

Civil Registration

Introduction

The ancient system of recording baptisms, marriages and burials in church or chapel register was the only official way of recording a person's birth, marriage or death in England and Wales, before 1837. However, baptism was not compulsory, and with the rise of non-conformity, less babies were being baptised in the local parish church. In fact, the recording of all three events was not universal. By the early 19th century, there was concern that these important events were not being recorded for a significant proportion of the population.

Therefore new legislation was introduced, and on 1st July 1837, the recording of births, marriages and deaths began. The country was divided into Registration Districts, each under the control of a Superintendent Registrar. Each Registration District was divided into a number of smaller sub-districts.

In order to obtain the information which is held in these registers, you have to purchase a certificate. You cannot search the registers yourself. So, it is only for registered births, marriages and deaths from July 1837 that you can purchase a certificate. If a birth, marriage or death was not registered, you cannot obtain a certificate.

When civil registration was first introduced, it was the responsibility of local Registrars to see that births and deaths were registered in their own sub-districts. Each Superintendent Registrar gathered these records from the sub-districts and sent copies to the Registrar General in London, four times a year. This situation lasted until further legislation was introduced in 1874.

Births: note that parents were not bound to give birth information unless requested by the Superintendent Registrar. The percentage of live births which were registered was small at first, especially in crowded urban slums and in isolated rural districts, but increased over the decades. Some parents were not truthful about the date of birth, as they were supposed to pay a fee if the registration took place more than 6 weeks after the birth. Other parents continued to believe that baptism was a legal alternative, and all that was necessary, so they neglected to register their babies at birth. Since these babies were not registered at birth, you cannot obtain a birth certificate for them.

Birth Registrations - Special Notes: Children born before their parents were married should be searched for under both their mother's maiden name, and their father's name - in case the parents were living together under the pretence of having already married. Many illegitimate children were registered with their father's name as a middle name.

Up to 10% of marriages took place after the first or second child was born in the 19th century. From 1837-1874, a mother registering an illegitimate child could name anyone as the father, without his permission, and without him being present at the registration. This situation changed in 1874.

From 1874, the newly introduced Births and Deaths Registration Act made registration compulsory, and the onus for registration of a birth was passed to the PARENTS, or the occupier of the house where a birth took place. Fines could be imposed on parents for late registration.

Marriages: from July 1837, marriages could finally take place in a local register office, instead of a church.

The Church of England, Jews and Quakers could conduct and register their own marriage ceremonies. Other denominations (Methodists, Baptists, Unitarians, etc.) had to apply for their chapels to be licensed to conduct marriages, and could only conduct a ceremony there if a local Registrar was also present, in addition to the minister, to record the events in a Register Office marriage register.

This situation did not change till 1898.

A new type of marriage register was introduced in July 1837, to be completed for all marriage ceremonies. It required more details of bride and groom to be recorded, including the names and occupations of their fathers, if this was known. However a few Church of England ministers objected to the new form of marriage register, and refused to enter all of the additional details, which makes it difficult for today's researchers.

Two copies of the new type of marriage register were to be completed and signed by bride and groom – one was to be kept at the parish church, and the other was to eventually be deposited with the local District Superintendent Registrar.

From 1929, the Marriage Act raised the age of marriage, with consent of parents, to 16 years.

Deaths: from 1874, the responsibility for recording a death was placed on a relation of the deceased. The registration had to be supported by a certificate signed by a doctor, and the death had to be registered within 5 days.

Finding civil registration records

Records of all births, marriages and deaths registered since July 1837 used to be held at two locations – at the local District Register Office where the event was originally recorded, and also at the General Register Office, which was originally located in London. Each local Superintendent Registrar in charge of a District Register Office had gathered these records from the sub-districts and had sent copies to the Registrar General in London, four times a year. This is how the General Register Office compiled its collection of registration records for the whole of England and Wales. The General Register Office moved many years ago to Southport, Merseyside and is still located there.

Both local District Register Offices and the General Register Office used to be able to supply certificates. However in recent years, many of the District Register Offices have closed, or have become Registration Offices which simply register current births, deaths and marriages, and therefore they no longer keep any historic registers. The historic registers have been sent to one local Register Office, which is centrally located, and which issues certificates for all births, marriages and deaths previously registered in the district register offices of that unitary authority or county.

