GENEALOGICA & HERALDICA XXXV

REFORMATION REVOLUTION RESTORATION

CAMBRIDGE
2022

ISBN 978-0-904858-07-5

Congress logo by Tania Crossingham

Photographs on the rear cover: Congress banners in Clare College Scholars' Garden by Jack Sain, plaque created for the Congress baton by Paul A. Fox

Printed in Great Britain by 4word Ltd, Bath

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THE PARISH REGISTERS IN ENGLAND FROM THE REFORMATION THROUGH TO THE END OF THE COMMONWEALTH ERA AND BEYOND: THE EVIDENCE FROM EAST KENT

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It is a truth, perhaps not quite universally acknowledged, that a man in search of a pedigree must be in need of a good parish register. Such registers are amongst some of the largest single sources of historical documents from the post-mediaeval period. In England and Wales every one of some 11,000 parishes should have commenced recording baptisms, marriages and burials from 1538. The original parchment volumes, despite the many well-known threats, still survive in their tens of thousands, and are the mainstay of genealogy, without which many pedigrees would easily fail before the later eighteenth century.

I will explore three aspects of parish registers, partly based on an exhaustive survey of all those surviving for the Diocese of Canterbury, that is, the eastern two-thirds of Kent.

1. Their introduction, and the problems of the first half-century.
2. The greater problems of the Commonwealth period, which includes a remarkable, but very short, flowering of extra information.
3. Clandestine marriages which overarched the whole marriage system for more than a century.

The introduction of parish registers

In July 1535 Henry VIII, by virtue of the Act of Supremacy, appointed Thomas Cromwell (at that time Lord Privy Seal) to be his Vicar-General. In early life Cromwell had resided in the Low Countries, and would doubtless have had knowledge of the baptismal registers introduced there by the Spanish clergy; now he would introduce (at very little expense) a greatly improved scheme to secure the registration in his own country of baptisms, marriages and burials.The inevitable rumours and fears of a tax on the sacraments aroused widespread resentment, and this, along with fresh memories of popular risings against his opening steps in the suppression of the monasteries, led to a temporary withdrawal of the initial plan. A revision was drawn up by Cromwell on 5 September 1538 and sent to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, on 30 September. Cranmer issued his mandate for publication on 11 October. Item 12 of the royal injunction stated that all clergy should now keep a register in which to record all ‘weddings, christenings and buryings’ made within the parish.

Not all parishes by any means started recording in 1538, and too many by far began considerably later. Early concerns about the safe-keeping of registers and their due maintenance by clergy, doubtless jealous of their long-held rights, led to much wrangling, but prepared the way for the adoption of a scheme of general registration to be adopted in 1597. On October 25 of that year a constitution issued by the convocation of the

archbishop, bishops and clergy of the province of Canterbury, and approved by Queen Elizabeth under the great seal, directed the more careful keeping of parish registers, now pronounced as being of the greatest utility (*quorum permagnus usus est*).

Thus did parliament request better safe-keeping of what were clearly and increasingly being perceived as priceless national assets. The registers were to be kept more efficiently in parchment books, and parchment copies were to be made of the extant paper registers. For the prevention of negligence and deception in the keeping of the registers, all entries of the previous week were to be read out openly and distinctly by the minister on Sunday at the conclusion of either matins or evensong. The names of the two churchwardens and minister were to be appended to every page upon its completion, and copies of the last year's entries (that is, the so-called Bishop's Transcripts) were to be sent annually within a month of Easter, without any fee, to the diocesan registrar.

The 1597 constitution was embodied in the 70th Canon of 1603 which reiterated that each parish was to procure at its own expense a parchment book into which were to be copied the former paper registers 'so far as the ancient books thereof can be procured, but especially since the beginning of the reign of the late Queen'. The registers were now to be kept in 'one sure Coffer with three Locks and Keys', in the several respective custodies of the minister and churchwardens.

Scattered references to what must have been widespread early teething troubles may be found. The churchwardens of Alkham near Dover in 1593 declared that, 'We know not whether our Register Book be duly kept, nor whether the Minister do enter the marriages, christenings and burials therein as required, for that our Minister would not bring his key to open the chest by the space of 12 or 13 weeks together.' At Boughton Monchelsea near Maidstone the wardens lamented in 1594 that, 'Our register Book hath been duly and orderly kept since our Minister came unto us, but before that it was mangled and many things cut out by whom we know not.'

