

Parish Registers

HAROLD W. BRACE of Gainsborough has kindly supplied the following notes on parish registers which may serve as guide for Friends engaged in local or genealogical research in this wide and too little-used field.

GENERALLY speaking, parochial registration commenced with Thomas Cromwell's Injunction of 5.ix.1538, although there are a very few registers containing entries before that date. There are several parishes in Lincolnshire whose registers begin in 1538, the nearest being Belton in the Isle of Axholme and Broughton near Brigg. Under Edward VI the Injunction to keep registers was repeated, almost word for word in 1547, and again by Queen Elizabeth in 1559. The Gainsborough registers commenced soon after this in the year 1564.

Lord Treasurer Burghley, in 1590, propounded a scheme whereby general registration by counties would have antedated the censuses which only came 200 years after. Nothing came of the scheme then, but in 1597 incumbents were ordered to send to their Diocesan Registry a copy of the register entries each year. These copies are called Bishop's Transcripts and for the Archdeaconry of Stow they commence generally in 1599. Many of them still survive and have proved to be of great use in supplying deficiencies where registers have subsequently been lost, destroyed or become illegible.

Unfortunately, both registers and transcripts are frequently missing or incomplete during the Civil War period. Systematic registration begins again with the appointment of lay officers called "Parish Registers" pursuant to an Act of Parliament passed in 1653. The same Act instituted marriage before a justice of the peace, and it was the date of birth not baptism which was recorded. The following examples taken from the register of the parish of Marton, will illustrate these points :

William Kimson and Anne Pinder was married the first of December before Justis Mounton in the yeare 1656.

William the son of William Kimson was borne the 12th of Sept., 1657.

The clergy officially resumed registration at the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, but had in fact usually regained their registers before the end of the Commonwealth.

What has been described as a "Whimsical Act of Parliament" forbidding burial "in any shirt, shift or sheete other than shall be made of wool onely", was originally passed in 1666 and re-enacted in 1678 with a requirement of an entry in the register, of which we can quote from Lea thus :

1695, Apr. 5 Thomas Swift, bur. his burial in woolen was certified by Mr. Mason, Rect. of Springthorpe."

Under William III taxes, graduated by social position, were imposed on the occasions of births, marriages and deaths. The Bishop's Transcript for the parish of Gate Burton for the year 1701 refers to this :

" Apr : 16 Eliz : daughter to Geo : Moody a Husbandman was buryed, to pay 4/-

Apr : 20 A child unbaptized was borne to Wm. Stow a Husbandman, to pay 2/-

Apr : 22 The same child buried, to pay 4/-

May 2d Geo : Inger a poor labourer and Mary Wilson a widdow were marryed, to pay 2/6."

Perhaps Geo : Inger might solace himself with the thought that had he been a duke, he would have had to pay £50.

In order that dissenters might not escape this tax (their entries not being in the parish registers), incumbents were required in 1695 to keep a separate list of such events for nonconformists. This was very generally neglected, but there is a solitary list for one year only (1700) in the Gainsbrough registers, thus :

" Aprill 19 Joseph Potter Butcher and Mary Simpson wer joyned

Novemb 29 Susannah Plant widdow was brought to bed of a Child named Mary

Jan. 27 Isaac son of Wm. Hornby was putt in the ground."

Clandestine marriages had become so scandalous by the time of George III that a special Act of Parliament, known as Lord Hardwicke's Act, was passed to stop such traffic, and, *inter alia*, it introduced printed registers in a prescribed form, for marriages, including the publication of banns.

The Stamp Act of 1783 imposed a duty of 3d. per entry in a parish register, and made the incumbent responsible for the collection of the tax. Extreme poverty was allowed as a ground for exemption, which explains the following quotations from the Marton Register :

“ Christenings 1785 : June 12 Mary daughter of Thos. & Susanna Milns. Poor

Burials 1785 : May 28 Sarah Scott of Cotes. Poor.”

This very unpopular impost was repealed in 1794.

Great interest in returns of population, and hence registration, was aroused in the early part of the 19th century, and Rose's Act of 1812 substituted a more rigid procedure and printed registers for the older manuscript books in respect of baptisms and burials. A quarter of a century later, on July 1st, 1837, registration became a civil matter and parish registers lose their genealogical importance after that date.

No account of registration would be complete without a mention of various non-parochial registers which are in existence. Such are the registers of the Chapels Royal, those of the Walloon and Huguenot churches and of burial grounds such as Bunhill Fields in London.

Large numbers of irregular marriages took place in such places as the Chapels of the Fleet and other prisons and in nearby alehouses. Registers of these are at Somerset House but they are not accepted as legal evidence, though from a genealogist's point of view there is little doubt that the marriages did, in fact, take place. These are perhaps too distant to have any local significance, but the student of local history in the Midlands cannot afford to overlook the registers of the Chapels at Dale Abbey and Peak Forest, both in Derbyshire, where many similar irregularities happened, the Clerk at the latter place marrying all comers for a fee of 1/-.

Practically all dissenting bodies kept registers of their own, the local examples being those of the Gainsborough Monthly Meeting of the Society of Friends (1657-1837), the Beaumont Street Chapel and the Roman Catholic register of Market Rasen (1640-1840).