Parish Registers, Civil Registration and the Family Historian

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Suffolk Record Office, the county archives run by Suffolk County Council.

This leaflet tells you about two of the most valuable sources of information for family historians. These are the **Parish Registers** (containing baptisms, marriages and burials) and the **Civil Registers** (of births, marriages and deaths).

The Parish Registers were the earliest records, dating from 1538 in some cases; the later system of Civil Registration was not introduced until 1837. Each set of records gives useful information and often family historians use them both to gain as many details as possible about their ancestors.

PARISH REGISTERS

In 1538 Henry VIII's Vicar General, Thomas Cromwell, ordered the minister of each parish in England and Wales to keep written records of every baptism, marriage and burial at which he officiated. At first most entries were made on loose sheets of paper, many of which have been lost.

In 1597 it was ordered that from the following year each parish was to keep a book made of parchment. Earlier entries were to be copied into the new books, certainly entries since the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558. As it was not obligatory to go back to 1538, many registers begin in 1558.

In 1558 it was also ordered that a copy of all the events recorded during the past year should be made and sent to the Bishop. These were called Bishops' Transcripts.

Form of entry

No standard form of entry was stipulated for parish registers until Hardwicke's Marriage Act 1753 and Rose's Act 1812 relating to baptisms and burials.

Until 1754 most registers are composite registers, that is each volume contains baptisms, marriages and burials, entered either in one mixed sequence or in three separate sequences in different sections of the same volume or, occasionally, in separate columns on the same page. Entries were generally written in chronological order but parchment was expensive so gaps were filled up with entries out of sequence, sometimes with a note to that effect (perhaps a finger pointing), sometimes not. The style of entry varies from place to place and over time. Often only the barest details are given.

During the later 17th and 18th centuries various attempts were made by central government or by the bishops of some dioceses to improve the quality of registration. From 25 March 1754 marriages had to be entered in a separate register on paper while baptisms and burials continued to be entered

together in a second register. Banns also appear as a separate entry form this date. They can indicate in which parish a marriage took place.

From 1 January 1813 there were separate registers for baptisms and burials with the entries on printed forms. In 1824 a separate series of banns registers were introduced. Many registers have occasional **gaps**. The practice of some incumbents and clerks of not entering events immediately has led to their occasionally forgetting names or leaving blanks in earlier years (especially in the case of brides' names for marriages and mothers' names for baptisms), sometimes to their omitting events altogether. Where an original register has been lost or there are gaps in a register, there may be surviving Bishops' Transcripts.

Civil War and Interregnum

There are often gaps in the sequence of entries during the disturbances of the Civil War and Commonwealth period (1642-1660) when some ministers were ejected from their parishes. Occasionally parish registers contain lists made after 1660 of retrospective entries. An Act which came into force in 1653 had transferred responsibility for keeping the register to an elected official known as the Parish Register, although in practice the minister or clerk was often elected and the arrangements continued as before. The Act ordered the recording of births rather than baptisms but this instruction was frequently ignored. A few parishes bought a new volume and the quality of the entries improved but more often than not standards declined until the repeal of the Act on the restoration of Charles II in 1660.

Nonconformity

The growth of Nonconformity in the late 17th to late 19th centuries affected the comprehensiveness of the Anglican registers. From the late 17th century Nonconformists could have their own places of worship and keep their own registers of baptisms. The Quakers and some small sects rejected the ceremonies of the Church of England but other Dissenters were prepared to accept the Anglican marriage and burial services and, to a lesser extent, baptism ceremonies. Between 1754 and 1837 all non-conformists except Quakers and Jews, were required to marry in their parish church

Latin

In early registers entries are often recorded in simple Latin**,** although this became less common until it stopped altogether in 1733. For example, entries such as Edwardus for Edward, Margeria for Margery, also 'baptizatus erat' for 'he was baptised', 'nupti erant' for 'they were married', and 'sepulta erat' for she was buried. Surnames were not put into Latin, but occupations, where given, often were. It should also be borne in mind that the parish clerk may have had little knowledge of the language and just 'Latinised' words as he saw fit.

Old Style

Until 1752 the custom was to begin a new year not on 1 January but on Lady Day (25 March). The modern practice (which was occasionally used at the time) is to note events that took place between these dates as, for example, 1677/8. This method of reckoning was abandoned in 1752 when Britain adopted the Gregorian calendar, which had long been in use in the rest of Europe, in place of the old Julian calendar, which was 11 days out by that time. The adjustment meant that 3 September 1752 was followed by 14 September. Some parish registers show that their incumbents or clerks did not quickly adapt to the new style.

