

**History and Glossary  
of  
Parish Councils**

**By  
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## The History of Parish Councils

**parish** /párrish/ *n.* **1** an area having its own church and clergy. **2** (in full **civil parish**) a district constituted for purposes of local government. **3** the inhabitants of a parish. **4** *US* a county in Louisiana. **parish clerk** an official performing various duties concerned with the church. **parish council** *Brit.* the administrative body in a civil parish. **parish pump** (often *attrib.*) a symbol of a parochial or restricted outlook. **parish register** a book recording christenings, marriages and burials, at a parish church. [ME *parochē*, *parosse* f. OF *parochē*, *paroisse* f. eccl.L *parochia*, *paroechia* f. Gk *paroikia* sojourning f. *paroikos* (as PARA<sup>-1</sup>, *-oikos* -dwelling f. *oikeō* dwell)]

The parish is the smallest unit of ecclesiastical and administrative organization in England. In the 7th and 8th centuries regional churches ('minsters') were founded, staffed by teams of priests who served large 'parochiae' covering the area of perhaps five to 15 later parishes. These were broken up during the 10th to 12th centuries as landowners founded local churches for themselves and their tenants, though it was only in the 12th century that the territories which these served crystallized into a formal parochial system.

1. A district under the religious care of a priest. Parishes in England date from at least the 7th century. Initially they were often coterminous with the estate of a lord, who controlled the appointment of a priest who was sometimes entitled to the ecclesiastical income of the parish, chiefly tithes. Following the Lateran Council (1179), however, the bishops had greater control over the parishes in their dioceses. The creation of new parishes, in response to the growth of population and changes in its distribution, is the responsibility of the Church Commissioners
2. The smallest unit of local government. Parishes became units of civil administration in the 16th century, when they were made responsible for the highways and for administering the poor law. The boundaries of civil and ecclesiastical parishes, at first corresponding, increasingly diverged with the growing complexity of local government, especially in the 19th century. The powers of the parish councils are now limited to such matters as maintaining bus shelters and footpaths. The ancient custom of 'beating the bounds' (or marking the boundaries) on 25 April and the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday before Ascension Day (the Rogation Days) is still practiced in some parishes.

## **Advowson**

The right of presentation to a benefice by a bishop or layman. Lay patronage dates from the 8th century, when laymen began to build churches on their land. Advowsons still exist as property rights tenable by British citizens who are not Roman Catholics.

## **Tithe**

The payment of one-tenth of the earnings or produce of an inhabitant of a parish for the upkeep of the church. Originally voluntary, tithes were first enforced in the mid-10th century, and they became an important item in the income of parish priests (see vicar). The payment of tithes was widely resented and became a political issue during the Interregnum, when Barebones Parliament (1653) sought to abolish them. They were also bitterly resented by the Roman Catholic majority in Ireland and formed one of the grievances of the Whiteboys. A series of Tithe Acts (1836-91) replaced tithes with rent charges dependent on corn prices; these charges were abolished in 1936. Similar acts were later passed for Scotland and Ireland.

## **Church Commissioners**

The body that manages the temporal affairs of the Church of England. Created in 1948 by the amalgamation of the former Ecclesiastical Commissioners (first appointed in 1836) and the commissioners of Queen Anne's Bounty, the Church Commissioners are responsible for the administration of church properties and finances and for the reorganization, when necessary, of parishes.

## **Poor Laws**

The laws designed to provide relief for the poor. An act of 1536 provided relief for the 'impotent poor' but compelled 'sturdy beggars' to work. Relief was funded by voluntary subscription and administered by the parish. In 1552 parish registers of the poor were introduced, and in 1563 and 1597 justices of the peace were given powers to raise compulsory funds. Administration was regularized by the Poor Law Act (1601), which introduced a poor relief rate on property owners. The Act of Settlement (1662) permitted parish overseers to send vagrants back to their native parishes. From 1723 the Workhouse Test Act obliged the poor to enter workhouses to obtain relief, but Gilbert's Act (1782) excluded the able-bodied poor from the workhouse and forced parishes to provide work or outdoor relief for them. After 1795 the Speenhamland system was widely adopted. Increased hardship among agricultural workers and heavy expenditure on outdoor relief in the early 19th century resulted in the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834). The act created 600 unions of parishes, managed by boards of guardians elected by ratepayers. Outdoor relief ceased, all paupers being forced into the workhouse, in which conditions were deliberately harsh. New attitudes to poverty in the 20th century resulted in the introduction of insurance schemes (see national insurance), which provided a comprehensive social security network that replaced the poor laws.

