

Searching Parish Registers

The census records and birth, marriage and death indexes/certificates typically allow you to trace your family tree back to the beginning of the 19th Century. To go back further you will need to use parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials.

Before starting to use online parish registers you need to know about some key differences to other records used so far in this series:

- Survival of parish registers is very variable. The further back in time you go, the more registers have been lost.
- The information in the parish registers changed with time, parish, diocese and vicar. Generally, it gets more limited the further back you go – there may just be a name.
- Readability of early (and not so early) records can be poor, both in terms of the quality of document and the style of handwriting.
- Not all parish registers are available online.
- There is no single online database which covers all Anglican parish registers. FamilySearch is generally the most comprehensive but often only contains basic index information.
- Online sources can be an index to the record or an image of the original register. The latter is a copy of original document and so is a primary source and the best data you will find.
- Not all ancestors were part of the Church of England and so they may not appear in Anglican parish registers.

See Annex 1 for a history of parish registers and some key dates which affect their survival, content and format.

[Using online parish register information in your research.](#)

Before starting your search in the parish registers you need to determine which system has the best coverage for the parishes of interest. FamilySearch, which is free, has good coverage of records, particularly baptisms, in the North East and so this may be the place to start for most.

It is worth remembering that parish registers did not stop with the start of civil registration in 1837 and they provide a complementary source alongside birth, marriage and death certificates and census records. Therefore, take your family tree and look for the baptism, marriage and burial records for your ancestors. This will allow you to get familiar with the sources which cover your areas of interest and to add some data to your tree.

Note: Typically, there will only be a few days between death and burial but there can be a significant gap – even years – between birth and baptism. It was not unusual for families to wait until there were several children to be baptised and have them christened at the same – don't assume that multiple baptisms mean a multiple birth!

Once you have reviewed your existing tree and added any additional information then it is time to start working backwards, starting with the ancestors who were born before the start of civil registration but for whom you have data from later records.

Robert Bryson

Robert was my 4x-Great-Grandfather. From the census records I knew that his parents were Richard and Eleanor Bryson and that he was born in Cullercoats in ca. 1836. His baptism record in FamilySearch shows that he was baptised on the 14 February 1836. A search for Tynemouth baptisms for Bryson babies with parents Eleanor and Richard gives the baptisms of Robert's siblings. These include Margaret Bryson, baptised 20 April 1834 and buried 20 December 1835. As Margaret did not live until the 1841 censuses these records are possibly the only evidence of her short life.

You can then work backwards in time looking for the baptisms, marriages and burials of your ancestors and growing your family tree.

Richard Bryson

FamilySearch shows that Richard (my 5x-Great-Grandfather) married Eleanor Walker at Christ Church, Tynemouth on the 5 June 1824. This date coincides well with the baptism of their eldest daughter, Elizabeth, on the 27 February 1825. From census records, Richard was born ca. 1798. FamilySearch gives Richard Bryson, born 19 April 1798, baptised 13 May 1798, at Tynemouth. Richard's parents were Robert Byron and his wife, Elizabeth Smith.

Where to find parish registers online

There is now a lot of information from parish registers available online.

Websites for accessing the parish registers include:

Website	Cost	
www.FreeReg.org.uk	Free.	Sister site to FreeBMD. Transcript only
www.FamilySearch.org	Free	Transcripts only Additional information including microfilm of the original registers may be available via Family History Centers.
www.Ancestry.co.uk	££	Transcript and images
www.FindMyPast.co.uk	££	Transcript and images
www.TheGenealogist.co.uk	££	Transcript and images
www.DurhamRecordsOnline.com	££	Transcript only. Covers Durham and Northumberland.

For each website you will need to check what data is available as none is complete and the registers available on each will be different. For example, FindMyPast includes transcripts of parish registers for Northumberland and

Durham but Ancestry doesn't, whereas Ancestry has images for registers for my home county of Derbyshire whilst FindMyPast only has transcripts.

It is also always worth using Google or another search engine to see what online resources are available for the county or place of interest. For example, the [on-line parish clerks project](#) has links to a number of county indexing projects.

If you don't have a computer, you may be able to access the free sites at your local library. Many libraries and CROs also have Ancestry subscriptions which you can use for free on their premises.

Note: Family History Centers are branches of the Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, the producers of FamilySearch. They are free to use, open to all and are available across the globe. The following link can be used to find your nearest Center:

<https://www.familysearch.org/locations/>

Searching parish registers online:

As the information in parish registers and their indexes is very limited you will need to search these records with only basic information:

- Surname
- Forename
- An approximate year for the baptism, marriage or burial.
 - Always use a range as this data can be inaccurate.
- Parish

Once you have found a relevant record you can see what type of indexing information has been included and refine your search accordingly.

