

Parish Registers pre-1837

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Every parish must have a history, every parish has a register, every person has a parish. -Bishop Stubbs.¹

On 29 September 1538 Thomas Cromwell, the Vicar General, ordered the keeping of parish registers in England and Wales:

‘Item that yow and eny (every) pson (parson) vicare or curate this dioc (diocese) shall for every churche kepe one boke or reistre wherin ye shall write the day and yere of every weddyng christenyng and buryeng made wtin (within) yor pise for yowr tyme, and so euy man succedyng yow lykewise. And shall there inserte euy psons (persons) name that shalbe so weddid christened or buried’.

These registers were to be kept in a coffer with two locks and keys with one for the parson, vicar, or curate, and one for the churchwardens. There were fines of 2s 3d should the register not be completed each week. This order was reiterated in 1547 when the penalty was ‘to be employed to the poore box of that parish’.



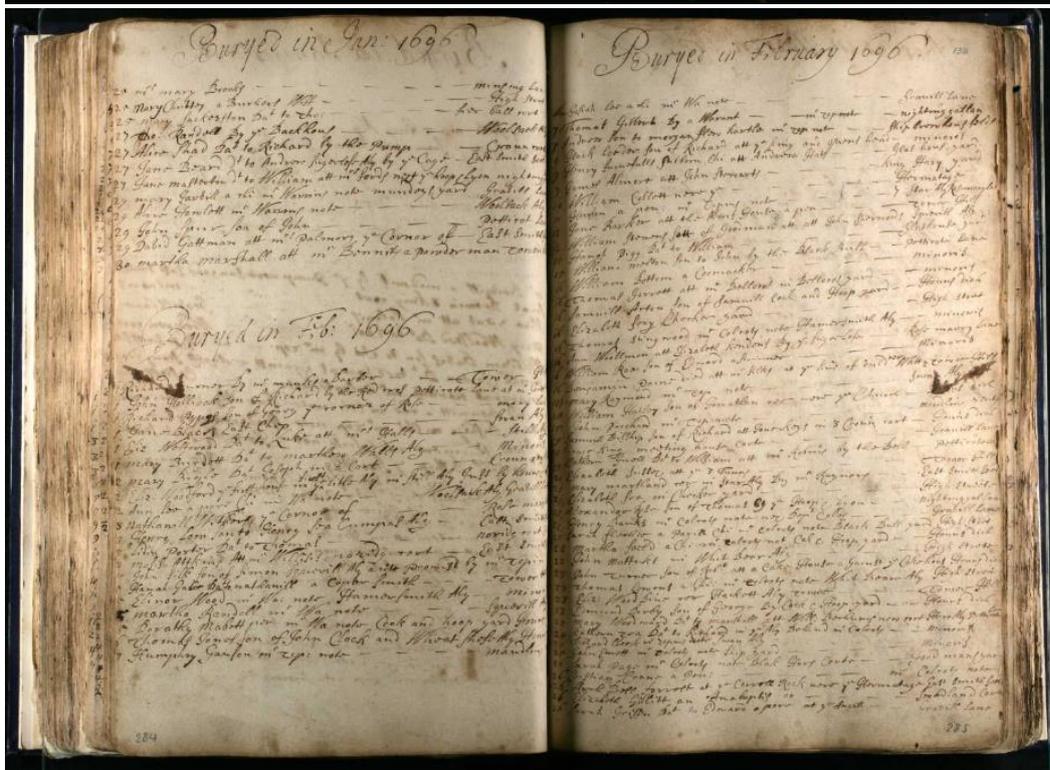
Parish Chest, St Mary Magdalene, Great Burstead. © John Salmon via the Geograph Project ([CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/))

¹ Arthur Meredith Burke, *Key to the Ancient Parish Registers of England & Wales* (1908), 5.

In 1597 the loose sheets on which the registers had commonly been kept were ordered to be transcribed into bound register books. Due to diverse interpretations of this order and record-keeping practices, many registers only survive from this date or from the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558. It was also ordered that copy registers should be kept. These were sent to the archdeacon or bishop every year and became the so-called Bishops Transcripts. They can be a useful alternative when parish registers are lost or damaged.

Early registers had no fixed format. Some jumbled together all three types of records and ran month by month. Others had separate sections for baptisms, marriages, and burials. Most registers have absences. There are widespread gaps during the reign of Mary I (1553-1558) and the Civil Wars and Interregnum (1642-1660). In the 1650s the clergy were no longer charged with registrations with the task handed to an officer called the Parish Register and a fee of one shilling levied, leaving many entries unrecorded. Things returned to normal following the Restoration in 1660.

Changes in what was recorded in parish registers are worth taking note of. Usefully laid out in this blog: <https://www.familyhistory.co.uk/parish-records/>. An order in 1711 required registers to be ruled and numbered, but this was widely ignored. The calendar change of 1752 means a jump of 11 days while before this the registers ran according to Lady Day dating, the new year beginning on 25 March. Lord Hardwicke's act of 1753 implemented separate marriage registers and witnesses began to be included as the act intended to outlaw clandestine marriages. Rose's Act of 1812 required pre-printed forms for the registers, standardising the information, and separating them into three books. In 1837 a centralised system of civil registration was introduced but parish registers continued to be kept.



The parish register for St Giles, Cripplegate, London LMA, P69/Gis/A/002/Ms06419/011 where weddings, christenings and burials are recorded together month by month and for St Botolph, Aldgate, London LMA, P69/Bot2/A/016/Ms09232/001 where weddings, christenings, and burials were recorded in separate sections. [Images may be used only for

research, private study, or education. Applications for any other use should be made to London Metropolitan Archives- ask.lma@cityoflondon.gov.uk.]

Though many parish registers have been transcribed these can exclude marginal details in early entries. Abbreviations were frequently used, for example, WtxSt stands for White Cross Street (a burial ground in London). It is worth researching the parish and its street names, burial grounds, and churches. Varieties in spelling and shorthand versions of names are also common such as Wm for William. Although most registers were in English, some words were still in Latin until this was prohibited in 1733. Some of these are listed at the end of this post.

Parish registers are an accessible resource, available on microfilm in archives across the country and increasingly available online via sites such as Ancestry and Findmypast. They can be used for tracing the births, marriages, and deaths of individual parishioners and more, including charting population growth, patterns of diseases, burial patterns, the popularity of names, occupations, and average ages. They are a treasure trove of information for the historian.

Common Latin terms found in Parish Registers pre-1733²

viz. (videlicet). – namely

cum cont. – with a sermon

dom. (dominus) / (domina) – lord or sir or owner / lady or dame or mistress

fil. (filius) / (filia) – son / daughter

fil.pop, (filius) / (filia) populi or filius / filia vulgi – bastard son or daughter of a harlot

in com. (in comitatu) – in the county (of)

libre – book of public records

lic. (per licentiam) – by licence

nupt. (nupti fuerunt) – were married

ob. (obit) – died

s.p. (sine prole) - without offspring

sep. (sepuliebatur or sepultus(-a) erat) – was buried

par. (parochie) – of the parish of...

² Adapted from:

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Abbreviations Found in Genealogy Records.](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Abbreviations_Found_in_Genealogy_Records)

q. (quarto) – book or pamphlet of full sheets printed with eight pages of text, four to a side, then folded twice to produce four leaves.

vid. (viduus) (-a) widower (widow)

References and Resources:

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