



# New to archdeacons' and bishops' transcripts?

A guide to archdeacons' and bishops' transcripts held at the Kent History and Library Centre



## **Historical background**

In 1598 Queen Elizabeth I ordered bishops' transcripts to be kept. Originally they were intended to inform the relevant bishops of the state of affairs within their dioceses although they now tend to be used as a supplementary source of genealogical and other historical information. Bishops' transcripts can date back to the beginning of Queen Elizabeth's reign in 1558 and most continue until the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Bishops' and archdeacons' transcripts are meant to be exact copies of the entries found in the Anglican parish registers of baptisms (i.e. christenings), marriages and burials. They were compiled annually and forwarded to the bishop of the relevant diocese, usually at Easter, and in the case of archdeacons' transcripts, to the archdeacon of Canterbury, usually at Michaelmas. Unfortunately the men who compiled them, often the incumbent (rector, vicar or curate) of the relevant church, could be rather hasty, with mistakes and omissions the occasional result. There have also been some suggestions that entries were altered to give a better impression of the moral state of the parish; for example, by disguising the number of baptisms of illegitimate children. However they sometimes contain entries and valuable details omitted from the original registers.

As bishops' and archdeacons' transcripts were stored at 'diocesan headquarters' they were not subject to constant usage like the parish registers and so their survival rate can be much better. Bishops' and archdeacons' transcripts are particularly useful for filling in gaps created by missing or illegible parish registers so if both the parish registers and the corresponding bishops' transcripts survive it is worthwhile comparing both sets.

## **Bishops' transcripts in Kent**

There are two dioceses in Kent: Canterbury and Rochester.

The bishops' transcripts for the diocese of Canterbury, which are quite possibly the best for any diocese in the country, are kept at the Kent History and Library Centre. The earliest begin in 1558, with most ceasing by 1900.

The bishops' transcripts for the diocese of Rochester are also held at the Kent History and Library Centre. The coverage is very patchy but generally speaking they survive from circa 1716 until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, apart from those for Bredhurst (beginning in 1564) and Rainham (1560).

Bishops' transcripts before 1813 for parishes in the Peculiar of the Deanery of Shoreham are held at Lambeth Palace Library. These parishes are: Bexley, Brasted, Chevening, Chiddingstone, Crayford, Darenth, Downe, East Farleigh, East Malling, East Peckham, Eynsford, Farningham, Gillingham with Lidsing, Grain, Halstead, Hayes, Hever, Hunton, Ifield, Ightham, Keston, Knockholt, Meopham, Northfleet, Orpington, Otford, Penshurst, Plaxtol, St Mary Cray, Sevenoaks, Shoreham, Stansted, Sundridge and Wrotham.

## Archdeacons' transcripts

There are no archdeacons' transcripts for the diocese of Rochester but unusually the diocese of Canterbury also has a set of archdeacons' transcripts for most of its parishes up to 1812 which fulfil the same function as bishops' transcripts. Most of the archdeacons' transcripts begin in the 1560s and thus often pre-date the surviving parish registers.

Although the parish registers for East Kent parishes are held at Canterbury Cathedral Archives, the bishops' and archdeacons' transcripts for the diocese of Canterbury provide researchers at the Kent History and Library Centre with an original source for baptisms, marriages and burials for that area.

## Formats and finding aids

Archdeacons' transcripts and bishops' transcripts for the diocese of Canterbury are the original records; there are no microfilm or digital copies.

Digitised versions of the bishops' transcripts for Rochester diocese are available on Kent History Source which currently can only be consulted at the Kent History and Library Centre. Bishops' transcripts for the diocese of Rochester are also available on microfilm. The bishops' transcripts for Rochester diocese are catalogued as DRb/RT1 (to 1813) and DRb/RT2 (1813 onwards).

There are no indexes to the archdeacons' transcripts or bishops' transcripts but *A Guide to Parish Registers*, which is held at the Kent History and Library Centre and local studies libraries in Kent, gives covering dates for those held for each relevant parish. The references to archdeacons' transcripts and bishops' transcripts in the pages for Canterbury Cathedral Archives can be used to order up the documents at the Kent History and Library Centre.

## Frequently asked questions

*What period is covered by bishops' transcripts for the diocese of Canterbury?*  
1558-c1900

*What period is covered by bishops' transcripts for the diocese of Rochester?*  
The coverage is very patchy, but generally speaking from circa 1716 to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, apart from those for Bredhurst (beginning in 1564) and Rainham (1560).

*What period is covered by archdeacons' transcripts for Canterbury?*  
1560-1812

*What period is covered by archdeacons' transcripts for Rochester?*  
None. There are no archdeacons' transcripts for Rochester.

*Are bishops' and archdeacons' transcripts parish records?*  
No, they are diocesan records so they are found with the records of the appropriate diocese.

*Where are bishops' transcripts for the Peculiar of Shoreham held?*

They are held at Lambeth Palace Library.

*Do baptisms, marriages and burials appear in bishops' and archdeacons' transcripts?*

Yes, although generally marriages are included until 1837 only. After that date the civil registrar began to take a second copy of all marriages, although a few do still crop up in the bishops' transcripts.

*Do bishops' and archdeacons' transcripts include banns of marriage?*

No. These can be found from 1754 in the parish registers only.

*Do bishops' and archdeacons' transcripts contain the same information as the parish registers?*

In theory, yes, but in practice they can contain gaps, mistakes and sometimes extra information.

*Do bishops' and archdeacons' transcripts cover Non-Conformist chapels?*

Not usually although some bishops' transcripts are held for the Society of Friends' burial grounds in Margate, Maidstone and Rochester.

*Do bishops' transcripts cover burial grounds, cemeteries, garrisons, prisons and workhouses?*

Only a few survive for these places; most of these fall within the diocese of Canterbury.

*Do archdeacons' transcripts cover burial grounds, cemeteries, garrisons, prisons and workhouses?*

No.

*Were bishops' and archdeacons' transcripts compiled during the Commonwealth period (1648-1660)?*

No. Diocesan authorities were abolished until the Restoration.

*Do bishops' and archdeacons' transcripts contain the signatures of the relevant clergy?*

Yes. These can include the signatures of not only the incumbent but also those of sidesmen, churchwardens and curates.

## **Further reading**

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| J S W Gibson | <i>Bishops Transcripts and Marriage Licences, Bonds and Allegations</i>                |
| D J Steel    | <i>General Sources of Births, Marriages and Deaths Before 1837</i>                     |
| W E Tate     | <i>The Parish Chest: A Study of the Records of Parochial Administration in England</i> |