- FamilySearch records each come from a specific indexing batch. For example, the entry for Robert Bryson is from C15597-5. Searches can be restricted to within a specific batch – all records from the same parish at around the same time.
- Searching for a surname within a batch can be a way to identify siblings or families with the same surname, who may be related.

Dade or Barrington-style registers

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries a number of styles of parish register were introduced which included a significant amount of additional information. For example, in a baptism record the dates of both birth and baptism were included. Other information which might appear was details of the child's grandparents and their position in the family. Burials could include information on the deceased's age, parents and cause of death.

Finding such a register can be a real bonus and, fortunately, they are relatively common in North East England, at least for a short period.

A typical baptism entry for such a register is:

- Robert Robson. 3rd son of Robert Robson (yeoman, native of Ford) by his wife Anne formerly Gordon (native of Gosforth, daughter of John Gordon). Born 20 April 1800. Baptised 13 May 1800. St. Andrew, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

The benefit of these registers to family historians are obvious, although as always one must be alert to the possibility of errors. The numbering of the children, in particular, can be problematic.

These registers were abolished in 1813, a casualty of Rose's Act – see Annex 1.

Bishop's Transcripts

Bishop's Transcripts are copies of the registers sent annually to the diocese. These provide a "back up" copy – if the original register doesn't survive then perhaps the Bishop's Transcript will.

Bishop's Transcripts will normally be found at the Diocesan record office. This is often, but not always, the same as the county record office. For example, the record office for the Durham Diocese, which originally covered all of Northumberland and County Durham together with parts of Cumbria and Yorkshire, is the University of Durham Special Collections rather than either the Northumberland or Durham county record office.

There are images of a large number of Bishop's Transcripts from the Diocese of Durham available via FamilySearch¹. These records are not searchable; it is only possible to browse through the images.

It should also be noted that the Bishop's Transcripts are copies so liable to the same human errors as when any copy is made. However, they were made within a year of the original register and by people familiar with local names for people and places and so are less liable to errors due to poor legibility and unfamiliarity with names than modern indexes.

Hints and Tips

- Don't just rely on indexes – check the original record where possible.
 - North East parish registers have been indexed separately by multiple sources. If these sources agree then there is a good chance that the index is correct.
- If you can't find or read the original register look for a Bishop's Transcript.
- "of this parish". This is phrase which is often seen in registers to describe the participants in a marriage.
 - It doesn't mean that a person was born in that parish – only that they had been there long enough to qualify to marry there. This could be as little as a few weeks.
- It was traditional for a couple to marry in the parish of the bride, however this was not followed with any great rigour.
- There could be a significant period – even years - between birth and baptism.
 - People could "save up" their children and have several baptised at once.
- People did not always have their children baptised in the parish where they lived.
 - A woman might return to her parents' home to give birth to her first child and it could be baptised there rather than in the parish where the couple lived.
 - Couples could return to parishes to which they had family ties to have their children baptised.
- People moved around a lot more that might be supposed, resulting in children being baptised in a range of different parishes.
- People were usually buried very quickly after death. Consequently, people were buried where they died and, if they were away from home, were not generally returned to their home or ancestral parish for burial.
- Don't assume
 - That people with the surname were the same family.
 - That people were born in the parish where they lived.
 - That different spellings meant different people – names were generally spelt phonetically and subject to change according to the writer.
 - That people were part of the Church of England
 - Many people were non-conformist protestants or Roman Catholics
- Between 1754 and 1837 the only place for a legally recognised marriage to take place was in an Anglican Church by banns or licence.
 - The only exceptions to this were Jews and Quakers.

¹ <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-DZ7S-HZ4?i=159&wc=9K53-SP8%3A13617901%2C30809801%2C30809802%3Fcc%3D1309819&cc=1309819>

- If you can find a wedding but no baptisms of children in the period afterwards, it could mean that the couple were non-conformists.
- Many non-conformists did not have their own burial grounds so members had to be buried in the local Anglican churchyard.
 - Sometimes entries for these people would be annotated in the register.
- People were less politically correct than today – terms such as “bastard” and “base-born” are used to describe children born out of wedlock.
- Try and get three pieces of information to support any conclusion – although the further back you go the harder this can be...
- Watch out for “double-dating”. Before 1 January 1752 the new year started on the 25 March and the convention is that before that time dates for 1 January-24 March are given with two years – old style and current style. For example: 7 March 1694/5. This date would be 7 March 1695 according to current usage but would have been 7 March 1694 at the time.
 - Online indexes only show one year – sometimes it is unclear which convention is being followed. This can lead to some odd effects – including children supposedly buried before they were born.
 - See Annex 2 for further information.