The new system under way

Cromwell had not prescribed the nature of new register books and therefore a paper volume was the choice of the vast majority because of its relative cheapness over parchment. Most parishes maintained a single volume in which were recorded the three types of event either in a single continuous sequence until the volume was full and a successor commenced, or, much more commonly, three distinct sequences in one book, with staggered starting pages, but often jumbled up and entered on odd pages (sometimes upside down or back to front) as one type of event outnumbered the other two and space became at a premium.

The first paper registers

Once the original paper register been copied up neatly into a new parchment volume, and now seemingly displayed the cachets of completeness, greater legibility and permanence, the paper book would naturally be presumed as redundant and so discarded. It is the sad lesson of history that this was the majority practice, for today in east Kent only a handful have survived: Biddenden, Brenzett, Brookland, Canterbury St Andrew, Charing, Chislet, Hawkhurst, Little Chart, Maidstone, Minster-in-Sheppey (recorded but lost), Seasalter, Staplehurst and Stone-in-Oxney.

By far the most interesting of these is Staplehurst. The first paper register of this parish (KHLC: P347/1/1) is a substantial book, and indeed a precious survival. There is a single sequence for all three events, the first, a burial, dated 29 September 1538. The second parchment book (copied in 1598) opens in 1558. The fact that the paper 1538 book still survives is irrefutable proof that the scribe of the second elected to dispense with the first two decades when copying began. The Staplehurst paper register may be compared with its parchment copy with considerable profit, not least for the types of error which occurred as thousands of entries were laboriously transmitted from one volume to another, as, in this case, an extremely modern-looking transcript was produced.

An exact collation of several hundred entries in 1561 and 1562 reveals mostly predictable types of error, but not all accidental ones. There are myriad slightly different surname spellings and Christian names which have now shed their original Latinity. Of more concern are the omissions: the loss of one baptismal entry is easily attributed to the preceding entry bearing the same surname, but more worrying are the many omissions of epithets such as 'baptised at home', 'from Ulcombe', 'his owne child', '10 years of age', 'being but a ladde', 'a lustie yongman', 'late before decessed', and so on. It does not look as if all of these omissions are deliberate in order to produce a transcript with neat line-endings, as the copy has many entries running over onto a second line. Elsewhere, others have noticed the suppression of Catholic sentiments, such as 'on whose soul God have mercy' and the like.

The first parchment registers

In east Kent 35 registers open in 1538 – some 15 per cent of all parishes. What can be observed from these earliest beginnings? Cranmer's mandate was dated 11 October 1538, but how long did this take to reach the parishes? The opening dates of registers are extremely variable.

Canterbury St George (CCA: U3/3/1/1) has a note on the flyleaf explaining the problems it has encountered:

> *"The minister and churche Wardens of the parrish of St George within the Cittie of Canterburye finding certain Records of Christenings, mariages and burials bearing date from the yeare of oure Lorde 1538 have thought it necessarie to Coppye oute the same and so to proceed accordinge to the st'ute in that behalf Provided but findinge the saide records (some of theim) Imperfectly Wrotten, and Confuzedlye bounde toghether, they could not so orderly proceade as they desired." The next page adds: "A true Copie so neere as may be taken out of the Olde Register booke…".*

One wonders how much editing and how many omissions occurred in making the untidy tidy.

Registers opening in 1558 or later

The splendid opening calligraphic page of Cranbrook's first register (KHLC: P100/1/15), which states that it begins in August 1559, explains what has been done and who has done it:

> *'These were first written in a book of Paper appointed for that purpose and so continued from the yeare above written unto the First day of December Anno Domini 1598 at which tyme all that were written before until then were taken oute of the sayed booke of Paper*

and placed into this Booke of Parchment by commandement from authorities for the better continuance of the same unto Posteritie … The Pastor or minister then of this parrish of Cranbrook was William Eddye in artib' magister of the universitie of Cambridge and borne in the Cittie of Bristoll whoe wroat or coppied it owte this Register to the end it mighte more faithfullie donne with his owne hand.'

In east Kent some 69 registers in the diocese begin in 1558, twice as many as those opening in 1538, and so an indication that the majority of clerks chose the easier copying task.

What of registers with more widely varying starting dates? These are not easy to explain satisfactorily. Some ministers may have been too busy or too anti-authority to implement what would be a possibly demanding and certainly continuous duty. In the south-western corner of the diocese, which includes some large and prosperous parishes and towns, there are many opening dates through the 1540s and 1550s. For the most part these parishes have many entries annually from the very beginning, so does this presuppose a first paper register already full after the initial decade and so either lost or simply not copied? Other late opening years include Maidstone (1541), Minster-in-Sheppey (1568), Walmer (1560), Canterbury Cathedral (1564), and Hythe (1566).

