

Norfolk Record Office Information Leaflet 45

Parish Registers

1 Introduction

Parish registers record baptisms, marriages, burials and banns in the Church of England. The registers may begin in 1538, although the early registers do not always survive. Those up to 1598 are likely to be copies of earlier books.

These records are the most important source of information on the lives of individuals for the next three hundred years. They are most commonly used by people tracing their family tree but they are useful in answering social history questions - such as family size, age at marriage, age at death, movements of people, changes in population, changing tastes in Christian names etc.

Most Norfolk parishes have deposited their registers with the Norfolk Record Office. We also hold registers of some 19 Suffolk parishes in the deanery of Lothingland, an area stretching from Great Yarmouth to Lowestoft.

To help preserve the registers for the future, many of them have been microfilmed. You can see these microfilms and fiche at the Norfolk Record Office and most are also available at the Norfolk Heritage Centre, Norfolk and Norwich Millennium Library, The Forum, Millennium Plain, Norwich, NR2 1AW (telephone 01603 774740). Where registers have not been microfilmed, you can usually see the original volumes. Some registers are still held by the churches themselves. Contact the Record Office or visit our website at <http://archives.norfolk.gov.uk> to check the whereabouts of the registers you wish to see and to find out whether they are available on microform.

2 Information given in Parish Registers

During the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries, baptism, marriage and burial entries are usually in a single volume. No rules were issued as to how entries were to be set out in the registers or the amount of detail to be included, so the information tends to be limited.

There may be gaps in the registers during the Civil War and Commonwealth period, 1645-60.

2.1 Baptisms

Baptism Registers pre 1813

There is no standard format for the entries. The following information is recorded:

- baptism date
- child's name
- parents' names (though sometimes only the father's name is given).

Occasionally, registers also include the father's occupation, child's date of birth and the mother's maiden name.

Baptism Registers post 1812

Baptisms were entered into pre-printed standard registers. Columns were included for:

- baptism date
- child's name
- parents' names
- parish of residence
- father's trade or occupation
- the name of the officiating minister

Clergymen sometimes also added the date of birth and mother's maiden name.

2.2 Marriages and Banns

Marriage registers pre 1754

These early registers give:

- marriage date
- names of the bride and groom
- occasionally, the groom's occupation

Marriage Registers 1754-1837

Marriages were entered into pre-printed standard registers. Between 1754 and 1837, all couples had to marry in an Anglican church for their marriage to be legally valid. The marriages of nonconformists should therefore be recorded in parish registers during this period. Only Quakers and Jews were exempt from this rule. In addition, all marriages had to be by either banns or by licence to prevent clandestine marriages.

The information recorded includes:

- marriage date
- names of the bride and groom
- parish of residence of both parties
- whether the marriage was by banns or licence
- the parties' marital status - bachelor, spinster, widow or widower
- signatures of bride and groom, the officiating minister and two witnesses. Those unable to write would make a mark.

Banns Registers 1754 onwards

These were also kept from this date; they are normally in the back of the marriage registers up to 1823 and then in separate registers. They give:

- names of the bride and groom
- the three dates when the banns were read out in church

Marriage Registers post 1837

Civil registration of births, marriages and deaths in England began on 1 July 1837. Church marriage registers took on the same format as civil marriage certificates. These give:

- marriage date
- names of the bride and groom
- parish of residence of both parties
- occupations (the bride's occupation is not always given)
- ages ('of full age' usually indicates 21 years or over)
- the parties' marital status - bachelor, spinster, widow or widower
- name and occupation of both fathers
- whether the marriage took place by banns or licence
- signatures of the bride and groom, two witnesses and the officiating minister. Those unable to write would make a mark.

2.3 Burials

Burial Registers pre 1813

These were very brief, giving:

- date of burial
- name of person buried (family relationships may be given, e.g., wife of, widow of, son / daughter of, but rarely for the male head of the household)

Sometimes the age at death and occupation was included. It may also be recorded if the person was from the workhouse ('pauper').

Burial Registers post 1812

Burials were entered into pre-printed standard registers. Columns were included for:

- date of burial
- deceased's name
- parish of residence
- age at death
- officiating clergy

Clergymen sometimes added a family relationship e.g. wife of, widow of, son/ daughter of, but rarely for the male head of the household. Very occasionally, the cause of death may be included.

3 Reading and Interpreting Registers

Layout of registers

Entries for baptisms, marriages and burials were entered chronologically. In many early registers, baptism, marriage and burial entries are jumbled together. In others, the categories may be divided, with the baptisms at the front, burials at the back and marriages somewhere in the middle. Parchment and paper were expensive, so clergy were careful to use all available space in the registers. This might mean squeezing later entries into any odd gaps found in the volume when the last page had been filled.

Use of Latin

Most parish register entries are in English but a few members of the clergy chose to write in Latin. There are Latin dictionaries available in the searchroom. Staff will also help in translating individual entries. Here are a few common phrases used:

Baptisatus / baptisata est / erat / fuit - was baptised
filia – daughter
filius – son
conjuncti fuerant - were joined in marriage
copulati sunt / erant - were married
nupti erant - were married
uxorem duxit - is commonly used for marriages (he took to wife)
sepultus / sepulta - buried
eodem die - on the same day (as the previous entry)
ultimo die mensis - on the last day of the month of
primo die mensis - on the first day of the month of

Names may also be given in their Latin forms. It is usually quite easy to work out the English version of the name, but here are some of the more tricky ones:

<i>Alicia</i> - Alice	<i>Johannes</i> - John
<i>Carolus</i> - Charles	<i>Maria</i> - Mary
<i>Gulielmus</i> - William	<i>Ricardus</i> - Richard
<i>Jacobus</i> - James	<i>Xtopherus/Xpoferus</i> - Christopher
<i>Joanna/Johanna</i> - Joan	

Dating

Dates may be given in Roman numerals.

Before 1752, the year officially began on the 25th March. This meant that instead of being the first months of the new year, January, February and most

of March were the *last* months of the *previous* year. So, to convert dates between 1 January and 24 March to modern dating, add one year onto the year given in the parish register. For example, we would now interpret a baptism entry for 10 February 1713 as being in 1714. The accepted way to note this is '10 February 1713/14'.

Handwriting

The styles of handwriting used in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries can sometimes be difficult to read until you are used to them. There are several books on the searchroom shelves about reading old handwriting. Staff will also help with difficult entries.

Illegible microfilm/fiche

Check the lists to see whether there is an alternative copy of the register; this may be clearer. In the case of illegible microfiche, ask a member of staff if you can use the master copy of the fiche, which is often easier to read than the searchroom copy.

You can also consult the archdeacons' and bishop's transcripts. These are contemporary copies of the original registers and may be helpful in clarifying an illegible entry: see our *Information Leaflet 46: Archdeacons' and Bishop's Transcripts*.

If the above do not help, ask a member of staff if you may consult the original parish registers.

Some Common Terms used in parish registers

Privately baptised/publicly baptised - Some babies were baptised at home soon after birth, especially if it was feared that they might not survive. Children of wealthier parents might also be christened at home.

Received into the church - this is sometimes noted in the margin of a private baptism entry. It refers to the ceremony when the child was publicly welcomed into the congregation.

Late [surname] Spinster - Clergyman sometimes included the mother's maiden name in register entries, e.g., Jane Jones, late Smith, spinster.

Base born, natural son/daughter - the child is illegitimate

If no father's name is given in a baptism entry, the child is probably illegitimate.



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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