



Somerset Archive and Record Service

Information Leaflet

Non-Conformist Registers in Somerset

NON-CONFORMIST RECORDS

Registers The Record Office holds registers, or microfilm copies of registers, relating to the following denominations:

- Baptist
- Roman Catholic
- Congregationalist (Independents and United Reformed Church)
- Quakers (Society of Friends)
- 'Free Churches'
- Methodist
- Unitarians

It also has microfilm copies of registers for the following unusual sects:

- Moravian (Bath)
- Countess of Huntingdon (Bath)

In 1837, following a Royal Commission, nonconformists were asked to deposit their registers. As a result the Public Record Office holds approximately nine thousand non-parochial registers. Copies of those relating to Somerset are available on microfilm. The index can be found in the red volume, housed with the nonconformist binders in the searchroom.

A list of nonconformist registers held can be found in the Summary List of Anglican Parish and Nonconformist Registers, produced by the Somerset Record Office, and last updated in 1994. The list is arranged alphabetically by parish, and includes details of the denomination, type of register (baptism, marriage, or burial), covering dates, and whether the register is on microfilm or not.

References for these registers are given in the two black binders labelled 'Nonconformist Registers' in the searchroom.

There is an index to Quaker marriages, 1600-1837, in a blue binder on the library shelves, SR 13D.

Other nonconformist deposits The index cards for NONCONFORMITY under the subject index gives a wide variety of sources, and is arranged alphabetically by denomination.

Lists to the deposits can be found in the three yellow binders in the search room under reference D/N/---.

Roman Catholic deposits See the index cards for ROMAN CATHOLICISM under the subject index.

Roman Catholic deposits (few in number) are referenced under D/RC/---, and can be found at the back of the last yellow nonconformist binder.

Somerset comes under the Diocese of Clifton, who hold the archives of the Western Vicarate. These are predominantly parish records from 1850 and Episcopal correspondence from the time of the Gordon Riots onwards.

The contact address is:

Revd Dr J A Harding
St Bernadette's Presbytery
Wells Road
Whitchurch
Bristol
BS14 9HU

Other sources for nonconformity Quarter Sessions following the Toleration Act of 1689 dissenting congregations were required to register their meeting places. These are found first in the Quarter Sessions records, but later more applications were made directly to the bishop or archdeacon.

Quarter Sessions Rolls (Q/SR) include references to registers of oaths of allegiance, lists of dissenting meeting houses, licences, indictments, petitions and recognizances.

Order books (Q/SO) record case judgements, and can contain presentments for non-attendance at Anglican services, indictments for recusance, registration of meeting houses from 1689, ecclesiastical returns of chapel registration under the terms of the Places of Religious Worship Act (1812), presentments of people holding conventicles contrary to the various statutes of the Clarendon Code, and oaths of allegiance.

Security of the Realm and Religion

(Q/RR) These records relate to predominantly to the various oaths which were sworn, predominantly by nonconformist sympathisers, 1673-1910. The main categories are

- Sacrament certificates Q/RRs
 - Oaths of allegiance Q/RRo
 - Registration of Papist Estates Q/RRp
 - Registration of Jesuits Q/RRj
 - Returns on places of worship Q/RRw
 - Miscellaneous Q/RRz
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Diocesan records Diocesan Act Books (D/D/Ca) may include lists of Roman Catholic recusants as well as lists of charges brought at visitation.

Replies from churchwardens in the visitation articles (D/D/Va) may also contain references to nonconformists within the parish.

Protestant dissenters' meeting house licences, 1736-1852, (D/D/Rm) record those meeting houses registered through the diocese, instead of Quarter Sessions. (These have been given the reference 'Dioc' on the index cards)

Parish records Acts passed in 1695 and 1700 stated that dissenters' births had to be reported to clergy, who were supposed to make entries in their parish registers. This was largely ignored, but some registers include comments relating to dissenters.

T/PH/GR: **Returns of Dissenters' Meeting Houses** for the archdeaconries of

- Bath 1830
 - Taunton 1792-1808, 1809-1852
 - Wells 1817, 1830
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Problems using nonconformist records

People were prepared to travel some distance to attend church meetings, therefore care is needed when

undertaking family history searches.