The 1653 Registration Act

On 4 January 1644/5 there was passed '*An Ordinance for taking away the Book of Common Prayer, and for establishing and putting in execution of the Directory for the publique worship of God.*' The 'inconveniences' of the Prayer Book, unchallenged for over a century, were abolished in favour of a new Puritan rubric for all priests, called the *Directory for the Public Worship of God*, a manual of directions, not devotions.

There are not many parishes in east Kent in which these new regulations were obeyed to the letter; indeed, not one commenced a new register in deference to the 1645 Act, probably because most, if not all, were already maintaining a parchment book and saw little need for extra expense. But civil war and the attendant chaos of the interregnum would have been the subject of much concern for efficient record-keeping and this was now supplied by one of the twenty-six Acts passed between 4 July and 13 December 1653 by the Assembly of Nominees, known as the Little or Barebone's Parliament.

On 24 August 1653, but only after severe criticisms and referral to committees, '*An Act touching Marriage and the Registring thereof; and also touching Births and Burials'* was promulgated, coming into force on 29 September 1653, and ordering the purchase of a parchment book, and that before 22 September 1653 each parish should choose one man approved by a Justice of the Peace to have keeping of the same. He would confusingly be called the 'Parish Register' and his details entered in the volume. Some 59 east Kent parish registers record this appointment, including men described as schoolmaster, victualler, minister, parish clerk, joiner, yeoman, maltster, gentleman, town clerk, husbandman and tailor.

Concerning marriage, it was directed that any couple desiring to be wed on or after 29 September 1653 must deliver to the Register of the parish where they were resident, and at least three weeks before the intended date, the names, surnames, 'additions' and places of abode of both themselves, and of their parents, guardians or overseers. The Register was then to publish this information on three several Lord's Days next following

at the close of the morning 'exercise' in the public meeting-place 'commonly called the church or chapel', or (if the couple desired it) in the market-place next to the church or chapel on three market-days in three several weeks following, between 11 and 2 o'clock. Afterwards, the Register was to make a true certificate of the proceedings, without which no wedding could proceed. If there were any objections, its nature and the name of the complainant and his parish were to be added to the certificate.

All parties were then to go before a Justice of the Peace of the same county and town, show him their certificate and, if either was under 21, prove the willing consent of parents or guardians. The Justice would then examine witnesses concerning the veracity of the certificate, any objections to be investigated by him at a subsequent quarter-sessions. If all was in order, the marriage could then proceed in the presence of two witnesses. Any marriage conducted after 29 September would be lawful only if conducted in this manner. A parchment certificate of the ceremony could be prepared by the Justice, his clerk receiving 12*d*. A final rider added that in the case of dumb persons the usual words spoken by the parties at the ceremony might be dispensed with, and that the traditional joining of hands need not apply 'in case of persons that have not hands.'

The information from such certificates would be a splendid ancillary source to the parish register entry, but it would seem that their loss has been universal, for not a single one has ever been seen by the present writer.

The new officials

The Register was to attend the Justice to subscribe every marriage, discharge his position for three years and longer until either a successor be chosen or he was removed. Attractive fees were applicable: for the publication of banns and the certificate, 12*d*.; for entering a marriage, 12*d*.; and for every birth/baptism or death/burial of a child, 4*d*.

Existing ministers, or at least those whose sympathies had not led to their ejection from the parish, were now doubly deprived. Marriages were now the sole prerogative of a justice (but after which the minister could perform a religious ceremony, then to be entered in the parish register by the Register who now had care of the records), or, in the rare cases where the minister himself had been elected as the Register, he would then be constrained in performing only civil ceremonies.

At Nonington between Canterbury and Dover the prospect of a new system was not looked forward to. '*A newe Regessor to bee kepte in the Parish of Nonington the Justices being to marry and the Regessor to aske, 29th Sept, this to be put in execution in the yeare 1653 a simple and silly practice'*.

What happened under the new system?