## **Rogation Days**

Days of prayer, and formerly also of fasting, instituted by the Church to appease God's anger at man's transgressions, to ask protection in calamities, and to obtain a good and

bountiful harvest, known in England as "Gang Days" and "Cross Week", and in Germany as *Bittage*, *Bittwoche*, *Kreuzwoche*. The Rogation Days were highly esteemed in England and King Alfred's laws considered a theft committed on these days equal to one committed on Sunday or a higher Church Holy Day. Their celebration continued even to the thirteenth year of Elizabeth, 1571, when one of the ministers of the Established Church inveighed against the Rogation processions, or Gang Days, of Cross Week.

## **History of Parish Registers**

In 1497 Cardinal Ximenes introduced the registration of baptisms to his province of Toledo, then throughout Western Europe. No doubt his aim was to check the growing scandal of wholesale divorces, disguised as decrees of nullity, based on the alleged spiritual kinship contracted at baptism between the baptised and his relatives, and the sponsors and their relatives. How far this notion had gone may be seen from such instances as that of John Hawthorn of Tunbridge, who was sentenced in 1463 to be whipped thrice round church and market for incest, i.e. for marrying as a second wife the god-daughter of his first. On 11 November 1563, the Roman Catholic Church ordered the general keeping of baptismal and marriage registers.

Meanwhile in England, a raft of reforming measures was consolidating the split with Rome and the Reformation. Among these, on 5 September 1538, Thomas Cromwell, the Lord Privy Seal and the king's vicegerent, ordered that every parson, vicar or curate enter in a book every wedding, christening and burial in his parish, with the names of the parties. The entries were to be made each Sunday after the service, in the presence of one of the churchwardens. The parish was to provide a 'sure coffer' with two locks, the parson having custody of one key, and the wardens the other.

These earliest registers were generally made of paper, sometimes even loose sheets. On 25 October 1597 a provincial constitution of Canterbury, approved by the Queen in 1598, ordered that each parish should purchase parchment registers, and that all names from the earlier registers should be copied therein from the beginning, 'but especially since the first year of her Majesty's reign'. The reason why so many registers begin in 1558 is that many transcribers lazily complied with only the last part of the injunction, and omitted to copy the first twenty years of the original register. Register entries were still to be made on Sundays, now in the presence of both churchwardens, and a third lock was to be added to the parish chest, with each warden having the key to his own lock. Also, bishop's transcripts were established.

Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753 (26 Geo. III, c.33) came into force 25 March 1754, and ordered that records should be kept of both banns and marriages, and that these should be 'in proper books of vellum or good and durable paper' to be provided by the churchwardens. The entries were to be signed by the parties and to follow a prescribed form, and the registers were to be 'carefully kept and preserved for public use'. These Hardwicke marriage registers were the first registers to consist of bound volumes of printed forms. Until then, baptisms, marriages and burials usually used the same volume, sometimes each using separate pages, sometimes all mixed in together. Now, however, that register carried on with baptisms and burials alone.

George Rose's Act of 1812, 'An Act for the better regulating and preserving Parish and other Registers of Birth, Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials, in England' (52 Geo. III, c.146) was passed 28 July 1812, and stated that 'amending the Manner and Form of keeping and of preserving Registers of Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials of His Majesty's Subjects in the several Parishes and Places in England, will greatly facilitate the Proof of Pedigrees of Persons claiming to be entitled to Real or Personal Estates, and otherwise of great public Benefit and Advantage', and enacted that separate register books should be kept for baptisms, marriages and burials from 31 Dec. 1812. The king's printer was to supply each parish with a copy of the Act and three books printed on parchment or durable paper, each printed in conformity with the standard layout and numbered entries laid down by the Act.

As part of the 1831 census, enquiries were made of clergymen of the pre-1813 parish registers. The returns are now in the PRO (HO 71), and sometimes give reasons for recent losses of registers.

A select committee reported on the 1831 returns in 1833, publishing an Abstract of the answers and returns made pursuant to an Act ... for taking an Account of the Population of Great Britain... Parish Register Abstract. The result of the report was further legislation in 1836, the Marriage Act (6&7 Will. IV, c.85) and the Births and Deaths Registration Act (6&7 Will. IV, c.86). These Acts came into force on 1 July 1837, and established the present system of civil registration.

## **Bishops Transcripts**

The Bishop's transcripts (BT) were established in the Church of England by a constitution of 1597, codified by a canon of 1603. They are an annual return to the bishop of a copy of the parish register entries for the proceeding year.

The dates covered by the BTs each year vary from parish to parish before 1812. Since then, they tended to standardise on 1 January to 31 December. Most parishes ceased sending marriages with their transcripts after July 1837.

Further reading

Cox, Parish Registers of England (1910)  
Tate, The Parish Chest (1951)