Parishes

From mediaeval times the country has been divided into parishes, each with a parish church, the parishes being grouped into dioceses. Parishes varied enormously in size. Some were divided into chapelries, which often registered some or all of their own events. In many rural areas the present parishes have existed for hundreds of years. In urban areas where the population increased rapidly in the 18th and 19th centuries, the ancient parish churches were insufficient to serve their congregations and so as new churches were built parts of the area of the original parish were taken to form new parishes. In this century, as church going and the population in inner city and some rural areas has declined, many churches have been closed and parishes united with each other.

RECORDS HELD IN THE SUFFOLK RECORD OFFICE

Genealogical Guide

Details of all the parish registers held in the three branches of the Suffolk Record Office, microfiche and film copies, transcripts and indexes are to be found in the first section of the Genealogical Guide. Copies are available to consult in all the Record Offices.

Parish Registers

Every parish in the diocese has deposited its older registers in the appropriate branch of the Record Office, usually retaining in parish custody only the registers in current use. Nearly all the registers have been filmed and are available as microfiche (usually) or microfilm copies. Filming stops either at 1900 or at the end of the last register to be deposited if this is earlier than 1900. Each Record Office branch has copies of all the microform coverage for the whole county. As is the case in many record offices, researchers are asked to use the microform copies in order to save wear and tear on often fragile original registers.

If a microform copy proves to be unreadable because the fiche/film is out of focus or the writing very faint then please ask staff for assistance

Bishops' transcripts

These are held on film at all three branches of the Suffolk Record Office. They are filmed by year in alphabetical order of deanery, and in alphabetical order of parish within the deanery. Some later transcripts are filmed by alphabetical order of parish within the Archdeaconry.

Modern Transcripts

The Suffolk Record Office has a very large and growing number of modern printed and handwritten transcripts mainly with indexes, compiled at various times by antiquaries and family historians. Some transcripts are available on the searchroom shelves. The majority are available in microform at Bury (J562), Ipswich (J426), Lowestoft (M44 and M62)

Mormon International Genealogical Index (IGI)

The easiest way to begin a search for ancestors in parish (or nonconformist) registers, or to look for a family, which moved between parishes, is to use the IGI, compiled by the Genealogical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Genealogical Society of Utah - GSU). The Mormons' interest in genealogy arises from their desire to baptise (posthumously) their ancestors and other people into the Mormon faith. The IGI is widely available in record offices, libraries, Mormon family history centres, the Society of Genealogists and on the Internet at http://www.familysearch.org/

The index is divided into countries ie England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, then into pre-1974 counties. It is then arranged in alphabetical order of surname. Entries are principally of baptisms (or births) but there are also many marriages. The IGI is not limited to entries for the period before civil registration. Although the majority are pre-1813, there are many entries between 1837 and c1875. Most entries in the English section have been extracted from parish (or nonconformist) registers or bishops' transcripts. Some births are recorded, usually from Baptist registers or from parish registers for the period 1653-1660. The IGI is the most important finding aid for pre-1837 records but it is far from complete (not all parishes and dates are covered by any means) and should **always** be used in conjunction with parish registers - it should be treated as what it is - a finding aid only. The Parish and Vital Records List on microfiche will say whether a parish is covered by the IGI and, if so, for what periods and for what type of record. New and expanded editions are produced every few years. Until the 1992 edition most of the information was taken from extracted sources such as parish registers. Since then more reliance has been placed on information deposited by families between 1840 and 1969. These are known as compiled records (mostly noted in the IGI as pre-1970) and consist of Church members' recollections of their relatives or information from family bibles, letters and other documents.

It is important to try and confirm the information by checking the original register.

In Suffolk all branches of the office have microfiche copies of the 1992 (not the most up-to-date) edition. Each branch of the Record Office has coverage of the whole of the United Kingdom. In addition Bury holds data for Australia, Canada and New Zealand (1992 edition) and for the east coast of the USA (1988 edition). The Mormons have libraries called Family History Centres in many countries including about 60 in Great Britain. Details of the East Anglian ones are in the Useful Addresses section of this leaflet. The 1994 edition of the IGI is available on CD-ROM at most local Mormon Family History Centres. The Mormons allow the public free access to them although small fees may be charged to order certain records.

Boyd's Marriage Index

Estimated to contain in its 531 volumes 6 to 7 million English marriages from 1538-1837, ie 12 -15% of all English marriages. It records spouses' names, name of parish and year of marriage, indexed by the name of both groom and bride. In Suffolk each office has a copy of the Suffolk section on microfilm.

Suffolk Marriage Index 1813–1837

Compiled by the Suffolk Family History Society it covers more parishes than Boyds. All three branches of the Suffolk Record Office hold the printed indexes.

CIVIL REGISTRATION (these are not held at SRO)

Two Acts of Parliament passed in 1836: - the Births and Deaths Registration Act, and the Marriage Act. set up the system of Civil registration. These established the office of Registrar General in London. From 1 July 1837 registration of all births, marriages and deaths in England and Wales became the responsibility of the state.

