

Non-Conformist Registers

Until the time of Henry VIII and the Reformation, virtually everyone in England and Wales was Catholic. After then everyone was supposed to be Anglican but in reality there were always people who didn't conform to the established church, either openly or in secret.

Each group left different records depending on their beliefs and practices and how openly they were able to practice their faith. As tolerance of different religious groups waxed and waned with time and the changing political climate then so did the level of records which were kept.

Some Different Non-Conformist Groups

Baptists

Date founded: 1612

Baptists practice adult rather than infant baptism. Sometimes birth registers were also kept.

Congregationalists, Independents and Presbyterians

Date founded: 16th Century. Prominent during the English Civil War.

These were closely related groups which have been through various mergers, splits and restructurings.

In 1972 the Presbyterian Church of England and the Congregational Church in England and Wales merged to form the United Reformed Church.

Many current Presbyterian churches have their roots in Scottish Presbyterianism.

Jews

Date founded: Not applicable

Researching Jewish ancestry is a specialised field not covered in this article. Records are often with the synagogue or, if lodged with a County Record Office, only available to view with the consent of the depositor.

Note: Jews were one of the two groups exempt from the requirements of Hardwicke's Act that marriages had to take place in an Anglican church.

Methodists

Date founded: 1740

Methodism quickly split into a number of different groups and over the years these have merged and split again. This fragmentation meant that it was not unusual for there to be more than one Methodist chapel even in quite small communities. This has left a range of different records which must be checked.

The earliest Methodist registers are by Circuit rather than by individual chapel so these need to be included when reviewing Methodist records.

Quakers (The Society of Friends)

Date founded: ca. 1648.

Quakers did not practice baptism but did record births. They also typically had their own burials grounds.

Quakers were one of the two groups exempt from the requirements of Hardwicke's Act that required marriages to take place in an Anglican church.

Quakers usually kept excellent records and when they surrendered their registers (now in RG6 at The National Archives and available online via subscription websites) they frequently kept local summaries known as digests. These may now be at the local county record office along with the minute books for the different meetings around which Quaker practices were structured.

For an example of an early Quaker family see "The Hoppers of Iveston": <https://cameofamilyhistory.com/the-hoppers-of-iveston/>

Roman Catholics

Date founded: Not applicable

Following the Reformation under Henry VIII, apart from some short periods of respite, Roman Catholics were persecuted in England and Wales until the end of the 18th Century. Records during this period were rarely kept by Catholics, for obvious reasons.

Most Catholics were at least married and buried in the Anglican church – from 1754 to 1837 they were subject to Hardwicke's Marriage Act – so they will appear in those registers.

Records of Catholics from this early period will typically be those of the State and Courts administering the regulations by which Catholics (and other Non-Conformists) were controlled.

Roman Catholic registers typically start after the penal period – typically 19th Century. However, Northumberland has some particularly early registers – the earliest being baptism registers for Woodhead for 1644-1795.

Catholic registers were kept in Latin until relatively recently – into the 20th Century.

Identifying Non-Conformist Ancestors

From the 25 March 1754 until the start of civil registration in July 1837, a legally recognised marriage in England and Wales had to take place in an Anglican church after banns or with a licence. The only exceptions to this were the marriages of Jews and Quakers. Similarly, many Non-Conformist groups did not have their own burial grounds, in which case the only place for members to be buried was the local parish church yard.

Thus, marriages of Non-Conformist Ancestors will generally appear in the Church of England Registers. However, if a marriage is not accompanied by baptisms and, possibly, burials, this is often a sign of non-conformity.

Some people moved regularly between the Established Church and the various Non-Conformist churches so a gap in baptisms in the parish registers could indicate that a family switched to a different church for a while.

Not all moves between churches were a matter of belief, but could be a matter of geography. Sometimes people would walk miles to attend a service of their choosing, others would just attend the nearest church or chapel for the sake of convenience.

Not all members of the household were necessarily of the same religion – at least on paper. For example, during the penal period, the male head of the house would conform (at least publically) in order to avoid severe penalties whereas his wife and children could be Roman Catholic.

Locating Non-Conformist Registers

Non-Conformist registers will typically be held at the County Record Office. Each of the North East Archives has one or more guidance documents on their Non-Conformist holdings which should be consulted for information.

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| Durham | Non-Conformist Church Registers |
| Northumberland | Methodist Registers Presbyterian and Congregational Registers Roman Catholic Registers |
| Tyne & Wear | Link Methodist Registers Records of the Jewish community Registers of other denominations Roman Catholic Registers |

You should also check the online catalogues of the various record offices for any registers of denominations not covered by these leaflets.

Online Sources

Overall, online access to Non-Conformist registers is more fragmented than to Anglican Registers. You will need to search the various sites and try Google to see if any records of interest are available online.

The various subscription sites provide online access to some Non-Conformist Registers.

In 1837 and 1857 many Non-Conformist registers were collected by the state as part of a process to officially recognise these records – before civil registration parish records served the same function as birth, marriage and death certificates but some people refused to accept anything other than those from Anglican churches. These records are now held at the National Archives and are available online via FindMyPast and TheGenealogist. Other, more local collections may be available, for example, FindMyPast has a collection of over 6000 North Yorkshire Non-Conformist baptisms.

FamilySearch also includes records from some Non-Conformist churches.

Hint & Tips

- If ancestors disappear from the Anglican parish registers for a while, consider whether they may have switched to a Non-Conformist church or chapel.
- If you only see marriages in Anglican registers but not baptisms or burials, this is a strong hit of a Non-Conformist family.
- People may have changed denomination to that of their spouse when they married.
- Check the information on the County Record Office website to see which Non-Conformist groups were prevalent in the area where your ancestors lived.
- Cities and coastal towns had immigrants and so may have had churches of more unusual denominations. For example, Tyne & Wear has baptism registers for a Swedenborgian church for 1808-1837.
- Some Non-Conformist churches stopped keeping records when civil registration started in July 1837 as they felt it was no longer necessary.
- If the registers are not with the local County Record Office, they may be at The National Archive or still held by the church.
 - Use the [Discovery Catalogue](#) to locate “missing” records
- If your ancestors had a long association with a particular Non-Conformist group, then you should consider reading a specialist book on their records and archives.
- There are a range of specialist collections and archives dedicated to various Non-Conformist groups, for example:
 - The Methodist Archives and Research Centre, University of Manchester
 - The Library of the Society of Friends, Quaker House, London

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.