

This second Booke contemeth in it the  
 names of all such as haue hiee mar-  
 ried within this parrish of Cranb.  
 from the 13 of August 1559.

*Marrriages*

August 1559

13 Mar William Meatralls & }  
 Joane Whittenden }

September 1559

30 Mar Henry Merynke & }  
 Merygen Ande }

23 May Thomas Forbye & }  
 Elizabeth Carpenter }

23 Mar Reynolde Dmke & }  
 Tomazme Mills }

October 1559

10 Mar John Markelman & }  
 Constant Brngis }

11 Mar Antonic Hoddes & }  
 Joan Smyke }

December 1559

3 Mar John Comfporte & }  
 Merygen Collyar }

16 Mar Robert whitnall & }  
 Mary Hall - }

January 1559

21 Mar Thomas Earle & }  
 Abre Benden }

26 Mar Nicholas Holl & }  
 Abre Johnson - }

Maye 1560

26 Mar Thomas Hexenden & }  
 Agnes yomge - }

June 1560

13 Mar John yceene & }  
 Abre ypage - }

John homewood &

# New to parish registers?

A guide to parish registers held at the Kent History  
 and Library Centre



Until civil registration began in 1837 there was no provision for the central registration of births, marriages and deaths in England and Wales. Prior to that date local, family and other kinds of historians largely depend on the parish registers of the Anglican Church to provide information on individuals.

Dating from the sixteenth century until the present day, few other classes of records can offer such complete and wide-ranging coverage.

## **Historical background**

Parish registers were first introduced by Thomas Cromwell in 1538. From that date every parish church was supposed to acquire a 'sure coffer' (ie a parish chest) within which their records could be securely stored.

They were also responsible for purchasing a volume into which an official, usually the incumbent (rector, vicar or curate) or parish clerk, could enter details of the week's baptisms, marriages and burials. Unfortunately the earliest registers were usually kept on loose sheets of paper so have rarely survived, despite the fact that they were supposed to be kept safe in the parish chest.

In 1598, Queen Elizabeth I approved a provincial constitution which stipulated that every church had to:

- Use registers made of parchment;
- Copy any old, surviving records into the parchment registers;
- Copy the year's baptism, marriage and burial entries and send them to the relevant bishop annually for safekeeping; these copies were known as bishops' transcripts.

The constitution decreed that all names from the older registers should be copied into the new parchment registers '... especially since the first year of her Majesty's reign'. Many parishes took this easier option which is why so many parish registers date from 1558.

## **The parish registers**

Although there are several types of parish registers, the most important for genealogists are baptism (ie christening), marriage and burial registers.

A marriage register is the only one of these three to record a 'life event' at the time it took place. Baptisms, for example, can take place any time after birth and before death. Sometimes a birth date is entered alongside the baptism entry, particularly during the Commonwealth period and after civil registration began in 1837, but most registers do not record such information.

Burials usually take place between three to seven days after death but there are notable exceptions. Frozen ground and contagious disease are two important factors; foul play is another (delays in burial can be imposed by a coroner if she/he deems it necessary). All in all it is difficult to generalise with any accuracy.

### **Information contained in parish registers**

Until the passing of various pieces of legislation during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the quality and extent of information entered into a parish register was a largely haphazard affair entirely dependent on the conscientiousness of the official who maintained the register.

Most early registers were written in Latin, the official use of which was not abolished until 1733. In practice, though, English had long since superseded Latin by this date. Researchers should note, however, that even when registers are written in English inconsistent spelling and appalling handwriting can make them very difficult to use.

Until Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act came into force in 1754 baptisms, marriages and burials were usually recorded in one volume, sometimes separately, sometimes all jumbled together in chronological order. Thereafter marriages were entered into separate volumes (often with banns), while baptisms and burials continued to be recorded together until the implementation of Rose's Act in 1813. Baptisms and burials then began to be recorded separately in pre-printed, standardised volumes.

### **Baptism registers**

(Usually recorded with burials and marriages until 1754; with burials only from 1754-1812; by themselves from 1813).

All baptism entries should include the date of the baptism and the name of the person being baptised. Additional information such as the parents' names and the date of birth of the person being baptised remained largely optional until the Rose Act. The standardised, post-1812 baptism register usually includes the following information:

- The date of the baptism;
- The name/s of the person being baptised and the names of the parents (if the child was illegitimate only the mother's name is given);
- Place of abode;
- The parents' occupations (usually just the father's is given);
- By whom the ceremony was performed.

## **Marriage registers**

(Usually recorded with baptisms and burials until 1754; separately thereafter).

It is worth remembering that, prior to 1929, a girl could marry at the age of 12, a boy at 14, although parental consent was required. Since 1929 the lower age limit has been set at 16 years of age.

The information recorded in marriage registers has been governed by more legislation than other types of registers so listed below is the key information which appears after the Acts of 1753 and 1836:

- The date and place of the wedding (from 1754 onwards);
- The names of the bride and bridegroom (from 1754 onwards);
- Parish/place of abode (from 1754 onwards);
- Whether married by licence or by banns (1754-1812);
- The marital status of the bride and groom (from 1754 onwards);
- The ages of the bride and groom (from 1837);
- The occupations of the bride and groom (from 1837);
- The names and occupations of the bride and groom's fathers (from 1837);
- By whom the couple were married (from 1754 onwards);
- Signatures of parties and witnesses (from 1754 onwards).

## **Burial registers**

(Usually recorded with baptisms and marriages until 1754; with baptisms only from 1754-1812; by themselves from 1813).

