

Understanding THE PARISH REGISTER

Discovering your pre-1837 ancestors can be difficult and it helps to have a better understanding of what's written in the register by the clergy or the Parish Clerk.

Next to the Parson and the Squire, two of the best known people in a village community were the Parish Clerk and the Midwife, the two functionaries who officiated at the entry and departure of the individual on this life.

However, when Thomas Cromwell issued an injunction in 1538 requiring the registers of baptisms, marriages and burials to be kept, many parishes ignored this order as it was commonly thought that it presaged a further tax and according to the Parish Register Abstract of 1883 there were;

	40 registers beginning prior to 1538		
772	“	“	in 1538 - it's now believed to be only 656
1822	“	“	in 1538 - 1558
2448	“	“	in 1558 - 1603
969	“	“	in 1603 - 1650
2757	“	“	in 1650 - 1700
1476	“	“	in 1700 - 1750

Also between 600 & 700 of later dates

So, with the above history on the start of some registers, we now have an indication of how far back we may get with our research of the registers and an important check for coverage is www.freereg.org.uk go to the 'Transcriptions' link at the top of the home page and follow the instructions, this should give you some information detailing what is possibly available for each parish or county.

Parish Registers contain the names of people, the date when they were baptised, married or buried (or when banns were called), and the names of some of their relatives (for example the parents of children who were baptised or perhaps the husband of a woman who was buried). Some registers may also record if the spouses were widows or widowers, as well as the occupation and place of residence of those people marrying, being buried or having their children baptised. After 1754 marriage registers should include the signatures or mark of the spouses and witnesses (who were often the spouses' parents or other relatives). Many parish register transcripts do not specify the witnesses at a wedding, so you may need to see the original register.

Baptisms, *Baptismata, Baptizata, Renata, Chrystenings, etc.*

Under one or other of the above headings were recorded the infant arrivals on "the stage of fools". During the 16th century the baptismal register was a more comprehensive record than subsequently. The activities of the various sects, which arose and developed during the 17th century made the parish register defective as a record of births.

Religious or anti-religious prejudice caused many to abstain from the sacrament of baptism. The baptismal entries vary much more in wording and the amount of information conveyed than either the weddings or burials. Registers of the 16th and 17th centuries were often written in Latin and can be difficult to read and a baptism entry in early registers may only record the date and the names of the child and father.

Baptisms of two or more brothers and sisters sometimes took place on the same day; however, this does not mean that the children were twins. Although most children were baptised shortly after birth, this was not always the case and it was common practice to have more than one child baptised at the same time. Until this century children were born to most couples at regular intervals, so the parents may not have arranged the baptism of one child before another was born and some parish registers may give a date of birth, as well as the date of baptism.

Most children were baptised and the ceremonies took place a few days or weeks after the child's birth, however, many children were baptised later and these baptisms can be difficult to find. This was often because their parents had not had them baptised as children but they decided that they wanted to be baptised before they died.

A minister often noted "adult" against the entry or recorded a person's age, however, it is unknown how many adult baptisms appear without any age noted and so appear to be baptisms of children. In the months before the introduction of civil registration on 1 July 1837, there was an increase in the number of baptisms, especially older children and adults. This may have been due to a popular belief that the law introducing civil registration required anyone born before July 1837 to have been baptised. If you cannot find an ancestor's baptism in the late 18th or early 19th century, you should search for an adult baptism in registers of 1836 and 1837.

Private Baptisms, during the 18th century the custom of privately baptising was very usual, in some registers nearly all baptismal entries for many years are marked "priv" or you may see a note "P" which was also used for pauper baptisms or a statement that a child was privately or "half" baptised. From 1603 parish registers were supposed to record both public and private baptisms, but this was not always done. Baptisms should have taken place in church, but private baptisms were sometimes permitted, usually if a child was too ill to be brought to church, however, he or she should have been "received" or "admitted" into the church by a later ceremony, the date of which may be noted in the register (usually a marginal note).

Infant Mortality – large families were very common in the 18th and 19th centuries. There were families of 12 or more children but the rate of infant mortality was extremely high, many children were stillborn or died before they could be baptised so no record of them may exist. Of those children who were baptised, many did not reach adult age.

Illegitimacy has never been an uncommon circumstance at any period of men's history

Citations:

Bradbrook, William. 1910. *The Parish Register*. Walton-on-Thames: Chas. A Bernau available from the Classic Reprint Series at www.forgottenbooks.com

Cox, J Charles. 1910. *The Parish Registers of England*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.