Civil Registration certificates contain much more information than the early church registers, and are therefore very useful to a family historian. The country was divided into Registration Districts, each under the supervision of a Registrar. The districts were based on the Poor Law Unions that had been formed in 1834. To establish which district a parish falls under, Trade Directories can be useful.

Also, F A Youngs, *Guide to the Local Administrative Units of England, I, Southern England* is very helpful. On the Internet see: http://fhsc.org.uk/genuki/REG/

Registrars travelled around their district recording information. Births had to be notified within 42 days and deaths within 5. Until 1874 when the Births and Deaths Registration Act transferred the obligation to register the event to the family concerned, informants could only be prosecuted if they refused to answer the Registrar's questions. It is estimated that in the early days of registration as many as 15% of events went unregistered in some areas of England and Wales, particularly urban areas such as London. In early Victorian times there was a problem with literacy, so public notices were not always understood. There was confusion in the early days of registration with some parents believing that a baptism was a legal alternative to registration. Penalty payments were levied for late registration so sometimes birth dates were altered to avoid payment of a fine. All these factors can create difficulties for a family historian.

Illegitimacy and Adoption

The Act of 1874 also tightened up the registration of illegitimate births, until then, the Registrar had to accept the father's name given by the mother. The new act only allowed the father's name to be inserted if he accompanied the mother to register the birth and gave information jointly with her.

The Legitimacy Act of 1926 allowed children to be legitimised by the subsequent marriage of their parents provided that neither parent had been married to a third party at the time of the birth. When this occurred the legitimised birth was re-entered in the birth indexes for that year (sometimes many years after the original birth). The original entry would be annotated to refer to the new entry.

The Adoption of Children Act 1926 authorised the Registrar General to maintain an Adopted Children Register. Stillbirths had to be notified and registered for the first time from 1 July 1927. They are recorded in special registers, which are not available to the public, and the events are not indexed in the normal birth indexes.

Marriage Registration

Changes to marriage registration were much more complicated. The introduction of civil marriage ceremonies in local Register Offices did not affect the traditional church ceremony. A new marriage register was introduced on 1 July 1837 and a new provision was made to notify all marriages to the Registrar General every quarter.

Jews and Quakers had been granted special privileges to allow them to conduct their own wedding ceremonies as a result of Hardwicke's Marriage Act 1753 and the new act continued this. They had to conform to the new regulations by notifying their marriages to the Registrar General every quarter.

From 1837 all other religious denominations could apply to have their churches or chapels registered for marriages, but the ceremony could only take place in the presence of a local registrar who recorded the marriage in a register belonging to the local register office. The Marriage Act of 1898 allowed 'authorised persons' to solemnise marriages in nonconformist chapels and churches and to keep their own registers from 1899. Because of the problem of arranging the attendance of the registrar, many nonconformist marriages took place in local register offices or even in local Churches. As marrying in the register office was so cheap, it became a popular venue.

The Age of Marriage Act of 1929 raised the minimum age of marriage to 16 years. (Before that it had been 12 for girls and 14 for boys although in practice such early marriages rarely happened.)

Death Certificates

The Births and Deaths Registration Act of 1874 made it compulsory for all death registrations to be supported by a medical certificate specifying the cause of death signed by a qualified medical practitioner who attended the dead person. Before this, the cause of death could be guesswork by the informant. Burial could not take place without a death certificate, so registration was compulsory and took place quickly. In the case of a sudden or violent death, an inquest was held, and the Coroner was the informant.

Indexes – Local

Every quarter Superintendent Registrars had to supply full details of every birth and death recorded. They also had to supply full details of civil marriages conducted in local register offices. Until 1899 nonconformist marriages were recorded in the Registrar's marriage registers. Local indexes were made of these events and kept in the district Register office. Marriages were indexed under both the bride and groom's surname by place of marriage.

Indexes – National

Once the full returns were received by the Registrar General's office, the quarterly returns were copied into national registers of births, marriages and deaths. These were then nationally indexed – marriages are indexed by both bride and groom's surname. Each event has its own separate quarterly index. Errors and omissions are sometimes made through the process of copying and indexing. There are always two indexes – one held by the local register office covering the district in which the event took place, and the national index, which is now held in the National Archives. The two index systems are quite different and references in them are not compatible.

Searching the Indexes

The general public has the right to access both local and national indexes, but has no right of access to the registers. A fee of around £17 is payable to view local indexes, for up to 6 hours and Register Office staff will confirm if the entries found are the ones required. If full details from a register are needed, then a copy certificate has to be purchased.

Scotland

In Scotland, registration began on 1 January 1855 and records are kept at the General Register Office, but a fee is payable, which includes access to the actual registers.

