

English Catholic Records in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

The eighteenth century was a period of change. The government's fears of an armed rebellion, possibly supported by the Catholic community, materialised in the 1715 Jacobite Rebellion. This was supported by some of the younger sons of Catholic gentry. Then there was the second Jacobite Rebellion in 1745, though this did not get the same Catholic support.

There was also a revolution of a different kind - the growth of the Industrial Revolution. This saw the growth of new communities around sources of water power and often away from the traditional settlements. The Church of England did not reach out to these new communities and this concerned some of its clergy, prominent among these were the Wesley brothers. These ministers started a travelling ministry, preaching in these new communities. There were other of a like mind who supported them. It was from these beginnings that, after their death, the Methodist Church emerged in the early 1800s. At the same time, the Independent Chapels began to consider their theology and about 1790 the chapels began to group into two strands - Unitarian (one person in God) and Trinitarian (three persons in God). The latter group split into Presbyterians (clergy led) and Congregationalists (led by the community). In recent times, the Presbyterians and

Congregationalists have joined to become the United Reformed Church. The Catholic community benefited from this changing climate by becoming more accepted by the wider society in general. In 1781 an Act (now referred to as the First Catholic Emancipation Act) was passed that allowed Catholics to own and inherit property. A further Act (the Second Catholic Emancipation Act) was passed in 1791. This permitted Catholic priests and school-teachers to operate in the community with their own premises - provided the priest and teachers, and the chapels and schools, were registered with the Quarter Sessions. The registration certificates for Lancashire are now in the Lancashire Archives in Preston.

Prior to this Act, a few Catholic clergy had kept records of their pastoral work, either as personal note books, or as a record of the mission (usually a gentry house) where they were stationed. These very early registers were mainly of baptisms. They were written free-form with the priest recording what was appropriate at the time. Some priests devised their own register format and had them printed as ledgers, though these were not common. Marriages were not commonly recorded, possibly because under Hardwicke's Act (1754) there was already a legal record. Burials would be recorded if there was a burial ground, but records of death may just be a list of dates of death (day of the month) so that the priest could pray for the deceased on that day.

1801 saw the first decennial Censuses as the government began to monitor the size and distribution of the population with the progress of the Industrial Revolution. The shift in distribution of the population produced problems with regard to care for the poorer members of society, particularly as people moved from a rural situation into the new industrial settlements. There was concern about this and a new Poor Law Act was introduced in 1832 and amended in 1834. Among other provisions, it grouped parishes together as Poor Law Unions to spread the care of the poor. This was the start of much of our present civil administration system.

1837 saw the introduction of the civil registration of births and deaths as another way of assessing the size and distribution of the population. The country was divided into Registration Districts that usually corresponded with the Poor Law Union districts. This registration of births and deaths did not have any religious links. At the same time the civil registration of marriages was introduced under a separate Act.

The civil registration of marriages recognised the traditional role of the Church of England in the solemnisation of marriages and this church continued to be the prime source for the solemnisation of marriages. For those outside the Church of England - the various other religious communities and those of none - civil registration of marriage was introduced. A civil registrar of marriages was appointed who could solemnise marriages in his office,

for those who did not want a religious ceremony, and in the licensed chapels of other religious communities.

In 1898, churches and chapel outside the Church of England were allowed to apply to have an Authorised Person act for the Registrar in the solemnisation of marriages. This facility was taken up by many of the Free Churches, but not by Catholic churches.

In 1908, the Catholic Church published the decree 'Ne Temere' that provided rules for the solemnisation of marriages world-wide. The new regulations were similar to those for our 1837 civil registration of marriages - with one exception - anyone seeking to marry in a Catholic church had to produce a 'Certificate of Freedom to Marry'. When the marriage had taken place, the priest who solemnised it had to send the details of the marriage back to the baptismal parish for them to be entered against the baptismal entry. Then if that person wanted to marry again in a Catholic church, the Certificate would show details of their baptism and the first marriage. The person would have to prove that their first spouse had died before they could be married again in a Catholic church, as the Church does not recognise divorce. Finding these marriage annotations against a baptism entry can be very helpful for family historians but sadly the marriage registers do not have notes about the baptisms.

After World War II, many aspects of society were in state of flux. In the Church, Pope John XXII called the Second Vatican Council to consider spiritual renewal and to search for Christian Unity. It was after this that the major Christian communities reached a theological agreement about baptism. This has allowed many baptised Christians from other communities to be in full communion with the Catholic Church without the need for conditional baptism.

In this period of change in the 1970s, many Catholic parishes applied to have Authorised Persons appointed from their congregations to act as Registrar at marriages in their church. These Authorised Persons are responsible for the two civil registers and the priest maintain the parish religious marriage register.

The Catholic churches in Scotland are under different religious and civil authorities, and likewise Ireland. This means that changes in religious practice may be different and occur at different times to those in England and Wales.

LFHHS Chorley Branch

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English Catholic Records

Contact Branch

Tel. 01257 262 028

Email chorleysecretary@aol.com

Contact Research Centre

Tel 01257 262028

Email chorleyresearch@lfhhs.org.uk

Websites

www.lfhhschorleybranch.com

www.cfhrc.com

Registered Charity No. 513437