Compulsory civil marriage did not survive the Commonwealth: the clause from the 1653 Act '*And no other marriage whatsoever in the Commonwealth of England after 29 September 1653 shall be held and accounted a marriage according to the laws of England*.' was subsequently annulled when the 1653 Act was confirmed on 26 June 1657, and indeed, marriages in the busiest parishes drop away suddenly and sharply around that time. Some marriages thereafter, however, do show justices' signatures, indicating that such marriages were not made illegal in 1657, and indeed from now until

the end of the Commonwealth many marriages were performed jointly by the magistrate and Register, and even also by the minister. The legality of civil marriages solemnised between was retrospectively confirmed by an Act of 12 Charles II, *c*.33. (1660).

The act remained unpopular, and many parochial clergy, especially rural ones not seriously affected by political and religious upheaval, did indeed continue to maintain their registers. In such parishes a Register would be appointed *pro forma* but his office, by common assent, would remain a sinecure, his principal concern being the collecting of the stipulated 4*d*. and 12*d*. fees. Marriages suffered more as additional factors affected them. After the ejections of 1643 and 1645 it was not uncommon for Royalists in a parish with an intruded minster to go to the nearest Anglican clergyman who had managed to retain his living – Which might explain no or few marriages in some parishes and large numbers in others.

Commonwealth marriages

Along with baptisms and burials, a new sequence of marriages (and, for the first time, banns) would begin in 1653. Here the need was more pressing, as by now many parishes were bereft of a minister and therefore without any legally sanctioned officiant, whereas baptisms and burials might still continue to be recorded, albeit in increasingly broken sequences.

The 1653 Marriage Act was something of a two-edged sword. Tiresome though it might have been for prospective couples to present themselves with a licence before a justice from within the county in order to have their credentials verified, at least the new system was available to anybody of any faith with the funds to pay. Enforcement of the new rules was almost impossible. Information about them took time to spread, and many refused to accept them. Secular marriage was highly unpopular, and doubts persisted about its legality since it violated the traditional customs and habits of most of the population. Chaos ensued, some being married by a JP as ordered, some persisting in being married by a clergyman in church, while others seem to have gone through two ceremonies, one by a JP and one by the clergy; and yet others resorted to clandestine marriages in private houses. These were conducted by clergymen who might have been ejected from their livings because of loyalty to the Church of England, or merely be vagrants whose prime object was to obtain a fee. Some couples made simple promises before the congregation in an independent sectarian chapel; others went back to private verbal contacts.

In 1657 there was long and angry debate in Parliament which did nothing but make matters worse. The existing legislation was prolonged for another six months, the clause which invalidated all forms of marriage other than that prescribed in 1653 was abolished. This appeared to mean that almost any form of marriage was now legal. At the Restoration the Convention Parliament tried to tidy up the mess by retroactively legitimating all marriages carried out by JPs since 1642, leaving all the other kinds of marriage, including contracts and clandestine ones, to be sorted out by the newly restored ecclesiastical courts.

The result was an avalanche of matrimonial suits falling upon the courts which now faced two problems: 1) how to roll back the revival of private verbal contracts; and 2)

how to persuade the population to abandon clandestine marriages in private houses and return to regular public weddings in church. Despite the scepticism of the courts towards poorly supported claims of contract marriages, the courts were still full of spurious claims where canon lawyers sought verification of the unverifiable. Things would never improve, and legal exasperation with women who had been seduced and impregnated on the promise of what proved to be an unenforceable contract led to Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753 (on which see below).

Banns had never previously been recorded (and after this short period would not be again until 1754 and the passing of the Hardwicke Act), but now a great many parishes show both banns and marriages, nearly always in a single well-written sequence. As happened in succeeding centuries, the publication of banns was no guarantee that a marriage would follow, and thus those which did so proceed were often annotated to that effect, usually with the officiant's signature.

The system would seem to have worked well in those relatively few parishes where there are sufficient numbers of entries from which to make meaningful inferences. The marriage centres all peak around , after which there is a sudden collapse, marked by dramatic drops in the annual numbers of entries. Many parishes, mostly rural ones, were more or less impervious to the new regulations, made no comment pertaining to it or the election of a Register, and maintained entry-keeping just as before, and often with substantial lacunae of a decade or more. Large numbers of rural parishes have a handful (at best a page or two) of marriages with the greatly increased details, sometimes with banns as well, but they more or less universally and rapidly fall away, perhaps in part because there were by now enough urban centres set up where the justices had established regular marriage business in places most convenient for them to attend.

