



Parish Registers

Part One - Legislation, Key Dates:

1534 The Reformation.

1538 Edict by Thomas Beckett for all Churches to keep a record of baptisms, marriages and burials.

1598 Elizabeth 1 – required her parish clerks to gather together all loose leaf parish registers back to 1538 and to put them together in bound volumes. Failing that, at least to try to get them back to the beginning of her reign (1558). These new **Parish Registers (PRs)** to be on parchment. Churches were also obliged to send returns to the Bishop each year of all their **PR** entries – these became known as **Bishop's Transcripts (BTs)**.

1604 An Act to restrain people from marrying until their former wives or husbands had died.

1644 – 1660 During the Civil War, churches were in turmoil and nonconformity was rife. Record keeping was often extremely patchy during this period.

1653 – 1657 The Commonwealth Period – a brief period of Civil Registration was introduced. Couples seeking to marry had to post notices, usually at the market cross, of their intended nuptials. The marriage had to take place in front of a Justice of the Peace, often at his home before two witnesses. These could sometimes be followed by a church blessing. It often happened that the parish clerk kept a record of these marriages in a separate book – he being the only person literate enough for the job.

1666 – 1678 Acts were passed requiring people to be buried in woolen shrouds (to help the woolen industry). Those found burying their loved ones in linen etc., were subject to a fine.

1688 An Act exempting Protestants who dissented from the Church of England from penalties. **The Toleration Act.** The start of nonconformist registers.

1694 Taxes levied on register entries to fund the wars with France: 2s per birth, 2s 6d per marriage and 4s for a burial. This lasted until 1706 so check after this date for any missing baptisms

1751 – 2 New style year. Under the old Julian calendar the year ended on Lady's Day 25th March. We then adopted the Gregorian calendar which started the New Year on January First. Old Style years are often shown as 1731/2. Ten days were also dropped from the calendar that year, September 3 – 13th.

1753 Lord Hardwicke's Act to regulate and prevent clandestine marriages. Banns had to be read for three successive weeks and the ceremony had to take place before two witnesses. Consent was also required for marriages of minors (under 21). The marriage also had to take place in the official Parish Church (hated by nonconformists) Jews and Quakers were exempt. Sadly there is little information on these printed marriage forms and no indication of the father's names and occupations.

1783 Stamp Duty of 3d on all entries – very unpopular, some children were not baptized until after the Act was repealed in 1794.

1812 George Rose's Act to standardize parish register entries and the introduction of printed books. Dependent upon the diligence of the parish clerk this could mean that more or less information was recorded than previously.

1837 – The introduction of Civil Registration.

Where to Find Parish Registers

GENUKI (Genealogy for the UK and Ireland) - before rushing to the IGI it's a good idea to find out as much as you can about churches, types of records and the geography of the area your ancestors lived; which records survive and where you are likely to find them. GENUKI was the first and is still a wonderful resource for family historians. You can drill down from Country through County down to individual Towns and Parishes. www.genuki.org.uk

Family Search (the Church of the Latter Days Saints website) - For reasons of their faith, the Mormons believe in the baptism of their ancestors by proxy into the Mormon faith. For this purpose they have filmed millions of entries from Parish Registers and Bishop's Transcripts all over the world. This information is free to search on-line for everyone. Click on Search Records, then Advanced Search and then the International Genealogical Index (IGI) www.familysearch.org

There are two separate parts to the IGI:

- Their 'controlled extraction' programme taken from filmed Parish Registers and BT's.
- Private Patron submissions from church members.

In general those entries from their controlled extraction programme can be regarded as accurate, making allowance for the fact that errors can happen when transcribing any original sources, but those entries from private patron submissions are to be viewed with caution. The rules governing proof of ancestry for church members were not as rigorous as those by family historians, and were interpreted with a considerable degree of license, especially in the early days. Be especially careful with entries that say 'Relative' or 'About'. In the past church members went about collecting as many entries of the same surname in an area as possible, without proving any relationship between them. Having found a marriage of their ancestors in a certain place they had a guesstimate formula which could assume that he/she had been baptised in the same area about 25/20 years previously, again without any proof at all.

Whenever you find an entry on the IGI always check at the bottom of the page whether it is from a patron submission or from their controlled extraction programme. If you click on the source call number you should be able to find the film number it was taken from, and then be able to order the film, on loan, from the LDS Family History Library Catalogue to view at your nearest Family History Centre.

A large number of records in the controlled extraction programme were taken from Bishop's Transcripts. This is because the Parish Registers at the time were still at the church and the incumbent had refused permission to film, so the Mormons went to the relevant County Record Office to film the BTs.

