

Churchwardens' Accounts

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Churchwardens in England and Wales were historically involved in the administration of the parish, alongside overseers and the vestry. They would have been familiar faces in parish life and appear regularly within historical records. Churchwardens were representatives of the parish laity, expected to lead parishioners through good example and to maintain peace in the church and churchyard. They were also responsible for church goods and property, including the nave and churchyard. Anglican parishes still have churchwardens fulfilling similar functions to this day. Following Hardwicke's Marriage Act, from March 1754 the signatures, or marks, of two witnesses were required for marriage entries in the parish registers. Churchwardens, along with the parish clerk, often performed this service. With the decline of the manorial system the parish constable was no longer supervised by the manorial court but instead by churchwardens (along with the Justices).

A key part of the responsibilities of churchwardens was to keep accounts of their expenditure. Account survival is sparse and uneven. A few accounts survive from the fourteenth century but more are available for later years. Accounts from the first few centuries of survival are mostly from the south and the midlands. There are more accounts for wealthier and urban livings and those which had been under the control of ecclesiastical authorities.

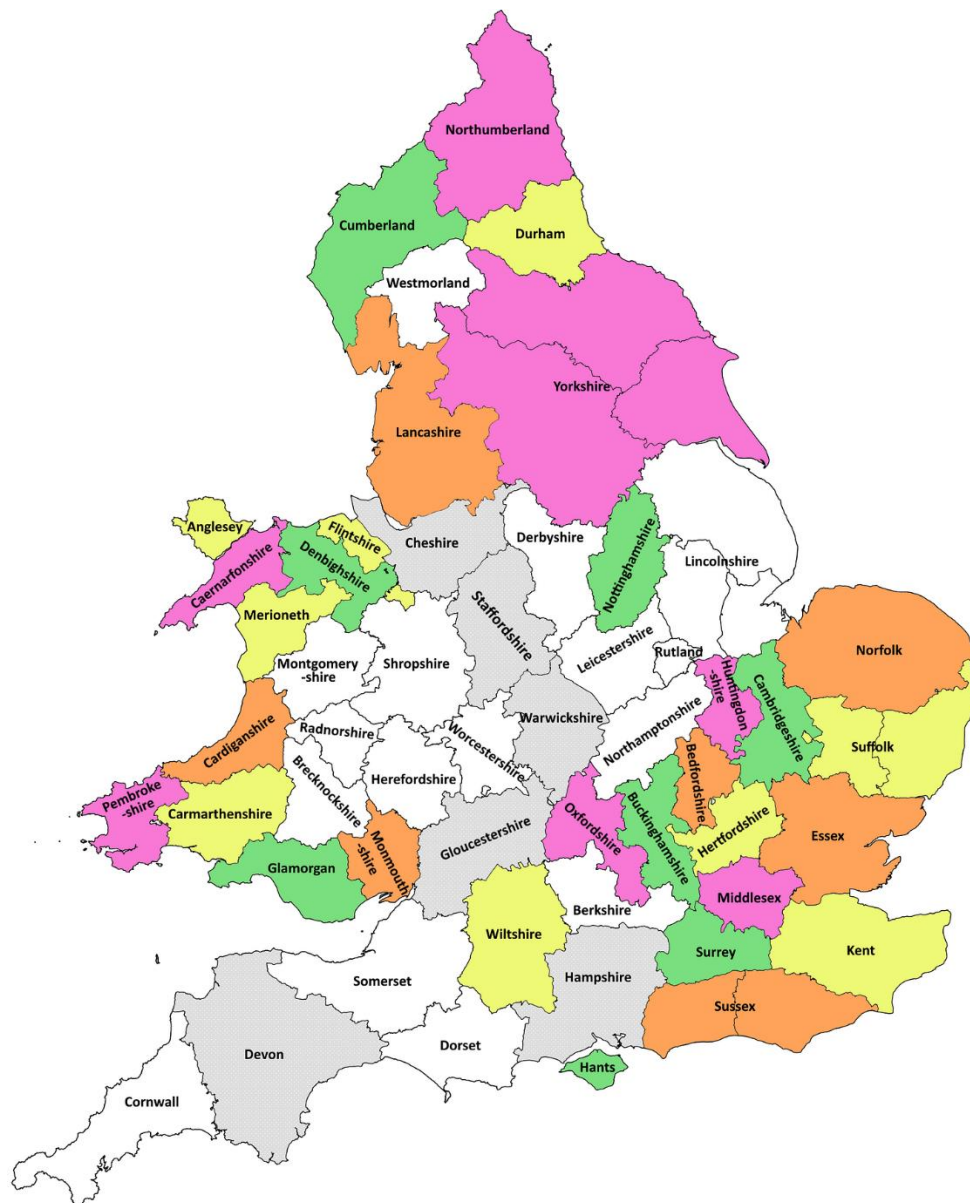


St Bartholomew the Great churchyard, Smithfield, London

The accounts record expenditure on the maintenance, cleaning and decoration of church buildings and grounds as well as provision of services and ceremonies. Within them you may find, for example, details about the purchase of wine for communion or items such as bellropes along with payments to carpenters and stonemasons. Accounts surviving for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are particularly important for charting the impact of the Reformation on churches and English religious life such as the removal of rood screens and gilded images.

The work of churchwardens and their accounts were serious business. Churchwardens could have cases brought against them in the ecclesiastical courts for failing to maintain the church while incoming officers could complain about the quality of their predecessors' accounts. Until 1868 churchwardens were allowed to levy a rate on all parishioners, even if they did not attend the Church of England. The money recorded in the accounts was expenditure from this church rate. Parish ratepayers may be listed in the accounts. Private benefactions or voluntary labour may not be recorded.

Churchwardens' accounts take the historian into everyday parish life. While churchwardens were often among the upper part of local society, it is labourers, craftspeople and their work which fill the pages of the accounts. In addition to their responsibilities to the parish church churchwardens paid out for the shooting of birds and vermin, gave relief to the poor and paid bellringers for celebrating national events. Their accounts are therefore 'a mine of miscellaneous local information'.[\[1\]](#)



- Counties completely coloured have been completed or are 90% completed
- Counties in grey have been started. Generally, these counties have more than one archive location and in most cases, one or more locations have been fully checked.

Map of Counties, copyright [CWA Database \(warwick.ac.uk\)](http://warwick.ac.uk)

Where Churchwardens' accounts survive they are held with other parish records such as registers and rate books. Some accounts have been transcribed and published. An invaluable database has been produced by Valerie Hitchman, with the help of many volunteers, on the survival and location of these accounts. The database enables you to establish the existence in manuscript or print of these accounts for almost all parishes in England and Wales. [CWA Database \(warwick.ac.uk\)](http://warwick.ac.uk)

References and Resources:

Information for this post was taken from the excellent David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 92 and Mark D. Herber, *Ancestral Trails: The Complete Guide to British Genealogy and Family History* (2000), 105, 161, 305-6, 450.

A blog showing detail from the accounts and how they may be used: Marion E. Colthorpe, [Queen Elizabeth I and some Essex churchwardens' accounts | \(essexrecordofficeblog.co.uk\)](http://essexrecordofficeblog.co.uk)

Books:

Valerie Hitchman and Andrew Foster (eds.), *Views from the Parish: Churchwardens' Accounts c.1500-c.1800* (2015)

Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400-1700* (1994)