Nonconformist churches are by their very nature independent and voluntary bodies. This is reflected both in their structure and records. For example, Methodists organised themselves into circuits, each covering several Anglican parishes. Further complications emerged with the various splinter groups, including the Wesleyans, Primitive Methodists (1811), and Bible Christians (1815). The latter were particularly strong in Somerset and merged with other sects to form the United Methodist Church in 1907. This joined the Primitive and Wesleyan Methodists in 1932. Similarly, the church book for a congregation may include the records of the day to day running of the congregation, minutes of meetings and register style entries within the same volume.

Presentments against nonconformists tended to be made predominantly in areas most hostile to alternative denominations, therefore the extent of nonconformity may not be adequately reflected in the records.

[Sources for Nonconformity](#) ▶ [Registers](#) ▶ [Quarter Sessions](#) ▶ [Diocesan records](#) ▶ [Parish records](#) ▶ [Bibliography](#)

Background to the development of nonconformist records

Early nonconformist groups, facing persecution and uncertainty, were often reluctant to create many records. The Quakers are the main exception, but in general few early nonconformist records have survived. The most complete early records to exist relate to Mary Street Particular Baptist Chapel, later Unitarian, Taunton (D/N/tau.mst). These date back to 1716/17, although the chapel was formed in 1647. Other early records survive for Hatch Beauchamp Baptist Church, with minute books dating back to 1742 (D/N/hat.b)

For the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the surviving records generated by the various denominations can be summarised in general terms as registers, minutes of church meetings, records relating to church property and finance, records of church societies, church histories and printed items, including magazines.

Bibliography of useful reference books

The office library has a number of printed books relating to nonconformity. For a full list see under NONCONFORMITY and ROMAN CATHOLICISM in the subject index to the library.

Calamy, Edmund, *An account of the ministers, lecturers, masters and fellows of colleges and schoolmasters who were ejected or silenced after the Restoration in 1660*, (1713), library reference L/1513, OW 8. Pages 573-624 list those ejected in Somerset, with details of their education, beliefs and life, arranged by parish, and indexed by surname. This book was revised by A G Matthews, 1934, and arranged alphabetically by surname, library reference L/2253, OW8.

Dwelly, Edward, *Somerset Non-parochial registers*, (1938), library reference PAM 1579. A list of non-parochial registers housed with the registrar-general, giving details of denomination, type of register (baptism, marriage, burial) and covering dates.

Matthews, A G, Walker revised, *being a revision of John Walker's Sufferings of the Clergy during the Grand Rebellion 1642-60*, (1948), library reference L/648, OW 8. Alphabetical list by county of clergy harassed or ejected during the Civil War and Interregnum.

Mullett, Michael, *Sources for the history of English Nonconformity 1660-1830*, (1991), library reference PAM 1331. A detailed account of the range of sources available for studies of non-conformity, arranged by denomination.

Palgrave-Moore, Patrick, *Understanding the History and Records of Nonconformity*, (3rd edition, 1994). On sale in the Orchard Wyndham Room, price £1.80. Contains a brief background history to the formation of the various sects, and includes useful addresses of organisations holding records.

Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, *An inventory of nonconformist chapels and meeting-houses in South West England*, (1991), library reference L/4076. An illustrated gazetteer of present and former nonconformist chapels, arranged alphabetically by county.

Sheppard, Margaret and Geoffrey, List of Nonconformist places of worship in Somerset in 1887, (1988), library reference PAM 735. Arranged alphabetically by parish, the list includes details of denomination, the district where applicable, and the year the chapel was built.

Steel, J D, National index of parish registers, vol 2: sources for nonconformist genealogy and family history, (1973), library reference L/3692, OW14.

Steel, J D and Samuel, Edgar R, , National index of parish registers, vol 3: sources for Roman Catholic and Jewish genealogy and family history, (1974), library reference L/3693, OW14. Includes details of the history of the various denominations, and the range and content of individual sources, illustrating this with extracts from documents.

Contact addresses for nonconformist records

The main library of nonconformist literature is

Dr Williams Library
14 Gordon Square
London