

PAROCHIAL REGISTERS AND RECORDS

Introduction

Of all the treasures that the church has inherited from the past, parish records are perhaps the least spectacular. Their importance, however, is undeniable. History shows that workaday and fragile records are easily neglected, and there have been losses through decay or wanton destruction - some in fairly recent times - in a number of parishes in this Diocese. The 1978 Parochial Registers and Records Measure was introduced to encourage us to take stock of our archival heritage and make effective provision for its preservation. Today's Church is in the midst of challenging changes, and it is no less important that we should leave a record of contemporary concerns for future generations. We therefore have a duty to preserve carefully all our records - past and present - in order that they may continue to be available to those interested in local history and genealogy as well as to lecturers and students from schools, universities and other research institutions. The initial survey work under the Measure has been completed, and these notes have been compiled to remind clergy and churchwardens of the background to the subsequent quinquennial inspections and to help them to look after their records generally.

PARISH RECORDS: How to deal with them

Parish records are like the fabric of the church, not property at our own disposal but entrusted to us for transmission unharmed and undiminished to our successors. It is important that we take the best measures we can to preserve our trust.

1. What are parish records?

Registers of baptisms, marriages and burials which may begin as early as 1538; of banns which date from 1754 and more recently of preachers, services and confirmations.

Parochial records of two kinds:

Ecclesiastical concerned with churchwardens, church fabric (faculties, plans, specifications), tithes, glebe, ecclesiastical charities, National Schools, and also the modern vestry minutes, modern p.c.c. minutes and accounts, letters, terriers, photographs and files of parish magazines. If in doubt as to what papers should be kept, consult the Diocesan Record Office, which is the County Record office for your county.

Civil concerned with the old Poor Law, highways, parish constable, vestry, local charities, town estates, Enclosure Awards and censuses.

2. Who is legally responsible for these records?

Registers and ecclesiastical parochial records are the joint concern of the incumbent and the p.c.c. The registers belong to the p.c.c., but are in the custody of the incumbent for the time being, and of the churchwardens during a vacancy.

Civil parish records are the concern of the civil parish, and of the bodies which have taken over the functions of the old Overseers of the Poor and Surveyors of the Highways. The civil parish is entitled to request their deposit in a local record office (see Note (i)).

3. How can the records best be presented?

You may arrange their deposit in the Diocesan Record Office. In this Diocese the Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire County Record Offices are designated as Diocesan Record Offices for their respective archdeaconries. In a record office they will be:

- cared for physically
- guarded against loss
- made available under proper supervision to all searchers

OR

You may keep them in the parish. If you do this they must be secured against theft, loss, fire, flood, rust, damp, vermin, lack of ventilation, defacement, and damage in handling.

4. If you deposit your early documents in the Diocesan Record Office

- (a) The Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1978 makes provision for all registers and records more than a hundred years old to be deposited in the Diocesan Record Office. However, you may well wish to arrange for the deposit of all your non-current records.
- (b) Your more recent parish registers, and also other documents less than a hundred years old remaining in parochial custody and not in current use, must be kept under the following conditions:
 - They must be kept in the church, the official place of custody, in a dry, well-ventilated place.
 - A roomy, ventilated, rustproofed metal cupboard with a secure lock is a suitable container, but any container used for documents should be opened at least once a week. Do not put documents in any container which is rarely opened.

The principles for the care of documents in section 6 below should be noted.

- (c) When registers remain in parochial custody, the incumbent can charge the fees for their inspection or for making certified copies which are laid down in the current Fees Order, and the money so received is counted as benefice income. However, under the new Measure, no fees are chargeable under Fees Orders when registers are deposited in the Diocesan Record Office.

5. If you keep your early documents in the parish

With the permission of the Archdeacon, you may keep all your registers and records in the parish. If permission is given, Schedule 2 of the Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1978 applies (see Note (ii)). This means that you will have to observe the following conditions:

(a) Place

- They must be kept in the church, the official place of custody.

