

Parish Registers

While it is possible to trace ancestors back to 1837 using only civil registration records, anyone wishing to extend their family tree beyond that date will almost certainly need to consult parish registers.

The registration of baptisms, marriages and burials (*not* births, marriages and deaths) was introduced in 1538. In 1597 the parish clergy were ordered to copy their existing registers into 'fair parchment books' but in many cases the copying only extended back to Queen Elizabeth's accession in 1558. Unfortunately, many parishes have lost their early registers, but it may be possible to fill the gap by consulting the Bishop's Transcripts. From 1598 each parish was required to send a copy of the previous year's entries to their bishop.

The great majority of registers are deposited at Diocesan Record Offices [DRO]. It must be remembered, however, that in small parishes, registers with entries more than 100 years old, may still be in current use by the present vicar for current events to be registered.

- There are two DROs for the Diocese of Sheffield and they hold the bulk of records for South Yorkshire. Sheffield Archives acts as the Diocesan Record Office for the Archdeaconry of Sheffield and Doncaster Archives acts as the Diocesan Record Office for the Archdeaconry of Doncaster including those parts of the diocese now in the East Riding.
- In the south east of the county, the parishes of Austerfield and Bawtry fall within the Diocese of Southwell and their registers are deposited at the Nottinghamshire Archives. Finningley formerly in the diocese of Southwell, opted to join the diocese of Sheffield in 2010 and its registers are now at Doncaster Archives.

Many Victorian urban churches had no graveyard. Burials would normally take place in the municipal cemetery and be recorded in the cemetery register, not the church register. In some cases the church would keep a register of burial where the rector or vicar conducted a service and these burials will therefore be recorded in both registers.

Bishop's transcripts are frequently used by family historians to supplement parish registers and can often fill in gaps where the original registers are missing or illegible. The bishop's transcripts for the bulk of the parishes in South Yorkshire are among the York Diocesan Records, held at the Borthwick Institute for Archives in York. Microfilms versions are held by Doncaster Archives.

PARISH REGISTERS: WHAT THEY CONTAIN

When parishes were ordered in 1538 to keep registers of baptisms, marriages and burials, they were not instructed about the information, which should be entered in them. The earliest registers generally

have only the barest details. A conscientious clerk might enter more than was strictly necessary. He might, for instance, enter the name of both parents for a baptism, rather than the father only; he might enter the occupations of adults, or age at death; but there is rarely consistency over a long period.

Marriage registers were the first to have standardised entries, from 1753, following the Marriage Act of 1752, sometimes named after its sponsor, Lord Hardwick. The parish of residence (not origin) of both bride and groom will be given, and both of them and the witnesses, were to sign the register. From July 1837, the still-current format was introduced. This gives the age, address and occupation of both parties and the name and occupation of the fathers of each.

From 1813 (as a result of Rose's Act of the previous year), baptism and burial registers were standardised. Baptism entries give the names of the parents, place of residence (often at first only the place rather than the address) and the father's occupation. Burial entries give the place of residence and age at death of the deceased.

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