

Nonconformist History

Introduction

Nonconformity has a particularly strong tradition in the south west of England, and there is a wealth of published material available, ranging from general studies of religious history to detailed accounts of particular denominations and congregations. The Devon Library Service computer catalogue of local studies holdings will provide details of most of these works. The *Devon Union List*, A Brockett (1977) includes a section on printed material relating to nonconformity in Devon.

The history of nonconformity in England can be divided into three distinct phases: the first characterised by repression and persecution, the second by a measure of tolerance and legal recognition and the third by a state of freedom and equality. These periods are divided by two events of major significance, the Toleration Act of 1689 and the French Revolution one hundred years later. It should always be remembered that the range of available source material is shaped by these divisions.

Before the Toleration Act of 1689

In this period, records relating to nonconformist congregations were generated by restrictive measures from both local civil and church courts and central government, as any form of dissent from the Established Church was seen as a potential threat to the very stability of society. The fear of a Catholic take-over was ever present following the Reformation, but Protestant dissent proved to be a far greater danger to the authority of the Church of England. The first Baptist church was founded in 1611 and forgotten sects, such as the Family of Love and the Seekers (forerunners of the Quakers), were also formed at this time. Most source material for nonconformist history in this period comes from cases in Quarter Sessions and church courts brought against those who refused to conform to the rites of the Established Church. Records for Devon consist of county Quarter Sessions order books and sessions bundles from 1592 onwards, churchwardens' presentments and records of the Bishop of Exeter's consistory court (all held at Devon Heritage Centre, Great Moor House, Bittern Road, Sowton, Exeter 01392 384253). Recusant Rolls in The National Archives in London (Class E376-377) contain lists of all those refusing to attend regular church services, arranged by county. The North Devon Record Office holds Quarter Sessions records for the following north Devon boroughs:

- Barnstaple 1328-1971 (ref. B1 and Barnstaple Castle (BC))
- Bideford 1659-1952 (ref. 46 and 1064)
- Great Torrington 1686-1836 (ref. 2558)
- South Molton 1671-1733 (ref. 1190)

Understandably, very few records were kept by nonconformist congregations themselves in this period of repression, but the Civil War and Commonwealth period, which temporarily overthrew Episcopal authority in favour of a Presbyterian model, opened the floodgates of radical thought, and the earliest denominational records began to appear after the Act of Uniformity of 1662, when about 2,000 Puritan ministers (a fifth of the English clergy) were ejected from their livings, taking their followers with them. Of the nonconformist groups emerging from the Civil War period, the Quakers were undoubtedly the most successful, although they made relatively little impact in north Devon.

After the Toleration Act of 1689

The Glorious Revolution and the adoption of William of Orange as King marked the end, not only of Stuart autocracy, but also of religious persecution in England. The Toleration Act of 1689 granted nonconformist congregations a measure of legal recognition, and dissenters were henceforth able to worship freely in their own meeting houses, provided that they were registered with either civil or diocesan authorities, with the majority of registrations, not surprisingly, made to the courts of Quarter Sessions. The Exeter diocesan records also include a number of such licences, 1698-1852, arranged by parish (Devon Heritage Centre. ref. Moger PR 109-111). In 1852, the responsibility for licensing was transferred to the Registrar General and submissions of returns from 1689 to 1852 were required from both former authorities. These returns (The National Archives. Class RG31) can provide evidence of name, description, location, denomination and date of registration.

The earliest denominational records are generally registers of births or baptisms, for Anglican baptism registers had a legal importance similar to modern birth certificates and the nonconformists, by maintaining their own registers, hoped to achieve equality in this respect. Pre-nineteenth century marriage registers are few, for between 1754 and 1837 all marriages except those of Jews and Quakers had to be solemnised in the Anglican Church. Similarly, nonconformist burials are generally found in Anglican registers, as the parish burial ground was usually the only one available. Most nonconformist registers were surrendered to the Registrar General for authentication in 1837, although few Catholic and no Jewish congregations did so. Copies of the surrendered registers for Devon are available on microfilm and most are indexed on the International Genealogical index, available for the British Isles on microfiche in the Local Studies Centre and on the Internet at www.familysearch.org.

