

Norfolk Record Office Information leaflet 43

Parish Records and the Norfolk Record Office

The Bishop of Norwich has designated the Norfolk Record Office as the Diocesan Record Office for the deposit of parish records in the Diocese of Norwich. Similarly, the Bishop of Ely has appointed the Norfolk Record Office as the Diocesan Record Office for the deaneries of Feltwell and Fincham in the Diocese of Ely. In the Norwich Diocese the Record Office works in conjunction with the Bishop's Committee for Books and Documents to advise on the care and preservation of documents from churches.

This leaflet answers some of the most commonly asked questions about parish records: please contact the Diocesan Archivist if you would like further advice or information.

What are parish records?

Parish Records are documents made or acquired by the incumbent, churchwardens, PCC, and other church and parochial officers in the course of their business. They usually include:

- registers of baptisms, marriages and burials (which may date from 1538)
- registers of banns (usually dating from 1754)
- registers of services
- registers of confirmations
- glebe terriers
- accounts and other records of the churchwardens
- vestry and PCC minutes
- papers relating to the church fabric and to the benefice, including the tithes and glebe land

Many parishes also have records of:

- ecclesiastical charities
- church schools
- other parish organisations
- overseers of the poor
- surveyors of the highways
- parish constables

Parish records may consist of volumes, loose papers, parchments, architectural drawings, photographs and maps. Large maps may be found separately stored in wooden boxes or (particularly tithe maps) rolled inside metal tubes.

How and where should they be kept?

In a dry well-ventilated place secured from theft, loss, fire, flooding, rust, prolonged exposure to light, vermin, and damage in storage or from handling. The greatest long-term risk is usually from unsuitable atmospheric conditions. A relative humidity above 65% (common in Norfolk churches) will encourage the growth of destructive moulds, while a very low humidity produces brittleness. The temperature should be reasonably constant and ideally not vary more than 10° Celsius (18° Fahrenheit) in any one week.

Parish records should be kept *either* in the parish church *or* in the Diocesan Record Office. They must never be stored anywhere else nor lent to anyone to take away. If you are asked to release records for exhibition outside the church or for any other reason consult the Diocesan Archivist first. Some parish churches are much too damp and insecure for the storage of records. The current registers may then have to be kept in the parsonage house or in another church in a group of parishes, but all non-current records should be deposited with the Record Office.

Norfolk Record Office : how can it help?

- **By accepting parish records on deposit.**

Any registers and other records not in current use may be deposited free of charge in the Record Office. Here they will be stored securely on behalf of the parish in temperature- and humidity controlled strongrooms, with a sophisticated fire protection system. A professional archivist will catalogue the collection and send a detailed receipt to the incumbent. All catalogues of parish records held by the Record Office are also available on the internet via the Record Office's web pages <http://archives.norfolk.gov.uk>.

Members of the public can consult the records (or microfilm copies of them) free of charge in the Record Office's professionally supervised searchroom. Exceptions are documents which are deemed to be 'unfit for production' (i.e. which may be damaged by handling) and any confidential material which has been closed to public access for a specified period. Such documents will not be produced to the public. Record Office staff can answer any genealogical and other enquiries, including requests for certificates. We carry out limited searches (for a fee) for enquirers who do not wish to visit the Record Office in person; those wishing to commission extensive research are offered a list of local record searchers.

- **By inspecting records in parochial custody and advising on their care.**

The *Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1978* (amended 1993) instituted a system of regular inspections of parish records and the Bishop of Norwich has appointed the Record Office to carry out the initial inspections. These involve listing the documents in each parish and making recommendations for their storage. Because the Diocese has an exceptionally large number of ancient parish churches this is a slow process.

If you would like advice or information about your records at any time please contact the Record Office without waiting for a first or subsequent inspection. In the case of severe damage to documents - from fire or flooding, for example - advice should be sought as a matter of urgency.

- **By preparing exhibitions and loaning showcases.**

Exhibitions of parish records, perhaps as part of a larger special event such as a flower festival, give parishioners and visitors to a church the opportunity to see a selection of its historic records. Given sufficient notice the Record Office can select suitable documents, mount them safely and provide labels. We have a number of portable showcases for loan free of charge. For more information about exhibitions please ask for our separate leaflet *Exhibiting Archives*.

- **By offering facilities for conservation and microfilming.**

The conservation staff at the Record Office can repair damaged or decayed documents, make up protective folders for vulnerable items and give technical advice on archive conservation. Parish records which are in a badly damaged state when they are deposited will only be repaired, however, at the expense of the parish or of a third party on its behalf.

Correct storage is the most important factor in preserving original documents. Ideally, however, they should also be safeguarded against the gradual deterioration caused by repeated handling. This can be done by providing a copy to be used in place of the original. The best method of copying is by microfilming, which is both economical and, more importantly, does not put the original documents at risk of damage (as, for instance, photocopying does). Many parish registers in the Record Office are now made available to the public only as microform copies. The Record Office does not supply facsimile copies of registers to members of the public without the incumbent's written consent - given either as part of general agreement to microfilming or in response to an individual request for permission.

How and when can parish records be deposited?

Parish records can be deposited at any time with the agreement of the PCC. Deposit does not affect the ownership of the records nor prevent some or all of them being withdrawn at a later date (provided suitable accommodation for them is available in the church). An archivist from the Record Office can collect the documents. If the records have not yet been inspected under the *Parochial Registers and Records Measure* he or she can carry out an inspection at the same time. The *Measure* requires the following to be deposited in the Diocesan Record Office unless exacting standards of storage can be met in the church:

- all registers begun 150 or more years ago (with the exception of marriage registers begun from July 1837 onwards)
- all registers and records completed 100 or more years ago.

Parishes often choose also to deposit records of more recent date. Over 700 parishes have so far deposited all or most of their non-current records in the Norfolk Record Office.

Can older records be retained in the parish?

Records completed less than 100 years ago may be kept in the parish without special permission. Records of older date, however, may be retained after an inspection only if the Bishop is satisfied that the necessarily high standards laid down by the *Parochial Registers and Records Measure* can be met in the parish church. Briefly, these require the records to be stored in a rust-proofed vented steel cupboard with a multi-lever lock. Such a cupboard is available commercially at a cost of several hundred pounds. The temperature and relative humidity must also be kept within specified limits. In many churches this would be possible only by installing air-conditioning or a dehumidifier.

What is the law relating to parish records?

It is set out in the *Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1978* (amended 1993). This is a Measure passed by General Synod which provides for the appointment of Diocesan Record Offices, a regular system of inspections of records in parochial custody and the safe storage of parish records. More detailed information is available from the Record Office or by obtaining a copy of the *Measure* from an H.M.S.O. agent.

What provision is available for printed books?

For advice about liturgical and other printed books belonging to parish churches, please contact the Bishop's Committee for Books and Documents. The name and address of the Secretary for Books is listed in the current Diocesan Directory.



If you need this leaflet in large print, audio, Braille, alternative format or in a different language, please contact the County Archivist on 01603 222599 and we will do our best to help.

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