

Diocese of Bath and Wells Records

Introduction

The Diocesan collection contains records going back to 1309. It is one of the largest and most important collections held in the Somerset Heritage Centre, though many items are extremely fragile.

The collection contains the administrative records of the diocese, the area the bishop of Bath and Wells had ecclesiastical jurisdiction over. The diocese was set up in 909 and covers almost exactly the same area as the pre-1974 county of Somerset.

Bishops' Registers (D\D\Breg)

The earliest surviving register is that of Bishop John Drokenford, from 1309 to 1329. After that, the registers survive in an almost unbroken series. The registers are chronological records of the bishops' main administrative decisions. In the medieval period they contain entries about:

- the ordination and appointment of clergy
- the election of heads of religious houses
- visitations
- the consecration and patronage of churches
- granting of licenses to celebrate masses
- a wide variety of other business

The later registers tend to be mainly about the ordination and appointment of clergy.

The registers have been published for the period 1309 to 1559 as volumes of the Somerset Record Society. The early registers are in Latin.

Records about visitation

Visitation was the process the bishop and his associates used to periodically seek to enforce ecclesiastical discipline. Allegations of immorality, disrepair of churches, improper conduct of services and a wide variety of other matters were 'presented' during the visitation. The records include:

- **The Act Books** of the diocesan courts (D\D\Ca)
- **Clergy lists** (D\D\Vc), From about 1530 to 1879, which list the names of parish priests
- **Visitation Articles** (D\D\Va), 1840 to 1901, which are the replies from churchwardens on the state of the church and parish
- **Visitation Presentments** (D\D\Vp), 1818 to 1879, which are the churchwardens' returns on the annual visitations

Records of Ecclesiastical Courts

Church courts dealt with allegations about the disrepair of churches, failures of church attendance and the improper conduct of services, as well as with the correction of moral offences. The courts also heard disputes between individuals relating to defamation, tithe payments, marriage, probate and other matters. The records include:

- **The Act Books** (D\D\Ca), 1458 to 1917, these are in Latin until 1733 and are usually arranged by area
- **Deposition Books** (D\D\Cd), 1530 to 1754, recording evidence of witnesses called to testify. These are mostly in English
- **Papers in causes** (D\D\Cp), these contain formal papers, depositions and other documents. They survive best for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

The ordination, appointment and service of clergy

The records include:

- **Bishops' Registers** (D\D\Breg) – please see above;
- **Ordination papers** (D\D\Bo), 1697 to 1837, including testimonials, baptismal extracts and nominations of curates. (There is a card index in the Research Room). We also have 16 boxes of un-indexed ordination papers, 1874 to 1973, arranged by date, then alphabetical (ref: acc. G/2706, D/D/*); please ask staff for more information.
- **Presentations** (D\D\Bp), c. 1550-1973, which are written requests from the patron of a living to the bishop to institute a priest to a vacant benefice. (A card index is available in the searchroom.)
- **Subscription Books** (D\D\Bs), 1661-1903, recording clerics' public assent to Church of England doctrine.
- Papers in cases brought under the **Clergy Discipline Act** (D\D\Bd), 1844-1921.
- **Benefice Returns** (D\D\Rb), 1815-1837.

The Building and Repair of Churches

The records include:

- **Bishops' Registers** (D\D\Breg), which detail the consecration of churches.
- **Consistory Court Act Books** (D\D\Ca) provide information on the repair and furnishing of churches.
- **Faculty papers** (D\D\Cf), from 1760, provide information and plans for many church building and restoration projects.
- **Inventories** of church contents exist for 1907-1966 (D\D\ Ri).

Parsonage Houses and Glebe Land

The records include:

- **Mortgages** for the building of parsonage houses, 1780-1971 (D\D\Bbm).
- **Orders** for the repair of parsonage houses, 1872-1923 (D\D\Bbo).
- **Glebe terriers** (D\D\Rg), 1571-1693, which usually include a description of the parsonage house and the glebe land in a parish.

Probate Records

See the separate leaflet on *Wills* for details on Somerset wills.

Other records include:

- Probate and Administration Acts are recorded in the **License Books** (D\D\OI), 1558-1850.
- **Administrator's accounts** (D\D\Cta) which record the expenses of administering a deceased person's estate. These survive from the late 16th century to the early 18th century.

Licenses

The Bishop exercised miscellaneous licensing functions. These included:

- **Marriage licenses** (D\D\Cm). These are from 1574 and were issued to couples who did not want the publicity or delay involved in marrying by banns
- **Protestant Dissenters' Meeting-House Licenses**, (D\D\Rm), 1736 to 1852
- **Licenses for Schoolmasters, Midwives and Surgeons**. You can find these in the License Books (D\D\OI)

Records of Peculiars (D\D\P)

'Peculiars' were places in the diocese that were exempt from the bishop's jurisdiction for various reasons. The records date from 1662 and tend to resemble the records for the rest of the diocese.

Miscellaneous records collected for registration purposes

- **Bishops' Transcripts** (D\D\Rr). From 1598 until about 1820 transcripts of each year's parish register entries were sent to the bishop. They often fill in gaps in the parish registers and are available on microfiche in the Searchroom
- **Tithe Maps and Apportionments** (D\D\Rt). These were compiled as a result of the Tithe Commutation Act of 1836, and set down the tithes payable for lands in all parishes. See the *Maps* leaflet for more information

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