Disclaimer: This document is intended as a guide to get you started with researching your family history. It is not intended to be comprehensive and Cameo Family History does not accept responsibility for errors and omissions.

Annex 1 - The history of parish registers

When using parish registers for family history research there are a number of key dates which should be born in mind:

1538

During in reign of King Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell ordered the clergy of each parish to keep a record of all weddings, christenings and burials.

Few records survive from this early date – and any that do can be very hard to read!

1597

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the 1538 order was restated and this time it was specified that the records were to be kept on parchment, a more resilient material than paper. Records from the start of Elizabeth's reign (1558) were ordered to be copied on to parchment so many parish registers start from this date.

This 1597 order also included requirement for "Bishop's Transcripts". These were copies of the registers sent annually to the diocese. These provide a "back up" copy – if the original register doesn't survive then perhaps the Bishop's Transcript will.

The content of these early registers can be very brief – often just a name and date was included. Women could be identified as "wife of" or "widow of" rather than by their forenames. Baptisms often only included the name of the father, marriages just the names of the bride and groom, and burials only gave the name of the deceased.

Early registers were in Latin.

The Commonwealth Gap – ca. 1642-1660

This is the period of the English Civil War and the Commonwealth/Protectorate which followed. As might be expected, record keeping during this period was not a priority. This often led to a gap in the records.

In 1653 the keeping of these records was taken out of the hands of the church and given to civil officers known as "Parish Registers". These Registers were to keep records of births, (not baptisms), marriages and deaths (not burials). From 29 September 1653 a marriage could only be legally made before a Justice of the Peace rather than in a church.

Sometimes the Registers continued to use the old parish registers for their records however many of the records for this period no longer exist.

1660

With the restoration of King Charles II the responsibility for keeping baptism, marriage and burial records returned to the Church of England. All marriages made before Justices of the Peace were confirmed as legitimate.

Sometimes events which happened during the Gap were retrospectively added to the registers in 1660 or later.

25 March 1754 – Hardwicke's Marriage Act

Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753 came into force on this date.

Under this Act, with the exception of Jews and Quakers, the only legally recognised marriages were those carried out in an Anglican church by banns or licence. A specific format for register entries was also mandated. This included the names of the witnesses but not details of the parents of the bride and groom. Records of the banns were also required to be kept and these may also survive.

Hardwicke's Act mean that Roman Catholics and Protestant non-conformists had to marry in an Anglican church if their children were not to be considered illegitimate. Hence, marriages of these ancestors can often be found in Church of England registers.

1813 – Rose’s Act

This introduced standardised formats and content for Anglican parish registers as follows:

Baptism:

- Date of baptism
- Name of child
- Mother and father’s names
- Place of residence
- Father’s occupation

Marriage:

- Date of marriage
- Name of groom
- Age of groom
- Occupation of groom
- Residence at time of marriage
- Father’s name
- Father’s occupation
- Name of bride
- Age of bride
- Occupation of bride
- Residence at time of marriage
- Father’s name
- Father’s occupation
- Names of two witnesses

Burial:

- Name of deceased
- Place of residence
- Date of burial
- Age

Whilst in many ways this was a positive step, it also meant that some of the additional (and very useful) information often included previously by clergymen was now omitted.

1 July 1837 – Civil Registration

The keeping of parish registers did not stop because of the introduction of civil registration. This practice continues to this day and can provide an alternative source of information which can be cheaper than paying for the certificates.

The introduction of civil registration also allowed legally recognised marriages to take place outside of the Church of England. This could now take place in register offices and Roman Catholic and non-conformist Protestant churches.

Annex 2 – The Julian Calendar and Double Dating

We are all familiar with the Gregorian Calendar in which the year starts on the 1 January and ends on 31 December. However, before the introduction of this calendar, the Julian calendar was in use. In this case the year started on the 25 March and ended on the 24 March.

In England the switch to the Gregorian Calendar was made in 1751. That year began on the 25 March and ended on the 31 December.

1752 began on the 1 January and ended on the 31 December and the 11 days 3-13 September were omitted making a year of just 355 days. This was to bring the year in line with the Continent.

Thus, from 1751 and earlier, dates given as 1 January to 24 March would actually be considered to be a year later under the modern system. Thus, these dates are often described as, for example, 7 March 1748/49 – 1748 under the Julian Calendar and 1749 under the modern, Gregorian, one.

Other countries made the switch from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar at different times. For example, Scotland made the change to start the year on the 1 January in 1600. This must have been confusing for those people along the England/Scotland border!