(b) **Accommodation** (see Note (iii))

- The place must be dry and well-ventilated, and should be kept warm during cold weather.
- A roomy, ventilated, rustproofed steel cupboard (preferably with interior sides and shelves lined with fire-insulating material), with the door fitted with a multi-lever lock, is the required container. This should be placed against but not in direct contact with an interior wall, out of the line of direct sunlight and artificial heat. The cupboard must be opened at least once a week.
- **Do not** use an airtight safe, or any container which is rarely opened.
- **Nothing** except books or documents may be kept in this cupboard.
- Check temperature and humidity weekly on a maximum-minimum thermometer and hygrometer. Preferably, the temperature should not vary more than 10 degrees Centigrade (18 degrees Fahrenheit) in any one week. The most suitable relative humidity is 55% to 60%. It should not rise above 65% nor fall below 50%. High humidity encourages the growth of mould; low produces brittleness in parchment and paper.
- In areas of general high humidity, dehumidifying apparatus may have to be installed, or other methods used to keep the atmosphere sufficiently dry.

You will need to observe the principles for the care of documents in section 6 below.

6. Care for all documents in the parish

(a) Storage

- Do not place documents at the level of the ground, or where leaking water pipes could cause damage. If the area is prone to floods, store them well above known highest flood level. Make sure that all electrical wiring is safe. Keep a carbon dioxide fire extinguisher nearby. Never use a liquid fire extinguisher. Make sure that documents are protected from immediate contact with concrete, stone, brick, slate, plaster or similar materials, and from contact with unprotected metal.
- Keep documents free from dust, grease and other foreign substances. **Do not** store with candles, wafers, wine, ink, oil, or articles made of cloth.
- **Do not** expose to natural or artificial light in a permanent showcase for any length of time. Note especially that fluorescent lights emit damaging ultraviolet rays.
- Pack documents loosely. If tightly packed, insect infestation and physical damage may result. Loose documents should be put first in suitable cardboard boxes, about which the Record Office will be able to advise you. Make sure that books placed upright on shelves are firmly supported, if necessary by rigid shelf dividers.
- Avoid metal that can rust in all clips, pins, staples, tags and containers. Rust destroys documents. The County Archivist can advise you where you can obtain brass or plastic paper clips.
- When tying bundles, use white tape rather than string, and string rather than rubber bands, which perish and damage the paper. Wrap bundles in strong white paper before tying.
- **Never** put documents in plastic bags. Free circulation of air is vital.

(b) Making documents available

You should be prepared to allow bona fide searchers, who may be genealogists, population historians (demographers) or local historians, to consult the records on request, **but** these searches should be by appointment at a reasonable time, that is during normal office hours or a time outside office hours that suits both parties:

To avoid blots and smudges which can damage and obscure the original text, make sure that no person consulting original documents uses anything but pencil. Also make sure that no person using documents eats, drinks or smokes while at work and that the notebook is **not** put **on** the documents. The use of tracing paper can damage older records.

If a search is likely to be extensive, or if a competent person offers to make transcripts, temporary deposit in a local record office should be considered. The copying or micro-filming of older records should always be carried out by or under the direct supervision of the County Record Office.

(c) Security

ALWAYS supervise **every** searcher for **the whole** of his/her stay. **Make no exception. NEVER lend any documents to an individual to take away.** Once a document is in a private house, even the parsonage house, the likelihood of eventual damage or loss is much increased. If a request is made for your registers and records to go on exhibition outside the church, consult your County Archivist. Try to ensure that when a present or former church office holder leaves the parish or dies, no records which belong to the parish are lost or destroyed as a result of the move or the winding up of his affairs.

7. Making Records

(a) Ink

The clergy are responsible for continuing the registration of baptisms, marriages and burials. The Stationery Office Record Ink (Stephens' "Registrar's" black lead ink - available in small quantities from the local Registrar's office on request) advised for use in the marriage registers is recommended for use in all three registers. **Do not use felt-tip or ball-point pens** for the ink may fade, stain and spread, and deface documents.

