

English Parish Records: How to Access, Use, and Interpret Them

November 8, 2016 By [Diane Sagers](#)



Presented by Paul Milner Genealogy

Vital records can be difficult to find, but the parish registers of England are excellent resources providing information on baptisms, marriages, and burials. They have remarkably good coverage because by law, everyone except Quakers and Jews was required to be married in the Church of England regardless of religious affiliation.

The earliest parish records were made in 1538, but the details vary with customs, guidelines from the local diocese, and the efforts of the clergy, said Paul Milner, professional genealogist and British Isles specialist who made a presentation on using, accessing, and interpreting English records at the BYU Conference on Family History and Genealogy in July.

Bishop's transcripts are copies of the parish registers sent annually, shortly after Easter, to the proper authority—but not always to the bishop. They are good alternatives when parish registers are missing or damaged or are missing entries.

Many of these records can now be accessed online. "When searching records online, if a result says 'no image'—it means no image is attached—not that no image is online. Check other sources, and you may find the image. For example, if a parish register image is not online, check by location in the bishop's transcripts," Milner said.

Parish records contain at least the date of christening and the child's name and father's name, but the mother's first name, father's occupation, and place of residence are also common. In later

entries, more information was included. The George Rose Act of 1812 required more details in records of christenings, deaths, and burials.

Prior to 1753, marriage banns required engagements to be announced in church for three weeks prior to the wedding. Some couples, anxious to hurry, resorted to a clandestine marriage without the banns. Lord Hardwicke's act of 1753 implemented marriage by license as a quicker alternative to banns.

A marriage by license required three documents. A paper license went to the parish and was likely destroyed. It required an allegation—a sworn statement that there were no impediments to the marriage (such as minors without parental consent, current marital status, and close family relation). Also required was a bond to ensure that the marriage would take place properly at a certain place and date, which included the names of the parties and the sum with which the bondsmen were bound. The bondsmen's names were usually indicated at the top of the document. One is generally the groom and the other another family member, Milner said.

Banns list the parishes of both parties and were likely recorded in the bride's parish. Do not assume the wedding took place because banns were recorded. If you cannot find marriages in the expected parish, look in nearby parishes.

Burials listed in parish registers provide the deceased's name and burial date and sometimes the cause of death, age, residence, and mother's maiden name. Registers may include still births and infants who were not christened. Christening records do not mention stillbirths.

The Family History Library in Salt Lake City holds the largest collection of microfilm and microfiche copies of English parish records and [bishop's transcripts](#). FamilySearch is placing scanned images online. Some are indexed, and some searchable from home.

Ancestry, findmypast, DustyDocs, and others also have online parish records and indexes. Check both location and historical records for the greatest accuracy. Original documents usually contain more information not found in indexes. "Always go to the original records when possible; don't stop with indexes," Milner said.

[DustyDocs](#) is a repository of links to free websites in the British Isles that contain parish records. Some of the links help users access records that may now be behind a paywall.

Other commercial sites have parish records, and others host transcription projects. Look for county and local family history societies that have published indexes or transcripts to parish registers.