



Rural Parochial Records.

By George C. Peachey.

The following are the principal Parochial Records :—

- (1) Registers of Baptisms, Marriages and Burials,
- (2) Accounts of Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor,
- (3) Minutes of Vestry Meetings,
- (4) Title deeds relating to land,
- (5) Tithe-maps and appointments, and
- (6) Inclosure awards.

(1) The spoliation of the religious houses and the consequent cessation of their registers necessitated the issue of certain injunctions by Thomas Cromwell in 1538, whereby the systematic registration of baptisms, marriages and burials was enjoined. By this injunction every parson, vicar or curate was required to enter in a register the date of every wedding, christening and burial within his parish. These entries were to be made on Sundays in the presence of one of the churchwardens, and the register was to be kept in a "sure coffer" with two locks, the key of one remaining with the parson, the other with the churchwardens.*

This injunction was renewed in 1547, and again in 1559.

In 1604 further regulations were issued to the effect that all christenings, weddings and burials that had taken place in each parish since the law was first made to that effect, should be entered, so far as the ancient books could be procured, in a parchment book : the entries were to be made in the presence of, and each page subscribed by the two churchwardens and minister on Sundays, and a third lock was to be provided, the keys of which were to be held by each of them.

*The origin of the transcripts of parochial registers which are at the several Diocesan registries is to be found in the Provincial Constitution of 1597, which required the churchwardens of every parish to transmit at Easter each year a transcript of the parish register for the preceding twelve months. In consequence of the loss of many of the parochial registers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries these transcripts are often the primary authority. But these transcripts were not regularly sent in many instances, and many of those which were so sent have been wantonly destroyed, as will be seen in the cited case of the Sarum Diocesan Registry.

By an Order of 1644, it was required that each parish or chapelry in England and Wales should be provided with a fair register book of vellum, wherein the minister should enter not only the names of children baptised, but also the time of birth and baptism and the names of the parents. The date of death was to be added to the record of burial.

An Ordinance of 1653 committed the custody of the old register books and the duty of entering all future *births*, marriages and burials to persons calling themselves "Parish Registers," who were to be sworn by a justice of the peace. This system came to an end at the Restoration. An Act of 1695 required that all births should be notified to the rector or vicar within five days and be registered by him, so that the local collector might levy the duty thereon, granted to the Crown in 1694 for a term of five years.

Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act, 1753-4, directed that all marriages and banns of marriage should be registered and carefully kept, and the entries of marriage were to be signed by the contracting parties. An Act of 1783 granted to the Crown a stamp duty of threepence on every entry of a burial, marriage, birth or christening, the parson being allowed two shillings in the pound. This Act was repealed in 1794.

Then came Rose's Act of 1812, whereby it was enacted that baptisms, marriages and burials should be registered in separate books, to be prepared by the King's printers on a uniform system.

The registers of baptism were to give the names, the abode and the description of the parents, and the registers of burials were to give the abode and age of the deceased. The registers were to be kept in a dry, well painted iron chest—in some dry safe and secure place. It was also provided that within two months after the end of each year, fair copies of all entries made in parish registers during the previous year, should be made by the rector or vicar on parchment, and by him transmitted to the registrar of the diocese, *who was to cause them to be carefully preserved and arranged, and cause correct alphabetical lists of all persons and places mentioned therein to be made for the public use.*

Parliamentary enquiry as to the success or otherwise of the system hereby inculcated has occurred at intervals. A return of 1831 shows that default in transmitting to the registrar was common, and that the mode in which the transcripts were kept by the registrar was far from satisfactory.

A return of 1833 again illustrates the very unsatisfactory condition of parish registers at that date.

In consequence of this dual default, the Registration Act of 1836 was passed, after which date a general system of registration of births, deaths and marriages was instituted, leaving baptisms and burials to be still registered by the clergy under the Act of 1812.

So much for the bare history of Parish Registers.

Their intrinsic interest is much greater, indeed as an index of the old social life they are unequalled.

The more the pity that they have received so little care in the past. In 1801, of the 11,000 parishes in England and Wales, only 812 registers commenced in 1538, and a return made in 1831 showed that many of these 812 had been lost in the interval. (An extremely valuable inventory of all the registers then existing prior to 1813 is given therein). More than half the parishes were found to have no register prior to the year 1604. What has become of the others? The old vellum leaves have served various purposes. One parish clerk being a tailor, in order to supply himself with measures, had cut out more than sixteen leaves of the register. A curate's wife used the leaves for making kettle-holders. Another who combined with his parish duties the business of grocery, wrapped his wares in the torn-out leaves. As an instance of wilful and malicious mutilation may be mentioned the Register of East Garston, from which have been cut out the entries of marriages from 1564 to 1661, and so determined was the vandal to obliterate every record of a certain marriage that he procured the destruction of the transcripts at Salisbury, leaving but one marriage transcript for the year 1636, in which year the marriage sought to be proved was solemnised. And quite recently parish registers have appeared in certain sale catalogues.