(b) Baptismal registers

The Measure alters slightly the format required by the Parochial Registers Act 1812. However, any registers you have already can still be used, though it will be necessary to adapt them to take in the additional information (as in Schedule 1 of the Measure). The new headings are: Entry number; Date of birth; Date of baptism; Christian name and surname; Father's Christian name and surname; Mother's Christian name and surname; Address; Father's occupation; Mother's occupation; Godparents; Officiating minister. The surnames of the person baptised and the father and mother should be in block capitals.

(c) Marriage registers

You may still be using a marriage register started in 1837. Although unfinished, such registers may be officially closed and exchanged and this is recommended. Please contact the Superintendent Registrar for your District, who will make the necessary arrangements.

(d) Burial Registers

The burial register should be used to record burials of bodies in the churchyard. The format confirmed in the Measure includes headings for: Entry number; Christian name and surname; Address; Age; Date of burial; Officiating Minister. The burial register may also be used to record the interment of ashes in the churchyard (subject to a marginal note being made to distinguish entries relating to ashes) where no separate interment register is provided. Where funerals held in the church are followed by burial or interment of ashes elsewhere, an entry should be made in the service register - the burial entry should **not** be used for this purpose.

8. Transcription and copying

The best way to preserve a document is to have a copy or an indexed transcript made for normal usage, as this reduces the need for use of the original and saves it from unnecessary handling.

(a) Transcription

An indexed transcript (up to at least 1837) is the best way of helping an enquirer who may find early handwriting difficult to read.

(b) Copying

Although machine photocopying was at one time favoured for copying, it is now recognised that this process can cause serious damage to documents. It is therefore discouraged. Micro-filming, however, can be carried out without risk of damage to the original material, and modern facilities enable paper print-out copies of single or multiple pages to be made from microfilm. All copying should be carried out by or under the direct supervision of the County Record Office.

In Hertfordshire, all registers over 100 years old and deposited at the Record Office have been microfilmed and it in that format that they are made available to enquirers. The originals are thus protected from risk of damage. A copy of each microfilm is kept off-site as an added precaution. Furthermore, there are currently plans for all microfilms of registers over 100 years old in both counties to be digitized and made available for viewing on a free website and this will ensure their wider accessibility to researchers.

9. Listing and inspection under the Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1978

Under the Measure documents must be listed, and those remaining in the parish must be inspected every five years. The initial listing or survey has been completed, and copies of the survey lists have been sent to all parishes. Generally these lists include all records considered to be of present

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or future practical or historical importance. Copies of the lists are also held in the County Record Office, and extra copies are available to parishes on request.

Work began in 1988 on the first quinquennial inspection under the Measure and every parish has been inspected at least twice subsequently. As with the initial survey, parishes in this Diocese are not required to contribute directly towards the cost of the inspection; parishes may help to keep costs as low as possible, however, if they take the opportunity to deposit additional records in the County Record Office at the time of the inspection.

Inspection

At the time of each inspection, you will be expected to produce all the registers and records on the survey list together with any additional material that has come to light or been created since the previous inspection. The items previously listed will be checked against the list, and any missing documents will be noted. The additional material will be listed. The inspecting officer will also identify any records "over 100 years old" (defined in the Measure as being items in which the date of the latest entry is 100 years or more earlier than the date of the survey or inspection), make appropriate recommendations, and report on storage conditions.

Revision of survey lists

After the inspection, you will be sent an updated survey list which will be marked to show changes of location (including items originally kept at the church but afterwards deposited in the Record Office) and which will also list the additional material seen at the time of the inspection. The list should be carefully preserved for future inspections, and it is suggested that it should be kept (with the Record Office deposit receipts) in the terrier and inventory.

10. Protection and repair of documents

The condition of documents kept at a church should be regularly monitored, and any signs of deterioration (eg. insect infestation or the appearance of mould) should be reported to the County Archivist. Natural decay can often be arrested and in part made good by a trained document repairer, and the County Record Office conservation staff will be able to offer advice and practical assistance in appropriate cases. Many commercially available materials for packaging and repair are harmful to documents, and so advice should be obtained from the County Archivist before any records are repaired or repacked. Never attempt any form of repair yourself, as to patch documents with unsuitable materials can cause irreparable damage.