Other denominational records may include minute books, which often contain register entries, church membership rolls, collection journals, account books, year books, magazines, etc. The North Devon Record Office holds records for the following early nonconformist congregations, generally commencing in the nineteenth century but often including historical accounts and some earlier material:

- Appledore Congregational Church (ref. B151)
- Cross Street Congregational Church, Barnstaple (ref. B81)
- Lavington Independent Church, Bideford (ref. B151)
- Braunton Independent Church (ref. B92)
- Ilfracombe Congregational Church (ref. B218)
- South Molton Congregational Church (ref. B498 and B526)
- Howe Congregational Church, Torrington (ref. B353 and B400)

There were still, of course, many legal restrictions on nonconformists, especially Catholics, whose activities were illegal until 1791. After the Jacobite Rebellion, all Papists were obliged, by an Act of 1715, to register their real estate with the county Quarter Sessions, and a box of papers relating to Papists' estates, 1717-1776, together with two rolls of Papists' oaths of allegiance, under an Act of 1791, survive amongst the records for Devon (Devon Heritage Centre. ref. QS22, 76). The Quarter Sessions records also contain a roll of dissenting ministers' oaths of allegiance, 1780-1825 (Devon Heritage Centre. ref. QS24). Replies to bishops' visitation queries, located among the diocesan records, provide a wide-ranging survey of the extent of, and attitudes towards, dissenters in each parish (Devon Heritage Centre. ref. Chanter 225 (1744), 228 (1764), 232 (1779), 242 (1821)). A transcript of the records for 1821 (covering both Devon and Cornwall) has been published by the Devon & Cornwall Record Society.

The Methodist Revival

The Methodists, like the Puritans before them, began as a revivalist movement within the Established Church, influenced by the evangelical preaching of John Wesley from the 1730s onwards. They were labelled 'violent enthusiasts' and increasingly refused access to their own parish churches. After the death of Wesley, who had opposed secession, in 1791, Methodism broke with the Church of England and split into several doctrinal groups, divisions that in many cases persisted until a general union in 1932. Most branches adopted the tightly organised system of centralised administration favoured by the Wesleys, and this generated a large quantity of records. Individual societies were grouped into circuits, and the majority of records held at local level relate to individual circuits and their chapels. The most significant branch of Methodism in north Devon was the Bible Christian movement, founded in Shebbear in 1815. The North Devon Record Office holds records for the following Methodist circuits:

- Barnstaple: Wesleyan and Bible Christian (ref. 2347)
- Barnstaple and Ilfracombe: Wesleyan (ref. 2334)
- Bideford: Wesleyan and Bible Christian (ref. 2237)
- Bideford: Primitive Methodist (ref. 2734)
- Bude: Wesleyan and United Methodist (ref. 2926)
- Holsworthy: Wesleyan, Bible Christian and United Methodist (ref. 2638)
- Ilfracombe: Wesleyan (ref. 2334)
- Kilkhampton: Wesleyan (ref. 2926)
- Ringsash: Bible Christian and United Methodist (ref. 2405)
- Shebbear: Bible Christian and United Methodist (ref. B607)
- South Molton: Wesleyan, Primitive Methodist and Bible Christian (ref. 2506 and 2734)
- Torrington (ref. 2347 and 2237)

After the French Revolution

The rapid spread of Methodism was greatly assisted by a profound sense of horror at the French Revolution and the perceived consequences of French Republican atheism. By the close of the war with France, the Anglican Establishment faced a number of powerful nonconformist denominations no longer content to be merely 'tolerated'. In addition, the inherent conservatism of early Methodism removed, to a large degree, long-standing prejudice and fear of nonconformity as a subversive force. As a result, the Church of England was obliged to address a number of grievances, e.g. tithe payment and restrictions on marriage, heralding the Victorian era of social reform and allowing nonconformist congregations a hitherto unparalleled degree of equality.

By the time of the Ecclesiastical Census of 1851, there were 142 Independent, 110 Baptist, 12 Unitarian, 8 Quaker, 9 Catholic and 376 Methodist preaching places in Devon, together with 8 assemblies of Plymouth Brethren and 1 Moravian congregation. A transcript of the Census is available in the Local Studies Centre. This probably represented the zenith of popular nonconformity in the county, and subsequent economic decline, combined with the growth of secularism in the twentieth century, led to a dramatic decline in membership that affected all denominations. Nevertheless, nonconformist traditions and attitudes remain strong in the region.

Sources Available

Nation-wide surveys to establish the number and strength of nonconformist congregations were carried out in 1715 (Evans' List, updated 1730) and 1773 (Thompson's List); both are held at Dr Williams' Library, 14 Gordon Square, London, the foremost research library on Protestant nonconformity. A local equivalent is a survey of nonconformity in Devon, made in 1794, preserved at the back of the first minute book of the Exeter Assembly of Dissenting Ministers (Devon Heritage Centre. ref. 3542D/M1/1).

The North Devon Record Office holds records for a number of north Devon nonconformist congregations. For details, see our List of Collections or the section on NONCONFORMITY in the subject card index. Microfilm copies of the surrendered pre-1837 registers for the county of Devon are also available for consultation, as mentioned above, along with microfiche copies of many post-1837 nonconformist registers deposited with the county archives service. There are, of course, numerous additional sources of information available; for example, local newspapers contain a wealth of useful material, particularly during the nineteenth century period of chapel building, and the Local Studies Centre holds copies of the North Devon Journal from 1824 and the Bideford Gazette from 1856. The North Devon Record Office holds a large collection of photographs of chapels in the Shebbear Methodist Circuit (ref. B175).

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