

The Parish Chest: Beyond the Christening, Marriage and Burial Records

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Overview

The casual English genealogist will no doubt search the Church of England parish registers of christenings, marriages and burials for the parishes in which their ancestors lived. However, depending on the parish, there can be a wealth of information in other records kept in the parish chest.

Parishes were not only the center of worship for town inhabitants but often the civic and social center as well. For almost all parishes, especially away from large cities, parish boundaries were formed out of long time custom and geographic practicality, not because of government decree. As a result, while church and civic laws and conventions were passed down from higher authorities, the execution of them can vary widely from parish to parish (Webb, 5). In fact, the lack of direct government involvement in the formation of parishes as recent as 1835 led to the statement from the 1st Annual Report of the Poor Law Commission that there were no fewer than “15,635 parishes or places separately relieving their own paupers” (Webb, 3). Relief of the poor always generated records, most often at the parish level but was not the only (typical) civil function performed by the parish. Sidney Webb states “By custom, the right and power of the parish to provide for its inhabitants whatever services or regulative ordinances were deemed locally expedient was so vaguely extensive as to be practically without ascertained limits” I is estimated that combined parish expenditures were equal to 1/5th of the budget of the national government (Webb, 4). And where there are income and expenditures, records are kept.

The big question is whether or not they have survived and how they may be of use to genealogists.

PARISH OFFICERS, THEIR DUTIES AND RECORDS

Incumbent or minister (rector, vicar, curate)

Traditionally, the minister received a tithe and a “living” from the parish. The living consisted mainly of land set aside to be used for the benefit of the minister. His duty was to: be entrusted with the registration of baptisms, marriages and burials of his parishioners, when present, he is chairman of the vestry meeting, may decline temporal duties such as bailiff, reeve, or constable and not bound to serve in war.

Records for which primarily responsible

Along with the parish clerk, register books of christenings, marriages and burials.

There were four principal unpaid offices in the parish as noted below. They were chosen in a variety of ways, depending on the parish custom. When selected, the person was bound for duty and required to perform it, typically for one year. It was often possible for the wealthy to buy their way out of the duty, especially the less pleasant ones. It is also possible for a person to serve 2 or 3 years until he could find a replacement for himself.

The Vestry

The Vestry was a kind of parochial parliament. It has also been called “a parochial social welfare committee” (Tate, 15). It may also be thought of as a parish council made up of residents of the parish with meetings generally chaired by the parish minister.

The duties of the Vestry were wide and varied, often depending on the customs of an area and often growing in scope until reforms in the 1830's. Tate states that “Strictly speaking, the vestry, as representing the inhabitants generally, had the power to administer common property and to make by-laws on all matters of public concern” (Tate, 16). The Vestry literally dealt with any issue any of the parish officers dealt with including Sabbath observance, fees for burial in church, agreements with the Overseers concerning care of the poor, bastardy agreements, providing of psalm singers, the prosecution of felons and providing of beer; literally everything. Perhaps the most powerful of duties was to require the four key offices of parish service – Churchwardens, Petty Constable, Surveyor of Highways and Overseers of the Poor – to have their expenditures brought before the Vestry for approval.

Because of the broad ranging power, many vestries which began as “open” or including virtually any resident of the parish, evolved into “select” vestries, which kept the power within the offices noted above as well as the minister, parish clerk and wealthy land holders. The effect this had on records is that often “there were no minutes, no printed accounts and no reporters for the newspapers, the persons who paid the rates themselves controlled every item of expenditure and knew everything that was going on” (Tate, 48-49). As for the records kept, it was often the case (and you will notice as you search them) that “parish account books, kept by successive Churchwardens or Overseers, and often containing the entries for a whole century, reveal, in inextricable confusion, the multifarious duties of the parish organization. Items relating to all the different parish functions often appear in one and the same rude account” (Tate, 43).

Records for which primarily responsible

The Vestry kept minutes which “may contain orders upon almost any subject under the sun” (Tate, 162). Records can be found usually from the mid-1700's well into the 1800's.