Although the IGI is possibly one of the most useful tools available to the family historian, it is vital that it is treated as an index only - **it is not a primary source**, but it is extremely useful in trying to pinpoint ancestors for further research. There are, however, many pitfalls and without referring back to the original parish registers and/or bishop's transcripts, it is extremely easy to find that you are researching the wrong line altogether. You can get very useful leads from the IGI, but the parish registers often contain the extra information required as proof.

Examples:

- Twenty three baptisms attributed to Robert Stanley on the IGI, on referring back to the parish register, five of these baptisms referred to his son Robert Junior, and that Robert Senior and Robert Junior were living at separate farms.
- People with common surnames with nothing else to distinguish them on the IGI. The Parish Registers reveal that they had different trades and lived at opposite ends of the parish.
- 1st March 1807, baptism of Ann the daughter of Richard Cartwright and Ann his wife *the daughter of David and Tabitha Jackson, born 1st February 1807.*

Without referring back to the original registers, you can be missing vital extra information.

Some tips on searching the IGI

All entries on the IGI were added in a series of batches each with their own individual number, called batch numbers. When you think you may have found your ancestor's baptism or marriage on the IGI, click on the batch number at the bottom of the search results page. Now go back to the original search screen and leave everything blank except for the SURNAME, REGION and BATCH NUMBER. This should reveal everyone with the same surname either getting baptised or married within the given timeframe covered by that batch number. There is a fabulous website devised by Hugh Wallis that used to do all this work for you. <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~hughwallis/IGIBatchNumbers.htm>

You may want to try and find out if your ancestor had any brothers or sisters. Go to the IGI search screen and input the names of the parents in the right-hand fields, click the drop down menu for births/christenings, click the drop down menu and put in +/-20 years, then a suitable date, enter a region, country and county. This should reveal all baptisms associated with, for example, William and Susannah Cartwright. Be careful, though, there could be more than one couple called William and Susannah Cartwright having children in the same area at the same time. Checking the parish register microfilm is likely to identify which is which.

Originally there was very poor coverage for Cheshire on the IGI – mainly because of opposition from the Bishop at the time. The LDS Church has been working for some time now to remedy this deficit. There is now good coverage on their new site for C of E parish registers for Cheshire, with differing estimates of between 80%-95% complete. For the first time the LDS Church is including burials and most of the churches I have checked are indexed up until about 1906. There are no images available for this collection. Chester Record Office has done a deal with to release the images to search at Find My Past

Family Search's new site is now the main route into their records, which are growing all the time, some are indexed and some are browse only. It's a good idea to have a browse around the collections before you begin searching.

It is very much still a work in progress and learning the best search techniques is also evolving. So far I am finding that if you always use advanced search and match all terms exactly, you can adjust your criteria at any time by clicking on the little down arrow next to REFINE YOUR SEARCH in the top left-hand corner. Family Search will then give you the results which match your criteria and then a list of near matches. You can still search for siblings on the new site with a similar process to the IGI and you can still use the batch numbers from Hugh Wallis' website.

Remember, though that some of the new records are browse only, particularly all churches within the Manchester Diocese. There are also new records on the site which are indexes only

to various census and nonconformist records, but these will take you through to pay sites to view the images – fine if you already have a subscription.

An interesting bit of extra help from the Family Search is while searching censuses, particularly 1911. Find My Past does not include place of birth in their search results, but Family Search does. This can save quite a bit of time when searching for common names.

The British Vital Records Index (BVRI):

In 1998 the LDS Church produced a set of 17 CDs containing just over 12 million additional entries to the IGI – these have now been added to their new site above.

Now to find original source material:

Armed with indexes, it's time to seek out the original entries (mostly on microfilm). Parish Registers and BTs are, with some exceptions, held in Diocesan Record Offices, for Cheshire this is Chester Record Office. Most Local Studies Libraries also hold these for their own locality.

Our Family History Society www.fhsc.org.uk has a huge selection to view on microfilm at our Alderley Edge Research Centre. Click on Alderley Edge Resource Centre, then Available Resources, and you can then download our parish register collection from our library resources. We also have a large collection of parish registers to purchase on microfiches and on CD. Our Crewe Resource Centre also holds fiche and films for the South Cheshire area.

The Cheshire Parish Register Project:

A partnership between the School of History and the Department of Computer Science at Liverpool University and the County Archivist at Chester Record Office

A volunteer project to transcribe and record the Parish Register entries for the thirty six ancient Cheshire parishes. Now over twenty parishes are complete. You can check out progress at: www.csc.liv.ac.uk/~cprdb/

Good Luck with your Search!