

Nonconformist Records

Early nonconformist groups, facing persecution and uncertainty, were often reluctant to create many records. The Quakers are the main exception to this, but generally only a few early nonconformist records have survived. We can summarise the surviving records of the various denominations from the nineteenth century, and held at the Somerset Heritage Centre as:

- registers
- minutes of church meetings
- records about church property and finance
- records of church societies
- church histories and printed items, including magazines (Ref. D\N)

Church and Chapel Registers

The Heritage Centre has registers (or microfilm copies) for the following denominations:

- Baptist
- Roman Catholic
- Congregationalist (Independents and United Reformed Church)
- Presbyterian
- Quakers (Society of Friends)
- 'Free Churches'
- Methodist
- Unitarians

We also have microform registers for the following smaller sects based in Bath:
Swedenborgian, Moravian and Countess of Huntingdon.

In 1837, as a result of a Royal Commission, nonconformists were asked to deposit their registers. Because of this, about 9,000 non-parochial registers are held at The National Archives, Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, TW9 4DU, phone: 020 8876 3444, email: enquiry@nationalarchives.gov.uk

Copies of the records for Somerset are available on microfilm at the Heritage Centre. You can find details of the nonconformist registers we hold in the Summary List of Anglican Parish and Nonconformist Registers (a paper index in the searchroom) or on the online catalogue.

Roman Catholic records

The Heritage Centre has very few Roman Catholic records (Ref. D\RC). Somerset comes under the Diocese of Clifton, which holds the archives of the Western Vicariate. These are mostly parish records from 1850, and Episcopal correspondence from about 1780 onwards. To see these you should contact the Revd. Canon Dr. J. A. Harding, c/o Alexander House, 160 Pennywell Road, Bristol, BS5 0TX.

Papists' estates were registered at Quarter Sessions from 1716, and the Heritage Centre has schedules giving details of tenements, field names, occupiers, rents and state and type of tenure for the period 1717 to 1788 (Ref. Q/RRp). Registers of Jesuits, 1829 to 1832, were also compiled by Quarter Sessions (Ref. Q/RRj).

Other sources for nonconformity

Quarter Sessions records:

- After 1689, dissenting congregations had to register their meeting places. You can find relevant records first in the Quarter Sessions records (Ref. Q/RRw). After 1736 applications were made directly to the bishop or archdeacon (Ref. D\DRm).
- Quarter Sessions Rolls (Ref. Q/SR) may include references to registers of oaths of allegiance, lists of dissenting meeting houses, licences, indictments, petitions and recognisances.
- Quarter Sessions Order books record case judgements, and can contain presentments for non-attendance at Anglican services, indictments for recusancy, registration of meeting houses from 1689, ecclesiastical returns of chapel registration under the terms of the Places of Religious Worship Act (1812), presentments of people holding conventicles contrary to various statutes of the Clarendon Code, and oaths of allegiance (Ref. Q/SO).
- Other records include sacrament certificates (Ref. Q/RRs); oaths of allegiance (Ref. Q/RRo) and returns on places of worship (Ref. Q/RRw).

Diocesan records:

- Diocesan Act Books may include lists of Roman Catholic recusants, and lists of charges brought at visitation. (Ref. D\DR\Ca)
- Replies from churchwardens in the visitation articles may contain references to nonconformists in the parish. (Ref. D\DR\Va)
- There are returns of Dissenters' Meeting Houses for the archdeaconries of Bath, 1830; Taunton, 1792 to 1808, 1809 to 1852; and Wells, 1817, 1830. (Ref. T\PH\GR)

Parish records:

- Acts passed in 1695 and 1700 stated that dissenters' births had to be reported to clergy and an entry made in parish registers. This was largely ignored, but some registers do include comments.

Printed sources:

- **Edmund Calamy**; 'Account of the ministers, lecturers, masters and fellows of colleges, and schoolmasters who were ejected or silenced after the Restoration in 1660', (1713), revised 1934. Pages 573 to 624 list people ejected in Somerset, with details of education, beliefs and life. (262.14 on the searchroom Quickref shelves)
- **Edward Dwelly**, 'Somerset non-parochial registers', (1938), (Ref. PAM 1579). This lists non-parochial registers housed with the registrar-general.
- **G. Matthews**, 'Walker revised, being a revision of John Walker's Sufferings of the Clergy during the Grand Rebellion 1642 to 60', (1948). (262.22 on the searchroom Quickref shelves)
- **Michael Mullett**, 'Sources for the history of English Nonconformity 1660 to 1830', (1991). (280.409 MUL on the searchroom library shelves)
- **Patrick Palgrave-Moore**, 'Understanding the History and Records of Nonconformity', (1994).
- **HMC**, 'An inventory of nonconformist chapels and meeting-houses in South West England', (1991). (726.584 STE on the searchroom library shelves)
- **M. and G. Sheppard**, 'List of Nonconformist places of worship in Somerset in 1887', (1988), (Ref. PAM 735).

- **J. D. Steel**, 'National index of parish registers, Vol. 2: sources for nonconformist genealogy and family history', (1973) (929.3 STE on the searchroom Quickref shelves)
- **J. D. Steel & Edgar R Samuel**, 'National index of parish registers, Vol. 3: sources for Roman Catholic and Jewish genealogy and family history', (1974), (929.3 STE on the searchroom Quickref shelves)

The main nonconformist library is Dr. Williams's Library, 14 Gordon Square, London, WC1H 0AR, phone 020 7387 3727, email: enquiries@dwlib.co.uk website <http://www.dwlib.co.uk/>.

The Methodist church archive is at John Rylands University Library of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PP, phone 0161 275 3751, email: libtalk@man.ac.uk, website www.rylibweb.man.ac.uk. This also holds Unitarianism, Christian Brethren, and Moravian material, and the Northern Baptist College library. The Methodist Heritage website at <http://www.methodistheritage.org.uk> is well worth a look, especially their map showing district and circuit boundaries, and where archives are held:
<http://www.methodistheritage.org.uk/research-circuitarchives.htm>.

You can find information about Baptists at the Baptist Union of Great Britain, PO Box 44, 129 Broadway, Didcot, Oxford, OX11 8RT, phone 01235 517700, email: info@baptist.org.uk.

Problems with using nonconformist records

- People often travelled a distance to attend church meetings and care is needed when undertaking family history searches.
- Nonconformist churches are independent, voluntary bodies; this is reflected in their structure and records. For example, Methodists are organised by circuits covering several Anglican parishes, and entries about the running of a congregation, minutes of meetings and register entries may be in the same volume.
- Presentments against nonconformists were mainly made in areas that were most hostile to these denominations, so the extent of nonconformity may not be accurately reflected in the records.

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