The General Register Office and the local Register Offices therefore each have their own set of independent records and their own indexing systems.

Information about Registration Services in Devon

The historic county of Devon was divided into three separate local authorities in 1998.

Historic registers of birth, marriage and death for the part of Devon still administered by Devon County Council since 1998, are held by Devon Registration Service. See the website at <https://new.devon.gov.uk/registrationservice/>. The Devon Registration Service holds registers for births and deaths and for marriages dating back to July 1837, but not records relating to the areas of Plymouth and Torbay.

Plymouth City Council and Torbay Council are unitary authorities, and since 1998, have not been part of Devon County Council. Each council has responsibility for its own Registration Service and for the historic registers of birth, death and marriage in its own area.

Historic and current registers of birth, marriage and death for Torbay are held at Torbay Register Office. See their website at <http://www.torbay.gov.uk/registrar/> .

Historic and current registers of birth, marriage and death for Plymouth are held at Plymouth Register Office. See their website at <http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/home/birthsmarriagesanddeaths/plymouthregisteroffice>

In England and Wales, the public only has a right of access to the General Register Office indexes of births, marriages and deaths. To obtain information from the registers themselves, you have to buy a certificate.

Obtaining birth, marriage and death certificates

Obtaining certificates from the General Register Office

You may obtain a birth, marriage or death certificate from the General Register Office if you wish. This currently costs less than ordering from one of the three local Register Offices in Devon. If you do not know the exact date and place where the event took place it is best to search the General Register Office indexes to birth, marriage or death first. This index will supply reference details to enable you to order the correct certificate successfully either by telephone, online or by post, even if you do not know the exact date and place where the event took place. For more information on obtaining certificates from the General Register Office, see their website page at <http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/default.asp>

Obtaining birth and death certificates from local Register Offices

If you wish to order a birth or death certificate for a person born in the historic county of Devon from a local Register Office, you firstly have to find out whether their place of birth now falls under Devon, Torbay or Plymouth, and then contact the correct office, as mentioned above. Local Register Offices do not usually have indexes to their registers, so before a search of the records is made locally, you will usually need to provide the following information:

- full name of the person(s) included in the registration
- date of the event including day, month and year
- location of the event, for example, town or village

Obtaining marriage certificates from local Register Offices

Because a registrar had to be present at their chapels during a marriage, the pre-1898 marriages of Methodists, Baptists, Unitarians, etc., will appear in one of the local Register Office marriage registers.

However details of marriages which took place in a parish Church of England will only be available from a local Register Office, if a copy of the marriage register of that parish church has already been filled up, and deposited in that Register Office.

Most local Register Offices, including Devon Register Office, keep marriage records according to the place where the wedding was solemnized, and do not hold any indexes to marriages. They cannot supply a copy certificate from the reference number found in the General Register Office indexes. Unless you can supply the name of the church, chapel or register office, they need to search a number of registers to find any entry. You will therefore need, in these cases, to obtain a marriage certificate through the General Register Office instead.

Obtaining copies of marriage entries from a record office or heritage centre in Devon

For marriages which took place in a church or chapel from July 1837, a photocopy or digital copy of the marriage entry may often be made from the marriage register which was once at the church or chapel – should it have survived. This is not called a ‘certificate’ but is referred to as a marriage register entry. It is the most original version of a marriage entry which you will be able to obtain, and will include the original signatures of bride and groom. It will be less likely to include the transcription errors which sometimes occurred in the quarterly returns made for the General Register Office. Most Church of England marriage registers dating from 1837 are now deposited by law at a local county or city record office or history centre. Some (but not all) marriage registers of other denominations (Methodists, Baptists, Unitarians, etc.) are also at a local county or city record office or history centre, though not all have survived to be deposited. In Devon, some of these original marriage registers are held here at Devon Heritage Centre, or at North Devon Record Office or Plymouth and West Devon Record Office. A few are not deposited, and should still be held at the chapel or church to which they belong.

For a list of the marriage registers held at these three offices, and the dates which they cover, see the **Parish Register List** on the Devon Archives and Local Studies website.

Marriage certificates for Devon marriages performed at a register office, rather than in a church or chapel, can only be purchased from the General Register Office or the local Register Office holding the historic registers for that part of Devon. These registers are not deposited in any of the three archive offices in Devon.

