

Parish Registers

Parishes were first ordered to keep registers of baptisms, marriages and burials in 1538 – no registers exist earlier than that date. Many parishes ignored the order, and didn't bother creating them until decades later. Equally, many early registers have been lost over the centuries. Do not be surprised if the register you hope to find in the early period doesn't exist.

These are registers of **baptisms, marriages and burials**. No one kept registers of births and deaths before 1837, although a few clergy did write birth dates into the baptism registers. The registers of births and deaths are called Civil Registers, and are held by the [Registration Service](#).

In addition, registers of **banns of marriage** and **service registers** exist for some parishes.

Key Dates

- **1538:** the beginning of baptism, marriage and burial registration
- **1598:** registers had to be written into parchment books, and copies (known as [Bishop's Transcripts](#)) sent to the Diocese.
- **1653:** under Oliver Cromwell, registration was transferred to the civil authority. Many people hated this and didn't bother registering events for the next seven years, creating gaps in the record. Church registration returned in 1660.
- **1754:** Hardwick's Act introduced printed marriage registers, which prevented people sneaking extra entries in between existing ones.
- **1812:** Rose's Act introduced printed registers for baptisms and burials.
- **1837:** civil registration of births, marriages and deaths began. However, Church registration of baptisms, marriages and burials continued.

What will I find in the registers?

Baptism registers:

- **From 1538:** name of child and date of baptism, sometimes parents' names, father's occupation and date of birth
- **After 1812:** name of child, date of baptism, parents' names, father's (or mother's if no father) occupation, where they live (town or area, not detailed address before the 20th century), sometimes date of birth

Marriage registers:

- **From 1538:** names of husband and wife and date of marriage, sometimes whether marriage was by licence or banns, and if one party was from another parish the name of that parish
- **After 1754:** names of husband and wife, date of marriage, whether marriage was by licence or banns, the parishes of both husband and wife, names of witnesses, the officiating clergyman, signatures of parties who can write, but often just their marks, sometimes note of previous marital status and parental consent if needed
- **After 1837:** all the above, plus age, occupation of parties (their job), and fathers' names and occupations

Burial registers:

- **From 1538:** name of deceased and date of burial, sometimes age, occupation, name of parents (if a child), cause of death, marital status – very occasionally other biographical details
- **From 1812:** name of deceased, date of burial, where they lived (town or area, not detailed address before the 20th century), age and the officiating clergyman, rarely occupation, names of parents (if a child), cause of death

Interesting Examples

Registers can sometimes include unexpected information on the people contained within them. The burial register of St Thomas' Oxford for 1835 includes the burial of James Langston, which starts in English but lapses into the clergyman's natural Welsh as the entry becomes more awkward: "Murdered himself by cutting his throat with a razor. He was having a bad friendship with a widow of the parish – that is why he killed himself. Buried according to the Coroner's warrant without any ceremony at 10 o'clock at night."

Where are these records?

Many parishes have transferred their records to Oxfordshire History Centre.

Most of the parish registers we hold have been digitized. Registers covering 1538-1812 are available to view via [Ancestry](#) (subscription required) or on the computers at Oxfordshire History Centre. Transcripts and indexes of parish registers are also available to view at the History Centre.

Many but by no means all parishes have a catalogue online. Enter PAR and the name of the parish into our [Heritage Search](#) and choose the "Archive Catalogue" collection to see if the catalogue you want is there.

If the parish you are interested in does not appear you will need to visit the History Centre to look at the catalogue in printed form.