In the past the information recorded in burial registers has been particularly patchy so listed below is the key information which appears after the Act of 1812.

- The date of the burial;
- The name and age of the deceased;
- The deceased's place of abode at the time of death;
- By whom the funeral was performed.

## **Parish registers in Kent**

Parish registers are still held locally, either in the custody of the incumbent or deposited in a local record office. As there are over four hundred parishes in Kent it is necessary to know at least the area and preferably the individual parish before beginning a search of parish registers.

David Wright's *East Kent Parishes* and the North West Kent Family History Society's *West Kent Sources* are useful guides to the coverage and location of Kent parish registers and Bishop's transcripts held by the Kent History and Library Centre, Canterbury Cathedral Archives and Medway Archives and Local Studies Centre.

Very few original parish registers are indexed and those relating to large, urban parishes can be very bulky. Consequently it may take hours or even days to search through each series of registers. Indexes to some parish registers may be available in printed volumes, microform, within the archive transcript series or online.

The deposited original parish registers for Kent are not all stored at one record office, although transcripts and microfilm copies may be available at more than one location. The record office a parish deposits its registers in depends on whether or not it lies within the Kent dioceses of Canterbury or Rochester.

The parishes have been divided up as follows:

- Canterbury Cathedral Archives (East Kent): Diocese of Canterbury (except for the archdeaconry of Maidstone)
- Kent History and Library Centre (most of west and mid Kent): Diocese of Rochester (except for the archdeaconry of Rochester) and the archdeaconry of Maidstone
- Medway Archives and Local Studies Centre (north-west Kent): Archdeaconry of Rochester

*Metropolitan Kent (former Kent Parishes now part of Greater London)*

- Bromley Archives: Rural deaneries of Bromley, Beckenham and Orpington (archdeaconry of Bromley)
- Bexley Local Studies and Archives Centre: rural deaneries of Erith and Sidcup (archdeaconry of Bromley)
- London Metropolitan Archives: Deptford, Woolwich and some Greenwich parishes
- Greenwich Heritage Centre: Greenwich St Paul, Charlton Holy Trinity and Charlton St Luke
- Lewisham Local Studies Centre: Lewisham and Lee

## **Online sources**

**Kent History Source:** Contains digital images of parish registers for the Diocese of Rochester which are held at the Kent History and Library Centre. Kent History Source can currently only be consulted at the Kent History and Library Centre.

**findmypast (<http://www.findmypast.co.uk/>):** Contains digital images for parish registers for the Archdeaconry of Canterbury. There are no records for the parishes of Cheriton St Martin, Harbledown St Michael, Ramsgate St Luke and Shepherdswell (also known as Sibertswold) St Andrew. Records for each of these four parishes can be consulted on microfilm at Canterbury Cathedral Archives. The three ancient Thanet parishes can be found under the names St John in Thanet, St Lawrence in Thanet and St Peter in Thanet (rather than under Margate, Ramsgate and Broadstairs respectively). The images cover baptisms to 1912 and banns and marriages to 1928. Later baptisms, banns and marriages are not being published for reasons of data protection and personal privacy.

## Key dates

- 1538** Thomas Cromwell's injunction establishes the registration of baptisms, marriages and burials.
- 1598** Queen Elizabeth I authorised a provincial constitution of Canterbury, ordering that all parish registers be retrospectively transcribed into parchment volumes to at least the beginning of her reign.
- 1649-1660** During the Commonwealth records were meant to be kept in English instead of Latin. The civil registration of births, marriages and deaths began in 1653. Many registers passed into the care of the new secular authorities. If they were not lost, they often contain gaps.
- 1678** The Burial in Woollen Act was passed in 1678 in an attempt to bolster the flagging English woollen industry. The Act stated that all corpses had to be buried in shrouds of pure wool only. It was repealed in 1814.
- 1733** Latin in documents was abolished.
- 1753** Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act was designed to put an end to clandestine (secret and unofficial) marriages. It enacted that weddings could only be solemnised after the publication of banns or after the issuing of a licence, and registers were standardised. The Act also decreed that only Anglican clergyman (and Jews and Quakers) could conduct marriages, and minors could only marry with parental consent.
- 1812** George Rose's Act decreed that parish clergy were to keep separate, specially printed, registers of baptisms and burials, as well as the marriage register standardised by Hardwicke's Act.
- 1836** Marriage Act: Superintendent Registrars were empowered to issue licences for marriage in the office of a registrar or in a Non-Conformist church. Marriages could also take place in Catholic chapels if a registrar was present. This Act spelled the end of the Established church's near-monopoly on legal marriage contracts (Jews and Quakers continued to be exempt), and civil registration began on 1 July 1837. The Births and Deaths Registration Act of 1836 made provision for the systematic recording of births and deaths by registrars. The civil registration of births, marriages and deaths began on 1 July 1837.

## Further reading

Lillian Gibbens, *Church Registers* (1994)

J S W Gibson, *Marriage, Census and Other Indexes for Family Historians* (2000)

W A Holdsworth, *The Handy Book of Parish Law* (1995)

Public Record Office, *Using Birth, Marriage and Death Records* (2000)

William E Tate, *The Parish Chest* (1969)

David Wright, *East Kent parishes: a guide for genealogists, local historians and other researchers in the Diocese of Canterbury* (2002)

North West Kent Family History Society, *West Kent Sources - A Guide to Family and Local History Research in the Diocese of Rochester* (1998)