General Register Office Indexes

Information on where to find and search these indexes

General Register Office indexes to birth, marriage and death for England and Wales can be searched on-line through the Ancestry and Find My Past subscription websites. See their websites at <http://www.ancestry.co.uk> and <http://www.findmypast.co.uk>. The indexes can also be found on the free volunteer-run website FreeBMD at <http://www.freebmd.org.uk/>. The indexes on this free website are not as complete as those on the subscription websites, but coverage up to the mid-20th century is good, and each month more entries are gradually being added.

Free access to the above commercial genealogical subscription websites is available at Devon Heritage Centre and at North Devon Record Office on our public access computers. Libraries and research centres in Devon also offer free access to either one or both websites.

For those who prefer to search the General Register Office indexes in microfiche format, it is believed that microfiche can still be found at the following Devon locations:

- Mormon Family History Centre, Wonford Road, Exeter, 01392 250723 See their website page https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Exeter_England_Family_History_Centre
- Devon Family History Society's Tree House Research Centre, King Street, Exeter, 01392 433212 See their website page <http://www.devonfhs.org.uk/treehouse.htm>
- North Devon Athenaeum, Local Studies Centre, Tuly Street, Barnstaple, 01271 388607 See their website <http://www.northdevonathenaeum.org.uk/>
- Mormon Family History Centre, Mannamead Road, Hartley, Plymouth, 01752 668666
- Other main libraries, genealogical research centres and record offices in other counties of England and Wales, and in overseas countries, may also still hold microfiche copies of the General Register Office (GRO) indexes. You can use these to search for references before applying for certificates from the General Register Office at Southport, Merseyside.

An explanation of the information supplied in the indexes

Indexes to Births: The child's surname and first Christian name is given. Sometimes the full middle names are also given, but often only initials of middle names appear. From September

1911, the mother's maiden name is also included in the index. Where a child was not named by the time of registration, it will be indexed under "male" or "female", followed by the surname.

Indexes to Marriages: Husband's and wife's names are not cross-referenced in the earlier original indexes up to December 1911, though online databases may have cross-referenced these, or may allow you to search for a matching spouse. It is otherwise necessary to look up both husband's and wife's names separately in the original indexes, and check that the reference number is the same, to be sure that you have found the correct marriage. From March 1912, the surname of the spouse is included i.e. when you look up the husband's name, you will also find the wife's maiden surname.

Indexes to Deaths: Early death indexes - those from July 1837 to March 1866 - record the name of the deceased only. Indexes from March 1866 to March 1969 also give the deceased's age at death, and indexes from March 1969 also give the date of birth, if it was known by the informant who registered the death.

Marriage Notice Books

After the introduction of civil registration in July 1837, couples could marry in church if they so wished, but they also had the option of marrying in a licensed non-conformist chapel, with the registrar present, or in the register office.

In the case of a marriage in a chapel or the register office, a notice of the couple's intention to marry had to be displayed in the register office for three weeks prior to the wedding and the couple had to marry within three months of the notice being put up. A notice could also be displayed in the register office if the bride and groom were marrying in the parish church but one or both of them lived in a different registration district. One of the parties to the marriage had to reside for at least a week in the registration district before the notice was issued. If the bride and groom lived in different registration districts, the notice had to be displayed in both. The three week period was similar to reading the banns in church in that it gave time for anyone objecting to the marriage to come forward.

The notices were copied up into a register or marriage notice book, to make a permanent record, and objections had to be written in the register next to the relevant notice. The names of bride and groom were recorded, whether they were single or widowed, their occupation, their age and address, the length of time they had lived at that address, the place where the ceremony was to be performed and the registration district and county in which both parties lived.

Marriage notice books from Axminster and Tiverton Registration Districts in Devon were previously deposited in Devon Record Office (now Devon Heritage Centre), and those from Bideford and South Molton Registration Districts were deposited in North Devon Record Office.

Axminster Registration District's Marriage Notice Books dating from 1838 to 1876 were transcribed by Devon Family History Society as part of the Joint Small Projects scheme with the former Devon Record Office. These transcripts are available for purchase through the [Devon Family History Society's Online Shop](http://www.devonfhs.org.uk/shop) in booklet or PDF format. See their website page at <http://www.devonfhs.org.uk/shop> .

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