

Beyond Parish Registers: Tracing your Anglican Ancestors in England

Dr Nicholas Dixon

Website: drnicholasdixon.com

RootsTech webinar, Friday 1st March 2024

Introduction

The Church of England has been the established state church in England since the sixteenth century, when it seceded from the Roman Catholic Church. The majority of the population of England belonged to this church until recent times. They can be found in its registers of baptisms, marriages and burials. However, genealogists researching Anglican ancestors can find their ancestors in a variety of other records.

Confirmation

Anglicans were confirmed by a bishop when they were able to recite a catechism of the Church's beliefs. Confirmation records are not as complete as parish registers, but an increasing number are being digitised and are available to view on Ancestry:

Dorset, 1850-1921

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/2266/>

Gloucestershire, 1834-1913

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/5137/>

Harborne, Birmingham, 1915-1931

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/4993/>

Lancashire, 1838-1922

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/2578/>

Liverpool, 1887-1921

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/2205/>

London, 1838-1923

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/1625/>

Northamptonshire, 1870-1911

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/9202/>

Somerset, 1843-1913

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/61012/>

West Yorkshire, 1859-1875, 1901-1915

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/2255/>

Receiving communion

Anglicans generally had the opportunity to receive communion three or four times a year until the twentieth century. Lists were kept of communicants that can be found among parish records. Receiving communion was a qualification for civil office from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, recorded at the quarter sessions.

Search for 'list of communicants' and 'sacrament certificates' in Discovery catalogue:

<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

Parish officials

Anglican churches appointed a variety of lay officers, depending on their size. These included the churchwardens, parish clerks, sextons, pew openers, bell ringers and musicians. Parish vestries, which were also responsible for local government, were selected from amongst the inhabitants. Accounts and vestry minutes often survive.

For accounts and vestry records, search by place in FamilySearch's online catalogue:

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>

Anglican schools

The provision of education was a major function of the Church of England. Clergy founded schools to educate the poor according to Anglican beliefs. Sunday schools were also established as well as Anglican public schools for more affluent families. Additionally, many Church of England clergymen founded their own private schools.

Anglican school admission registers for 1870-1914 can be searched on Findmypast:

<https://search.findmypast.co.uk/search-world-records/national-school-admission-registers-and-log-books-1870-1914>

Anglican societies

Many societies were founded by Anglicans to further their various aims. Records of such societies reveal much about activities of individual believers. Examples include:

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK)

<https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/departments/archives-modern-and-medieval-manuscripts-and-university-archives-16>

United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (USPG)

<https://archives.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/repositories/2/resources/1576>

National Society for Promoting Religious Education

<https://archives.lambethpalacelibrary.org.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=NS&pos=64>

Church Mission Society

<https://www.calmview.bham.ac.uk/Record.aspx?src=Catalog&id=XCMS>

Church Union

<https://archives.lambethpalacelibrary.org.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=CU>

Mothers' Union

<https://archives.lambethpalacelibrary.org.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=MU>

Church Lads' and Church Girls' Brigade

<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/53d28a75-1819-481f-9b21-39e8875594fc>

Anglican publications

The literature produced by the Church of England is profuse and can be found in libraries across the world. It includes newspapers, periodicals, parish magazines, sermons, tracts and annual reports of the societies. These websites are relevant:

The Church Times (1863-present)

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/archive>

Google Books

<https://books.google.co.uk/>

Internet Archive

<https://archive.org/>

Several parish magazines have been digitised by the Society of Genealogists:

<https://www.sog.org.uk/research-hub/our-collections>

Newspapers

Anglican activities were widely reported in both local and national newspapers, which are extensively available online. The following are digitised newspapers:

The British Newspaper Archive

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>

The Burney Collection

<https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/moira-goff-burney-newspapers-british-library>

The Times Digital Archive

<https://www.gale.com/intl/c/the-times-digital-archive>

The Telegraph Historical Archive

<https://www.gale.com/intl/c/the-telegraph-historical-archive>

Many ecclesiastical appointments are recorded in the *London Gazette*:

<https://www.thegazette.co.uk/>

The Clergy

The clergy of the Church of England are well documented. Most of them attended Oxford or Cambridge universities before the twentieth century. There are a number of online resources that should assist researchers in finding information about them:

Clergy of the Church of England Database 1540-1835

<https://theclergydatabase.org.uk/>

Alumni Oxonienses 1500-1714

<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/alumni-oxon/1500-1714>

Alumni Oxonienses 1715-1886

<https://archive.org/details/alumnioxonienses01univuoft/page/n7/mode/2up>

<https://archive.org/details/alumnioxonienses02univuoft/page/n7/mode/2up>

<https://archive.org/details/AlumniOxoniensesTheMembersOfTheUniversityOfOxford1715-1886Their/page/n9/mode/2up>

<https://archive.org/details/alumnioxonienses04univuoft/page/n5/mode/2up>

A Cambridge Alumni Database

<https://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/>

Crockford's Clerical Directory (1858-present)

<https://www.crockford.org.uk/faq/pre-1968-data>

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/1548/>

Fasti Ecclesiae Anglicanae

<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/search/series/fasti-ecclesiae>

Main repositories

Records relating to the Church of England and its members are widely dispersed but mostly accessible to researchers in archives. These repositories are important:

Lambeth Palace Library

<https://www.lambethpalacelibrary.info/>

Borthwick Institute for Archives

<https://www.york.ac.uk/borthwick/>

Diocesan archives

<https://religiousarchivesgroup.org.uk/advice/directory/christianity/anglican/>

Cathedral libraries and archives

<https://cathedrallibrariesandarchives.wordpress.com/ecclesiastical-libraries-and-archives/>

Bodleian Libraries special collections

<https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/libraries/weston/special-collections>

Cambridge University Library special collections

<https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/special-collections>

Durham University Library special collections

<https://www.durham.ac.uk/departments/library/archives-and-special-collections/>

Further reading

W. M. Jacob, *Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Nigel Yates, *Buildings, Faith, and Worship: The Liturgical Arrangement of Anglican Churches, 1600-1900* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

P. Towey, *My Ancestor was an Anglican Clergyman* (Society of Genealogists, 2006).

W. M. Jacob, *The Clerical Profession in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1680-1840* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

W. E. Tate, *The Parish Chest* (Phillimore, 2011).

Stuart Raymond, *Tracing your Church of England Ancestors: A Guide for Family and Local Historians* (Pen & Sword, 2017).

Nicholas Dixon, 'The Activity and Influence of the Established Church in England, c. 1800-1837' (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2018). Available online here: <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.41006>