

## **Parish Registers**

### **Introduction**

Parish registers are one of the four main sources used by family historians researching families in England and Wales. They are also an essential source for parish history and demography. Post-1754 marriage registers can also provide useful information on the extent of literacy at particular times.

Parish registers are simply records of baptisms, marriages and burials as recorded by the minister [rector, vicar or curate] in charge of a specific Church of England parish. They can date from 1538 to the present day, and a good series of registers survive for most, but not all, Devon parishes.

Before civil registration of births, marriages and deaths commenced in July 1837, parish registers (or in some cases, registers kept by non-conformist congregations) are usually the only official documents which record these events in our ancestors' lives.

Baptismal registers, which in most cases were the only record of a child's coming into the world before civil registration began in July 1837, are especially useful as they almost always record the names of the child's parents.

Early marriage registers are very brief, but from 1754 onwards they should give the signatures of witnesses, who may be relatives of the married couple. From July 1837, marriage registers are also expected to record the names and occupations of the fathers of the bride and groom. The family connections which can be made from such evidence make parish registers especially useful.

### **Finding Devon parish registers**

#### **Where are the original Devon parish registers held?**

Original parish registers are rarely held in parish churches any longer. The vast majority of Devon parish churches have now deposited their oldest original parish registers in one of the three archive repositories in Devon which are authorised to hold them, under current legislation. This legislation is the Parochial Registers and Records Measure, passed in 1978 by the General Synod of the Church of England to ensure the long-term care and preservation of parish registers and other ecclesiastical records, and to make them accessible to the public. This legislation was introduced in response to the increasing importance of parish records in historical research, and recognized the fact that church officers did not necessarily have the skills – and even more importantly, the appropriate storage conditions - to care for parish records. The development of archival services in Devon and other counties and cities, meant that there were centralised repositories available where these parish registers and other records could be looked after and made accessible.

This means that the majority of the original Devon parish registers already deposited, are at the Devon Heritage Centre. However, those for North Devon parishes are held at the North Devon Record Office, and those for Plymouth and most west Devon and south-west Devon parishes are at the Plymouth and West Devon Record Office. Very few parishes still hold their oldest parish registers. Some parishes have even deposited completed registers which cover dates up to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*The Guide to the Parish and Non-Parochial Registers of Devon and Cornwall, 1538-1837*, by Hugh Peskett (published by Devon and Cornwall Record Society, 1979, revised 1983) is a valuable

information source on Devon parishes and their registers. Copies of this book are kept for reference in the Devon Heritage Centre, and the other two record offices in Devon, as well as at family history society libraries within and outside Devon. However, please note that many of the registers which are listed as being in the possession of the incumbent are now deposited with one of the three archive offices.

### **Filmed copies of parish registers**

Most pre-1837, and a substantial number of post-1837 registers which have been deposited at the three archive offices, were originally filmed and made available on 35 mm film or as microfiche.

Church of England parish registers for the whole of Devon, including those held at North Devon and Plymouth record offices, which have been filmed, are available on sets of microfiche or rolls of film at all three archive repositories in Devon. This means that even if the original registers are held in North Devon, for example, you can still access the registers on film or fiche at Devon Heritage Centre. Of course if a register was never filmed, you have to visit the office where the original register is held, in order to see it.

We have also supplied sets of microfiche and film of the parish registers for their own area, to our service points in Devon. Information about our Service Points is available on the Planning a Visit section of the Devon Archives and Local Studies website.

Where registers have been filmed, it is expected that researchers will use the film or microfiche versions when they visit the archive offices.

### **Parish registers still held in parish churches**

Because more recent parish registers – those with entries less than 150 years old recorded in them – do not have to be deposited under the abovementioned legislation, some parishes still have 19<sup>th</sup> century baptism, marriage and burial registers in their own care. Many Church of England benefices are now grouped together or combined with other parishes under the care of one incumbent, so these undeposited parish registers may be held in the parish church, or at another church within the same team ministry

The staff at all three offices will help you to find details of the present custodians of a parish's registers.

### **Access to registers held in parish churches**

Registers which are in use are still held by the incumbent (the minister) at the parish church. In a small parish in which very few baptisms, burials etc. take place, these registers may have been in use since the 19th century. Under the Parochial Measure registers more than 100 years old should be deposited in the designated Record Office. However, some incumbents still have older, completed registers in their possession. A parish may choose to hold its own registers instead of depositing them, provided that it can be shown that they have the correct storage facilities in which to keep them, in terms of security and environmental control.

You can find out what registers we hold for a particular parish from our on-line list of parish registers. If you wish to see registers still in the possession of an incumbent, you can contact us and we will supply his/her name and contact details, from the latest Diocesan Directory.

Parish registers online.

### **Parish registers online**

Most of the Church of England parish registers held at the Devon Heritage Centre and North Devon Record Office have been digitised, and many of these are now searchable online on the genealogical

subscription website, Find My Past. There is a cut-off date of 1915 for registers released online, so that baptism, banns and marriage register entries will only rarely relate to those still living.

The first batch of digitised parish registers were released online on 30 May 2014. Note that none of the digitised registers from North Devon Record Office which had been supplied to Find My Past were put online at that time. The second batch of digitised parish registers was released online on 14 November 2014. This batch included digital images of many (but not all) of the registers held at North Devon Record Office, as well as additional registers held at Devon Heritage Centre. However, not all of the parish registers already digitised and supplied to Find My Past appear to have been uploaded in this second batch. In addition, there are 49 parishes still missing because their registers are still in the process of being digitised, and 2 additional parishes for which permission to digitise was refused by the incumbent.

Most of Plymouth and West Devon Record Office's parish registers up to a cut-off date of 1912, and Devon Family History Society's indexes to baptisms, marriages and burials were already available on Find My Past. A large percentage of the surviving parish registers dating up to 1915 which have been deposited in Devon archives are therefore now searchable online.

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