

Bishops Transcripts

Introduction

Bishops Transcripts are contemporary copies of the baptism, marriage and burial entries in the parish registers - that is, copies made in the parish in the same year as the original parish register entries.

Under an Order made in 1598 it was ruled that within one month of Easter each year, the churchwardens were to send to the Diocesan Registry (that is, to the Bishop of the Diocese) a copy of all the register entries for the preceding year.

Note that these copies may not be an exact copy of a register entry. Some Bishops Transcripts were written out first, and copied up into the register before being sent to the Bishop, and some do not contain all the information found in the register, while some contain more. Bishops Transcripts are particularly useful to family historians in cases where a parish register is missing, or where there are gaps or difficulties in reading existing ones.

In Devon, the original Bishops Transcripts of the Diocese of Exeter are now held at Devon Heritage Centre, as we act as the official repository for the historic records of the diocese. However the early Bishops Transcripts dating up to 1812 have been filmed, and are also available on microfilm at the other two archive offices in Devon.

In the case of other Church of England dioceses, the official diocesan repository is usually, but not always, the county archive office or heritage centre.

If a diocese includes more than one county, the original Bishops Transcripts for that diocese may sometimes be split up according to archdeaconry, and stored in the relevant county archive office or heritage centre, instead of together as a complete group with all the other diocesan records.

The counties of both Devon and Cornwall were, until 1876, in the diocese of Exeter. Therefore, Devon Heritage Centre holds most of the original Cornish Bishops Transcripts as well, although some years ago, those covering certain dates were transferred to Cornwall Record Office. They were filmed, and Devon Heritage Centre holds films of these transferred Bishops Transcripts.

Early Bishops Transcripts (up to 1812)

Bishops Transcripts survive for almost all Devon and most Cornwall parishes. The earliest transcripts date from 1598, but because they were written on paper, very few of these survive. In fact very few survive from the early 17th century at all.

During the Civil War, the Church was associated with the losing Royalist side and during the period of the Interregnum and the Commonwealth from 1649-1660, its Bishops were abolished. Therefore, no Bishops Transcripts could be sent to the Bishop during this period, because there were none. Many of the Church of England clergy were also deprived of their livings. With the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, this situation was reversed and the keeping of Bishops Transcripts began again. Most parishes have a reasonably good series from 1660, and this is especially so for the second half of the 18th century.

Late Bishops Transcripts (after 1812)

From 1813, after George Rose's Act had been passed, and baptism, marriage and burial entries had to be kept in printed registers with parchment pages, the keeping of Bishops Transcripts changed in a similar way. From this date they were supposed to be exact copies of the registers, written on printed sheets of parchment, often with the page and entry numbers copied from the register, as well.

After the introduction of civil registration in July 1837, copies of marriage entries were no longer sent to the Bishop, because copies had to be sent to the registrar of the local registration district instead. Baptisms and burial entries generally continued to be copied up and sent for some time; the date when they cease varies from parish to parish, with some continuing into the 1850s and 1860s. Most of these parchment transcripts are in good condition, but some were very badly damaged by fire and water in 1942, when the room in the Cathedral where they were kept was hit by an incendiary bomb in the Exeter Blitz of World War II. This damage is so severe in some cases, that all post-1812 transcripts for particular parishes cannot be unfolded and read.

Locating Bishops Transcripts for Devon and Cornwall

As already mentioned, most of the parishes in the counties of both Devon and Cornwall were, until 1876, in the Diocese of Exeter.

The original early Bishops Transcripts (up to 1812) for Devon are held at Devon Heritage Centre, but these have been microfilmed, and the films are made available to visitors at all three of Devon's archive offices.

The original early Bishops Transcripts (up to 1812) for Cornwall are divided between the Devon Heritage Centre in Exeter and the Cornwall Record Office. Original Bishops Transcripts for Cornish parishes in the Archdeaconry of Cornwall are held at the Cornwall Record Office for the years 1674-1736, 1741-1772, and 1801-1804. The remaining original Cornish Bishops Transcripts are held at Devon Heritage Centre. However, all of the pre-1813 Cornish Bishops Transcripts in both locations have been filmed, and are available on microfilm at Devon Heritage Centre.

The late Bishops Transcripts (dating from 1813) for Devon and Cornwall are held at the Devon Heritage Centre. They have not been filmed. Those which are not too badly damaged can be ordered up and seen in the searchroom at the Devon Heritage Centre.

Both early and late Bishops Transcripts for Devon were also digitised by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) some years ago. They have now been indexed and the digital images made available online on the FamilySearch website, under the collection title "England, Devon Bishops Transcripts, 1558-1887." It is necessary to register for a free account on the FamilySearch website

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