And all this was done in spite of the Marriage Act of 1753, whereby the tampering with, or destruction of, any parish register, was constituted a felony, without benefit of clergy. *And it may be worth noting that this Act is still in force.*

The following are examples of interesting items occurring in various Registers, and note should be taken of any such which may be met with :—

Certificates to go before the King to be touched for "the Evil," which practice was at its zenith during the Stuart dynasty. (Camberwell, Hambledon, Bucks, 1685, Merstham, Surrey, 1684, Registers).

Proclamations of marriages during the Commonwealth.

Marriages solemnised by the Mayor during the Commonwealth.

Marriages solemnised by Military Officers during the Commonwealth (Wartling Reg. 1656).

Tax levied on marriage (Hawstead Reg. 1697).

Fees received for tolling the bell for a corpse passing through the parish on its way to burial in some distant church.

Burials "in woollen" (Chas. ii.).

"Heart" burials.

Burials in gardens, &c. (Toddington Reg. 1658).

"The Sweating Sickness" (Maresfield Reg. 1538, Loughborough Reg. 1551).

"The Pest" or Plague.

"The Fever."

Remedies for various diseases.

Fever (Collingbourne Reg. 1703).

Plague (East Retford Reg.).

Bite of Mad Dog (Swettenham Chesh. Reg. 1704).

Bite of Mad Dog (Sunninghill).

The interest attaching to this latter will excuse its insertion :—

"Six ounces of rue, picked from the stalk and bruised : four ounces of garlic bruised : four ounces of Venice treacle and four ounces of scraping of pewter. These are to be boiled in two quarts of strong ale over a slow fire until reduced to one quart : the liquor then to be strained off and kept close corked in a bottle. Nine spoonfuls warm to a man or woman fasting for seven mornings successively and six to a dog. Apply some of the ingredients warm to the bitten part."

This recipe was taken from Gathorp Church, Lincs., and was hung up in Sunninghill Church.

(2) The earliest Churchwardens' Accounts date from the 14th century (Brightwalton dates from 1481), and since churchwardens shared with overseers the care of the poor, they give numerous interesting details of parish life, e.g., lists of churchwardens and overseers, expenses of keeping the church and church property in repair, lists of briefs collected, notices of bequests to the poor of the parish, the distribution of doles and charities, alms given to vagrants and "foreigners," and often accounts of the visitation of the parish by "the pest," no infrequent visitor in those times. The parish rate-books, very few comparatively of which are extant, give names of occupiers of property and the changes of hands and value it underwent.

(3) Minutes of vestries, all former vestry books, accounts and vouchers of overseers, surveyors of highways and other parish officers, all these by the Vestries Act, 1818, were to be kept by the person appointed by the vestry, and should under the Local Government Act, 1894, have been deposited with the clerk or chairman of the Parish Council. It is the duty of the County Council to enquire into the manner in which the documents under the control of the Parish Council are kept.

(4) "Some parishes possess very ancient conveyances of land and wills relating to benefactions to the Church, to the chantries therein and to local charities."

(5) One copy of every confirmed instrument of apportionment duly sealed, should under the Tithe Act of 1836 have been deposited with the incumbent or church or chapel wardens of the parish, and in some instances, such place of deposit having been found unsafe or inconvenient to the majority of the persons interested therein, by order of the Court of Quarter Sessions some more convenient or secure place of deposit may have been selected.

N.B.—A copy of the apportionment, found or known to be in improper custody may be impounded by order of two Justices.

(6) Two copies of every confirmed enclosure award duly sealed are to be deposited, one with the Clerk of the Peace for the County, the other with the church or chapel wardens of the parish.

Such are the Parochial Records to be found in our villages. They are to be supplemented by certain Episcopal or Diocesan Records which are to be found in the corresponding Episcopal or Diocesan Registries, and which will be described subsequently.

GOOSEY MONASTIC CHEESE FARM.—There was a cell to Abingdon Abbey at Goosey, near Wantage, where the monks had a cheese farm. Part of the building appears to have been incorporated in an ancient farmhouse there, still known as the Abbey Farm, one of the ground-floor rooms having an outer wall of great thickness, in which are two windows, and a door opening into a garden where is an old fish-pond. In a wing of the building there is a bedroom lined with fine panelling, with a large landscape painting over the fireplace. There is said to be a subterranean passage from this house to the church, a small ancient building, and the belief seems to be borne out by the fact that in a house which stands close to the church-yard, between it and the Abbey Farm, the singing in the church is more distinctly heard in the ground-floor room which faces toward the farm than in the room on the church side. All knowledge of its entrance and exit is however lost. There is a corpse-path across the village green and the meadows to Stanford-in-the-Vale, to which Goosey is a chapelry, but the ancient stones on the green have lately been pulled up and a new path made.—Mrs. STEVENSON, Oldfield Balking.