Hawkhurst in the Weald of Kent offers evidence from overlapping paper and parchment registers. The two volumes agree exactly between 1635–1642 with up to fifteen entries annually, when the parchment book now shows a complete lacuna until 1662. The paper register has entries 1645–1648, resuming in 1653 with twenty entries in 1654 before dropping away to lowish single figures by the late 1650s. Thus the act seems to have been obeyed, even if no reference is made to it in either volume. Very curiously, of the 87 entries between 1653–1660, almost every single one shows at least one party (usually the groom) being of this parish, in great contradistinction to the large numbers of 'foreign' couples in most of the other 'busy' parishes.

This third group of what I call the 'busy' parishes, although not numerically large, offers much fascinating information as each parish obeyed the letter and spirit of the new Act. Many of these would amply repay further individual study. At Ashford from 1635–1643 there were around ten marriages annually. There is nothing at all 1644–1652, after which 26 in 1655, 48 in 1656, 54 in 1657, 34 in 1658, and then a marked drop after the Restoration to the levels of the 1630s. The entries are generally full with occupations and fathers' names. Banns note any objections, and marriages are all signed by John Hayter. Of the 162 entries over 1655–1658, about a half have both parties from some 40 other parishes, including most of the Weald, many others within a ten-mile radius, and the usual outliers.

A note in the nearby Benenden register alerts the reader to marriages by justices in one section and marriages by a minister in another. Typically, after 1662 no officiant's name is given. There are 146 civil marriages over 1653–1661, peaking with 54 in 1654,

and eighteen religious ones over 1657–1660 (all repeated from the earlier volume), these latter mostly conducted by the minister, William Hieron, or the master of the free school, Alexander Reade.

> *15 January 1656. Robert Earle of Goudhurst in the Countie of Kent, Broadweaver, sonn of Abraham Earle, late of Brenchley, and Elizabeth Faukner of the sayd Goudherst, Singlewoman, daughter of Steeven Faukner of Wythyam in the Countie of Sussixe, husbandman, did Solempnize there marriage in due forme of law before Edward Sharpe of Benenden Esq. Also in the Presence of Thomas Earle And Abraham Earle, Broadweavers, both of Goudherst. (KHLC: P20/1/2)*

Cranbrook was another substantial Wealden parish, and one which dutifully commenced a new 1653 register in conformity to the new Act. However, the preceding register, which ran on as far as 1667, ignored the Act altogether and continued to maintain a patchy run of marriages (sixteen between 1653–1662) even whilst its successor was now recording in far greater detail. From 1635–1645 annual figures are in the high twenties; then there is a drop until 1652 until much more regular business ensues: 31 in 1653, 58 in 1654, 100 in 1655, 77 in 1656, 56 in 1657, 36 in 1658, then dropping by half or more by the early 1660s.

Many entries show the father's name and parish (quite often different from that of the groom). Of entries between 1653–1657 around a half have both parties originating from 48 parishes other than Cranbrook, these including every parish within an eight-mile radius, plus many outliers. There are separate sections for marriages 1653–1661 solemnized by Justices of the Peace, and for 1657–1661 solemnized by ministers, the former including Thomas Plumer and John Rabson, the latter William Goodrich, who sometimes signs alongside one of the justices.

Maidstone was the largest parish in the diocese, and with correspondingly interesting figures. From 1635–1653, amazingly, no year exceeds single figures; then 92 in 1654, 155 in 1655, 136 in 1656, 129 in 1657 and 112 in 1658, including many banns. After the restoration there are twenty to thirty annually. The question arises whether before the 1653 Act some nearby parish in west Kent handled most of the local marriage business. Of the 247 entries in 1654–1655, 110, or nearly half, have both parties from 74 parishes other than Maidstone. These include almost every parish within an eight-mile radius, many outliers, and the usual strays from London, Surrey and Sussex.

Wye, a small country town, had up to a dozen marriages annually between 1635 and 1642, then dropping away rapidly until there were 90 between 1654 and 1657, then none for five years before a slow resumption over 1663 to 1665. Of the group of 90 no fewer than 81 have both parties originating from 39 other parishes, mostly within a five-mile radius, and in nearly every case bride and groom are both from the same foreign parish.

Considering all the evidence for marriages, it is clear that in many smaller parishes, and indeed probably in a substantial majority, the 1653 Act was a retrograde step in that far fewer marriages (and often none at all) were recorded, such losses probably not being balanced, and certainly not exceeded, by high totals in a relatively small group of other 'busy' parishes. The benefits are to be seen in the few parishes which did adhere to the new registration system, even if generally only for about five years, when enormously increased amounts of personal details are given, greatly superior to both pre- and post-Commonwealth levels.