The **Scottish** GRO indexes are available on payment of a fee, to search (to 1898) on the Internet at http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk. See also http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk.

Ireland

In Ireland civil registration began on 1 January 1845 for Protestant marriages and on 1 January 1864 for births, deaths and all other marriages. Irish records are kept at the office of the Registrar General of Ireland and Northern Irish records are at the General Register Office, Belfast, but marriages prior to 1 January 1922 are in Dublin. In both Dublin and Belfast there is a fee to search the indexes. The Northern Ireland birth index is available to search (1922-1993) on CD-ROM at the Family Records Centre.

Information given in Parish Registers and Registration Certificates

Parish Registers	Registration Certificates
1538 – 1754 All the information is listed in one register. Some incumbents gave more information than others e.g. mother's maiden name in a baptism entry.	Not available
1754 – 1813 Separate printed registers for marriages give more information, including bride's maiden name, and parish of origin of both bride and groom. Baptism and burial registers still in one volume depending on incumbent how much information was recorded.	Not available
1813 – 1837 Printed registers introduced for baptisms, marriages and burials. This standardised the information provided.	Not available
1837 onwards: **Baptismal registers**: When baptised, Child's christian name(s), Parents' christian name(s), Surname (sometimes incumbents noted the mother's maiden name), Abode, Quality, Trade or Profession, By whom the Ceremony was performed	**Birth certificates**: Precise date of birth, Place of birth (often full address), Name of child, Sex of child, Father's forename and surname, Mother's forename and surname, maiden name, and possibly a previous married name, Occupation of father, Signature (or sometimes mark if illiterate) description and residence of the informant, Date of registration, Signature of Registrar
Marriage Registers Name of district and church/chapel/register office, Full date of marriage, Name of groom, Name of bride, Groom's age (full = 21 or over), bachelor, widower or divorcee, His occupation, His address (not always full address), His father's name and occupation, Bride's age, (or minor = under 21), spinster, widow or divorcee, sometimes an occupation, Residence, Name and occupation of bride's father, By banns or licence, Denomination of the church, Signatures (or marks) of couple, Names and signatures, or marks of witnesses, name of the clergyman or registrar	Name of district and church/chapel/register office, Full date of marriage, Name of groom, Name of bride, Groom's age (full = 21 or over), bachelor, widower or divorcee, His occupation, His address (not always full address), His father's name and occupation, Bride's age, (or minor = under 21), spinster, widow or divorcee, sometimes an occupation, Residence, Name and occupation of bride's father, By banns or licence, Denomination of the church, Signatures (or marks) of couple, Names and signatures, or marks of witnesses, name of the clergyman or registrar

Burial registers	Death Certificates
Name, Abode, When buried, Age, By whom ceremony was performed	Registration district and sub-registration district, Place of death (full address or village name), Name and sex of deceased, Age (which may be guesswork for old people), Occupation for men or single women, or name and occupation of husband/father for married women and children, Cause of death, Nature and duration of contributing illness, Possibly medical attendant's name, Date when registered, Name and address of informant, (who should be relative or person present at the death), Registrar's name, Corrections or additional details.

USEFUL ADRESSES

The National Archives, Ruskin Avenue**,** Kew**,** Richmond**,** Surrey**,** TW9 4DU
Tel. 020 8876 3444   Email: enquiries@nationalarchives.gov.uk

Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, 66 Balmoral Avenue**,** Belfast, BT9 6NY
Tel. 028 9025 5905

National Archives of Ireland, Bishop Street**,** Dublin 8**,** Ireland

General Register Office for Scotland, New Register House, 3 West Register Street, Edinburgh, EH1 3YT   Tel: 0131 314 4433   Email: **records@gro-scotland.gov.uk**

Bury Record Office
77 Raingate Street, Bury St Edmunds, IP33 2AR
Telephone: 01284 741212
Email: bury.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Ipswich Record Office
Gatacre Road, Ipswich, IP1 2LQ
Telephone: 01473 263910
Email: ipswich.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Lowestoft Record Office
Clapham Road, Lowestoft, NR32 1DR
Telephone: 01502 674680
Email: lowestoft.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Suffolk Archives website:
www.suffolkarchives.co.uk

Opening hours
Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday: 9.30am – 4.30pm
Wednesday and Sunday: Closed

If you need help to understand this information in another language please call 03456 066 067

Se precisar de ajuda para ler estas informações em outra língua, por favor telefone para o número abaixo. **Portuguese**

Jeżeli potrzebujesz pomocy w zrozumieniu tych informacji w swoim języku zadzwoń na podany poniżej numer. **Polish**

এই লেখাটি যদি অন্য ভাষাতে বুঝতে চান তাহলে নিচের নম্বরে ফোন করুন **Bengali**

Jeigu jums reikia šios informacijos kita kalba, paskambinkite 03456 066 067 **Lithuanian**

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