In the event of damage by fire or flood, you should get in touch with the County Record Office **immediately**. Help will be available promptly to ensure that as much as possible is salvaged and preserved.

If documents kept in the church are lost through theft following a break-in at the church, you should also get in touch with the County Record Office who can identify from their lists exactly which items have been lost.

11. Addresses

The Diocesan Record Offices are the County Record Offices:

Bedfordshire (Archdeaconry of Bedford)

Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service,
Borough Hall,
Bedford,
MK42 9AP

Telephone: 01234 228833

Email: archive@bedford.gov.uk

Website: <https://bedsarchives.bedford.gov.uk>

Hertfordshire (Archdeaconries of St. Albans and Hertford) Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies,

County Hall,
Hertford,
SG13 8EJ

Telephone: 0300 123 4049

Email: hals.enquiries@hertfordshire.gov.uk

Website: <https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/libraries-and-archives>

12. Further Reading

- For general advice on how to deal with documents held in the parish, including PCC minutes, accounts paperwork, etc, please see “Keep or Bin – The Care of your Parish Records” (2009) published by the Church of England Record Centre and available to download at:
<http://www.churchofengland.org/media/51609/careofparishrecords.pdf>

If you want a much more detailed and technical explanation of the Measure, you will need to consult the "Guide to the Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1978" which can be obtained from the Church House Book Shop, Great Smith Street, London, SW1P.

NOTES

- Note (i) Section 226 of the Local Government Act, 1972, gives oversight of civil parish records to the County Council, which can give orders for their preservation.
- Note (ii) Schedule 2 of the Measure was amended by the Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 1992 and is now as follows:

Provisions which apply to register books and records retained in parochial custody under section 11 (3)

1. Every register book or record to which this Schedule applies shall be kept in a woodlined, rust-proofed, vented steel cabinet, the door of which is fitted with a multi-lever lock or in a fire-proofed muniment room conforming so far as practicable to British Standard Specification Number 5454 or any new British Standard which supersedes it.
2. The cabinet or muniment room shall be situated within the appropriate parish church or other place of public worship, positioned where there is least risk of damage to any such book or record in the

event of a flood or an outbreak of fire, and made secure in all other respects against flood, fire and theft.

3. The temperature and relative humidity in such cabinet or muniment room shall be checked at least once a week by means of a maximum-minimum thermometer and a hygrometer, each of which shall be kept in the cabinet or muniment room. Records of all readings shall be kept for a period of not less than twelve months and be made available for inspection at any reasonable time by the archdeacon in whose archdeaconry the parish is situated or by such person or persons as he may appoint.
4. The hygrometer shall be one conforming to British Standard Specification Number 3292 or any new British Standard which supersedes it.
5. The temperature in the cupboard or muniment room shall not be allowed to rise above 18 degrees Celsius and the difference between the maximum and minimum temperatures during any week shall not be allowed to exceed 10 degrees Celsius.
6. The relative humidity in the cupboard or muniment room shall not be allowed to fall below 50 per cent nor to rise above 65 per cent.
7. Subject to paragraph 3 above, nothing, except books or other documents, shall be kept in the cupboard or muniment room in which any register book or record to which this Schedule applies is for the time being kept.
8. Without prejudice to the preceding provisions, the person or persons having the custody of any such book or record shall take all such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that the book or record is protected against theft, loss and damage.

Note (iii) Storage accommodation

The optimum conditions for storage of documents are a properly equipped air-conditioned fire-proof strong room operated under supervision. These conditions are difficult to meet fully even in the most favourable of circumstances, and when applied to relatively few documents disproportionately expensive. The recommendations made in 5 (b) therefore, are very much a compromise with requirements.

Note (iv) Periods for which records must be kept

The following categories of records should be retained for the following minimum periods:-

PCC Minute book	-	permanently
Correspondence	-	as long as relevant, then check with CRO
Faculty documents	-	permanently
Accounts etc.	-	6 years or, in the case of covenants, 6 years after the end of the covenant period

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Addresses updated 2021 pending further review