

Parish Records

Introduction

Although the best known categories of Anglican parish records are the registers of baptisms, marriages and burials, there is a wide range of other material relating to individual parishes available to the local historian. In fact, the keeping of parish registers was a relatively minor part of the work of a parish. From the 16th to the 19th centuries, parishes were responsible for almost every aspect of local life, from poor relief and public health to highway maintenance, and their records reflect this. For further information on the life and work of the parish, as well as its records, the following books are useful:

- The Parish and the County, S and B Webb, 1963
- The Parish Chest, W E Tate, 1983
- Village Records, John West, 1986
- Church and Parish, J H Bettey, 1987
- A Pocket Guide to Parochial affairs, P E Hattersley, 1988

What is a Parish?

Parishes are areas under the spiritual charge of a minister (usually a vicar or rector); historically, they have also been areas where separate poor rates were levied and overseers of the poor appointed. Each parish also traditionally provided its own officials from among its inhabitants, as well as its own militia quota. Parishes, moreover, had long controlled their own affairs through locally elected vestries. A parish, then, has historically been the basic unit of local government and, in the words of W.E. Tate, 'the territorial basis of community service'.

Lists of Parish Records at the North Devon Record Office

These are arranged alphabetically by parish, and are subdivided in each case by the following headings: PR (Registers); PI (Incumbent); PB (Benefice); PW (Churchwardens); PO (Overseers of the Poor); PV (Vestry); PP (Parochial Church Council); PC (Constable); PS (Surveyor of the Highways); PX (Parish Council); PF (Charities); PE (Education); PG (Clubs and Societies); PD (Statutory deposits); PM (Militia); PZ (Miscellaneous). Copies of North Devon Record Office lists of parish records are also available on the Discovery website at www.discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/.

Parish Registers (PR)

Anglican parish registers of baptisms, marriages (later including banns) and burials were first introduced in 1538, though many of the earliest surviving registers do not begin until 1558 for historical reasons, and the registers of many other parishes commence at a later date. Parish registers, apart from giving names and dates of events, will sometimes provide the occupation, parish of settlement and other information on the individuals concerned, especially after 1754 (marriages) and 1812 (baptisms and burials), when printed register formats were introduced. Early registers are sometimes written in Latin, although most are in English, and their script can be difficult to read; there are often also gaps, notably between 1642 and 1660 during the Civil War and Commonwealth period. The North Devon Record Office holds parish registers for most of Devon on microfiche, and original registers, some registers of services, selected marriage licences, etc, for the north Devon area (i.e. parishes in the Archdeaconry of

Barnstaple). Many Devon parish registers are also available to search/view on the Find My Past website.

Incumbent (PI)

The incumbent (usually vicar or rector) of a parish was responsible for the supervision of his community, both spiritually and as chairman of the parish vestry. He was also responsible for the registration of baptisms, marriages and burials, as well as other areas of church life. Incumbents' records will therefore include licences for curates, confirmation notices, etc., along with papers concerning his own personal work, such as letters or sermon notes.

Benefice (PB)

The benefice was the living attached to a particular parish and usually included the vicarage or rectory and the land belonging to it (glebe land) as well as tithes (a proportion of produce or money paid by each parishioner towards the support of the incumbent or to another owner). Benefice records will include glebe maps and terriers (surveys), tithe maps and apportionments (lists of plots with owners, occupiers and tithes owed), documents concerning Queen Anne's Bounty (a fund established to supplement the incomes of poorer clergy) and papers relating to topics as varied as stocks and shares and rectory improvements.

Churchwardens (PW)

Elected churchwardens were the principal officers of the parish, and their duties were mainly connected with the maintenance and repair of church property as well as organising the killing of vermin, dealing with vagrants, paying wages and expenses for other church officers, witnessing the registration of baptisms, marriages and burials etc.. Their records, which include detailed accounts, rates, bills, as well as faculties and other papers concerning work done on the church fabric itself, reflect this wide range of duties.

Overseers of the Poor (PO)

These probably originated as collectors of parochial alms, but were formally established from 1572 as supervisors of the labour of vagrants and the general relief of the poor. From 1662 they were also responsible for removing paupers to their parish of settlement (the parish legally responsible for their upkeep), and from the 18th century for the parish workhouse. Even after the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act took away many of these responsibilities, the overseers continued their work in a diminished form until 1925. Their records include rate books, accounts, removal orders and settlement certificates, apprenticeship indentures and bastardy bonds. The Record Office holds indexed transcripts of selected overseers' records for many north Devon parishes.

Vestry (PV)

From the 16th century onwards, vestries gradually took over many of the administrative functions of the manorial courts. As the parishes' governing bodies, their duties ranged from providing arms for the local militia, levying highway rates, appointing constables, examining parish officers' accounts, and making byelaws, to managing common fields and agreeing work to be undertaken on church property. Their records include minutes of vestry meetings and other documents relating to most areas of parish life.

Parochial Church Council (PP)

Parochial Church Councils were formally set up in 1919 as partial successors to vestries. The civil responsibilities of vestries were taken over by Parish Councils and other local authorities in the late 19th century, so the duties of the Parochial Church Council, as detailed in their minutes, tend to concern church matters only.

Constable (PC)

Parish constables were subordinate partly to the local justices and partly to the vestries, though their office dates back to the 13th century at least. They were responsible for law and order in the parish, but also took charge of the parish armour, inspected alehouses, supervised relief payments to vagrants, etc.. Their records include accounts and lists of parishioners mustered for the local militia.

Surveyor of the Highways (PS)

Highway surveyors (or waywardens) were responsible from 1555 to 1835 for the upkeep of parish roads and for organising statute labour from among the parishioners. Highway rates were not collected on a consistent basis until 1691. Nevertheless, highway surveyors' accounts provide not only the names of surveyors but also the names of labourers and details pertaining to work carried out on particular roads.

Charities (PF)

Parish charities can include simple bequests of food or clothing, endowments towards bell-ringing, the upkeep of the churchyard or the apprenticeship of poor children, or larger financial gifts. Charity records may consist of leases, memoranda in vestry minutes, lists of beneficiaries, lists of charitable donations, accounts, registers, etc..

Education (PE)

The records of church schools (which often predate the 1870 Education Act) can range from head teachers' log books and admission registers to accounts, plans and other papers regarding school buildings.

Other Parish Records

Parish records may also include the papers of Parish Councils (PX) and local clubs or societies (PG), documents relating to the militia (PM) and the enclosure of common land (PD), and miscellaneous items such as notes on parish history, population statistics, and photographs (PZ).

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