

Buried Treasures: What's in the English Parish Chest

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OVERVIEW

An introduction to the wealth of material to be found in the parish Chest. Lots of examples of different documents and the types of information they contain will be shown, plus explanations given on how they can be useful in genealogical research.

Instructions will be provided on where to find and gain access to these records.

PARISH RECORDS FOR POOR LAW ADMINISTRATION

Settlement and Removal Records

Settlement records relate to a person's legal place of settlement determined by a set of rules laid out in Acts of 1601, 1662, 1685, 1691, 1697 and 1795. The parish of settlement was responsible for the welfare and old-age care of family members. Parish officials often aggressively denied settlement. When a family sought parish welfare, officials determined the family's place of legal settlement. The Settlement Acts were repealed in 1834, but the principle of settlement remained substantially unaltered until 1876.

Three main groups of records created by the 1697 Act are:

- a. Settlement certificates - often a printed form provides the name and occupation of the person to whom it was issued.
- b. Examinations as to settlement - were conducted by a churchwarden or magistrate,

prior to the issuance of a Removal Order. The examination could take place at the request of either the parish seeking to remove an individual or the parish unwilling to receive him, or both parishes. There may therefore be more than one record of an examination relating to an individual. These records may contain birthplace, names of parents and family members, plus details of employment such as names of employers, length of service and other valuable information.

c. Removal Orders - often a printed form naming the person and their family to be removed. They were issued in duplicate, after application by the Overseer to two Justices of the Peace, one copy for each parish involved. The parish of departure and destination will be named. Appeals against a removal order will be found in the Quarter Session Records.

Overseer's Accounts

The daily administration of relief for the poor was the responsibility of the parish overseer of the poor. The overseer was responsible for collection of the poor rate. Distribution was as indoor relief in the parish workhouse, where food and lodging was provided, or as outdoor relief providing cash or material benefits such as food, clothing or coal.

With the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 many parishes, especially in the south of England provided emigration assistance to Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Many parishes provided passage money, a grant for clothing and provisions, and land money when the emigrant arrived at the destination.

In 1834, Poor Law Unions were created, ending the parochial responsibility for the poor. The Unions were governed by elected Poor Law Guardians.

The accounts of the overseer's of the poor vary greatly but where they survive should be examined for any locality and time period in which you are interested.

Bastardy Records

The Vagrant Act of 1575/6 prescribed the responsibilities of the father of and bastard child. These were reinforced by an Act of Parliament in 1732/3 which imposed on the pregnant mother the responsibility of presenting herself and naming the father. Printed forms became available after this for recording the information. Where the records survive it is unusual to have a complete set of documents regarding a particular birth.

The principal groups of bastardy records are:

- a. **the examination** of the pregnant woman by the parish overseer's of the poor. This document usually names the alleged father of the child, who may be unborn at the time of the examination.
- b. **the summons** to the father to appear in respect of an affiliation order and maintenance payments.
- c. **a warrant** for the father to be apprehended. Such warrants usually name the father and mother but not the child, who is often still unborn. The warrant may include details of the place of birth, often the poor house of the parish.
- d. **the Bastardy Bond**. This document recorded the promise of the father to pay for

the maintenance of the child and the lying-in expenses of the mother. It constituted an admission of paternity. The bond was canceled if the child died within three weeks of birth. The Quarter Sessions should be checked for the possible discharge of a man from his bond. Alternatively, an Indemnity Bond would be created if the parent of either the father or mother promised to pay.

If no records are found in the Parish Chest the Quarter Session Records should be examined. If no Bond was produced then the churchwardens would apply to the Quarter Sessions for a court order obliging the father to do his duty. This document is a maintenance Order or Filiation Order. If the father ignored this then the summons would be issued.

Apprenticeship of the Poor

Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor, with the consent of two justices, were empowered to apprentice to a trade or husbandry any child under 16 whose parents they judged not able to maintain him until the age of 24, and 21 or marriage for girls. Apprenticeship to someone in another parish was often no more than a way of getting rid of a pauper child, because apprenticeship conferred settlement after 40 days. In the Overseers and child's parish the master chosen was compelled to receive the child or be fined for refusal. In some parishes he could pay to be excused. Sometimes children were drawn by lottery.

OTHER PAROCHIAL RECORDS

Vestry Minutes

The contents of the vestry minutes vary greatly covering such topics as the allocation of pews, appointment of parish officers, arrangements for medical treatment of parishioners, and records of parish societies and clubs.

Churchwarden Accounts

These accounts generally include details of expenditure on the rebuilding or repair of the church; payments to the parish clergy, payments to servants of the church such as the parish clerk, sexton, bell-ringers and cleaners, payments for bread and wine. Income from rent of pews and other sources may also be recorded.

Parish Lists

These lists may be very diverse in background such as lists of all the inhabitants in the parish at a particular time or participants in a parish function.

Local Militia Lists

Under the 1662 Militia Act all property owners were to provide arms, horses and men in accordance to the size of their property. In 1757 the liability was removed from the individual to the parish. In every parish men were chosen by lot and compelled to serve for three years or to provide 10 pounds for a substitute. The parish chest may contain lists of men eligible for militia service, the substitutes, lists of those actually serving, or certificates of payments.

Parish Charities

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, and throughout the 17C many charities were established in parishes. References to them can be found in many places within the parish records including the parish register itself. The documents may contain lists of donors or recipients. Copies of wills creating the charity may also survive.

ACCESSING THE RECORDS

Family History Catalog. First stop for anyone in North America. Search under name of the parish or town. www.familysearch.org

County Record Office. Contact the county record office in the area you are researching. Ask what records, if any, are available for the parish of interest, plus the availability of any indexes by parish or by record type, e.g. some counties have produced indexes to the settlement records for specific time periods.

Local or County Family History Societies. Join the local or county Family History Society where your ancestors are. Seek indexes, transcripts or copies. Current listing available at: www.genuki.org.uk

Internet. Search by locality and type of record, also for contemporary legal texts

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