Churchwarden

Churchwardens were considered “the proper guardians or keepers of the parish church” (Tate 84,) Their work was primarily related to duties related to ecclesiastical or “church” duties but sometimes involved civil functions as well. Of the four unpaid offices, the Churchwarden was “one of dignity and importance, without very onerous duties, and was therefore little objected to” (Webb, 18). Churchwardens paid for necessary expenses using a variety of income sources. Hopefully the funds that came from “church stock or other property, customary fees for lights and particular church services, the voluntary offerings of the faithful, and the profits of ‘church ales,’ public games and other village sports and feasts were enough to cover expenses. If not, the churchwardens could levy the “Church Rate”, temporary tax to cover their expenses. The churchwardens were required to account for rate monies, which resulted in the creation of records. The duties of the churchwarden could include: maintenance & repair of the church fabric (edifice, building), provision of materials necessary for church service, allocation of the seats in church, pew rents, keeping up of “churchways” (paths leading to the church), report to the Archdeacon or Bishop on the performance of the incumbent, condition of the church and moral and religious delinquency of the parishioners and levying church rates as needed.

Records for which primarily responsible

Churchwarden's Accounts
Church Rates
Pew Rents
Dogwhipping

Churchwardens' Presentments

Overseers of the Poor

There were at least two and sometimes three or four chosen by the Justices of the Peace. This role often "involved unpleasant relations with one's neighbors, besides considerable work & responsibility" (Webb, 18). The overseers' primary responsibilities were to: assist a destitute person, appear at Petty and Quarter Sessions to resolve issues of removal of paupers, settlement of paupers, bastardy questions and destitute children apprenticed. An overseer could "be indicted for manslaughter if a destitute inhabitant died of starvation, after having been refused relief" (Webb, 32). Therefore, they could legally insist on the poor rate (tax to support the poor). Overseers submitted both their payments (outgo) for the poor and also their proposed poor rate (poor tax) for the upcoming year to the Justices of the Peace.

Records for which primarily responsible

Poor Rates and most records dealing with the poor up to 1834
Overseers Accounts
Settlement Certificates
Removal Orders
Bastardy Bonds and most records dealing with illegitimacy

Surveyor of Highways

The survey was chosen by and reported to the town Justices of the Peace. He was chosen from among the parish land holders. This role was also considered unpleasant. Typically, he would organize the more prosperous members of the parish to put together teams of workers to perform six days work a year on the ditches and parts of the road that he chose (Webb, 30). It was a statute (legal) duty to be performed by all eligible members of the parish. Some were able to pay a fine to avoid the duty. The Justices could raise money for road work by assessing a "highway rate".

Records for which primarily responsible

Surveyors rates and accounts

Petty Constable

The petty constable worked under the high constable of the county to keep the peace although Tate states that "In many places the duties, and therefore the accounts of constables, wardens and overseers, were mixed together in a condition of indescribable confusion" (Tate 179). The Constable's primary duty to "apprehend any person who had committed a felony, but also if he saw any minor offence committed, or even a breach of the peace about to take place, to apprehend the offender" (Webb, 26). He could hold "petty sessions" (or court) in his own parish and was often required to attend quarter sessions for the county. This job was the "most objected to" and "invariably filled by a substitute" (Webb, 18). He also assisted the county in raising a militia could be allowed to levy a "Constable's Rate" for his expenses. It's also possible his expenses came from poor accounts when dealing with vagrancy or even the churchwarden's accounts depending on local practice.

Records for which primarily responsible

Constables Orders and Constables Rates

FINDING THE RECORDS

In most cases, the records have now been deposited at the appropriate County Record Office though many may still reside at the parish church. Many counties have published lists of the existing parish chest records and their location.

- Begin by searching the “big three” websites with digitized records for England and their catalogs. These include: FamilySearch.org, Ancestry.com and Findmypast.com.
 - For example: search the card catalog at Ancestry.com (www.ancestry.com) and perform a keyword search using terms such as “England” with terms used in the record titles such as “Poor” or “Churchwarden” or “Rate”. Currently Ancestry has records for London, Dorset, West Yorkshire
- Search the Family History Library Catalog for your parish and check for the subjects of “poor law” and also “church records”
- Search the Family History Library Catalog for the county in which your parish is found for a guide to existing parish records
- Search the catalog of the relevant county record office online for the parish and possible deposited records
- Search the UK National Archives catalogue <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>. This search includes a catalogue to records in over 2,500 archives across the UK.

Remember to search all available records for a parish because the roles and records are not usually clearly defined.

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