status e.g. bachelor, spinster, widow, widower, the date of the marriage, whether the marriage was by banns or licence and the signatures of the bride, groom and two witnesses
- After 1837 marriage registers contain exactly the same information as **marriage certificates**. A marriage certificate is simply a copy of the entry in the marriage register
- Until **1929**, boys could marry at 14, girls at 12. After 1754, **minors**, those aged 20 or under, could only marry with the permission of their parents
- By tradition, marriages usually took place in the **bride's home parish**
- **Early baptism** entries usually only record the name of the child, the date of baptism and the name of the father, although the name of the mother may also be included
- After 1812, **baptism registers** include the date of baptism, the name of the child, the names of both parents (if married), the parish of abode and the father's occupation
- Late 20th century baptism registers usually include dates of birth and the names of godparents
- Baptisms usually took place in church, but if a child was not expected to live they may have been **baptised at home** soon after birth. This should be recorded in the register with an annotation, for example, 'privately baptised', 'PB' or 'half-baptised'. If the child survived, it was usually '**received**' into the church by a public baptism and a **second entry** would therefore be recorded
- Children were often baptised soon after birth, but it is not uncommon to find that a child was baptised several years later
- Annotations may appear in the register to show that a child was **illegitimate**. Common phrases include 'spurious', 'base', 'base-born', 'merry begot' or just a capital 'B'
- If the child was illegitimate the father's name is usually not recorded
- **Early burial** entries usually only record the name of the person and the date of burial, but the names of husbands, whether they were a widow or widower, or age may also be recorded

- **After 1812**, burial entries included the age of the deceased and the place of residence. Each entry was signed by the officiating minister
- If the person buried had not lived in the parish they may be referred to as a '**stranger**'
- People buried in a municipal cemetery, a workhouse burial ground, or on private land may sometimes not be recorded in the parish burial register
- **Banns** were the proclamations read in church upon **three successive Sundays** prior to a wedding ceremony to allow time for any objections to the marriage to be made
- From 1754, the reading of banns was recorded with the marriage entries, but **separate banns registers** were also kept by parishes and these usually record the names of the bride and groom, marital status and the parish in which they lived