Clandestine marriages

I have already touched on clandestine marriages, which were operating from immediately after the Commonwealth, if not a little before. Before the mid-nineteenth century, laws of marriage administered by the ecclesiastical courts were neither more nor less than mediaeval canon law. The situation was left unaltered at the Reformation except for a drastic reduction in the number of forbidden degrees of incest. England was unique in Europe, since it preserved the lax mediaeval canon laws about marriage which had been swept away in Catholic Europe by the Council of Trent, and severely modified in most parts of Protestant Europe. But now England had the worst of all worlds: marriage was far too easy to enter into, but extremely difficult to get out of.

This mess continued for centuries, there being no consensus within society at large about how a legally binding marriage should be performed. Popular custom, the church, and the state with its propertied laity each took a different view. Parliament was at odds within itself, the Lords favouring parental veto over the marriage of minors, and the Commons, replete with heiress-seeking younger sons and small gentry, just as naturally opposed. A state of moral and legal confusion seemed to maximise insecurity and misery, the explosion of the clandestine marriage industry reflecting confused conflict between deeply entrenched vested interests.

After inheritance, marriage was probably the single most important method for the transmission of property, and in consequence, a great deal of litigation about marriage was in reality litigation over property and the ever-present responsibility of married men for debts incurred by their wives. How easy it was therefore for a man to arrange a clandestine marriage in order to seize the wife's property, perhaps to pay off his own debts, and for an unscrupulous woman to arrange a faked clandestine marriage in order that a cast-off lover might pay off her debts. Since common law had jurisdiction over questions of credit, the courts frequently found themselves deciding upon whether or not a woman sued by her creditors for debt was legally married.

In order to be legally binding, marriages before 1753 did not have to be performed in church by a clergyman of the Church of England according to the rites laid down in the Book of Common Prayer. The essence was free consent of both spouses alone, and thus a valid and binding marriage was created by a mere verbal contract, and performed by an exchange of vows in the presence of two witnesses. The vows must be in the present tense to imply present consent; but a future statement was only binding if followed by consummation. Under church law these unions were indissoluble, and made any later marriage -even one in church - voidable by a court sentence as bigamous. In common law, however, the contract had no jurisdiction over property for either the husband or the wife, and gave the children no rights as legitimate heirs to any property.

A clandestine marriage was a ceremony conducted by a man who at least purported to be a clergyman, and which followed the ritual of the Book of Common Prayer. But it could be irregular and in violation of canon law chiefly by 1) being conducted in secret without banns or licence; 2) by not being performed in the parish church of one of the couple, but rather in a busy venue where the clerk could not ascertain the residential requirement for the calling of banns, or in a private house, coffeee shop, prison or brothel; 3) or was outside the canonical hours of 8-12am; and was not recorded in any official parish register but rather in a grubby personal notebook kept by the officiating clergyman.

During the interregnum such ceremonies would only increase during the ban on Church of England weddings as the ejected clergy fulfilled a pious duty by marrying people in private houses. Church control over marriage had been weakened by the creation of a system of secular marriages by JPs and by a large body of dissenters who conducted their own ceremonies in their own chapels and with their own rituals.

A clandestine marriage had great advantages over a mere contract marriage. A clergyman gave respectability; it was recognized by canon and common law as legally binding with full property rights; it was easier to prove by way of witnesses and a written certificate; it was secret; and it was cheaper than a church marriage service by about a third. Couples could avoid opposition from friends or family; those under 21 could remain safe until they came of age, or perhaps until a cantankerous relative had died and an uncertain inheritance now materialised.

With the outbreak of civil war in 1642 ecclesiastical courts stopped functioning, the old marriage service was denounced as 'Popish' and it was no longer clear how a legal marriage should be conducted. Many people now took to being clandestinely married by clergy or laymen. But neither Parliament nor the clergy could agree on a new policy for marriage until the legislation of 1653. This long and fraught period came to an end only in 1753 when lay, legal and religious opinion was sufficiently powerful enough to push through Lord Hardwicke's act, after which, with the exception of Jews and Quakers, marriages could be solemnised only in parish churches and after the calling of banns or purchase of a licence. All marriage contracts were declared invalid, regardless of whether the present or future tense had been used, and despite the reliability of the witnesses.

No minor could now marry without the written consent of parents or guardians, and any clergyman performing a clandestine marriage was subject to transportation to America for fourteen years. The clandestine marriage trade died overnight and left just the option of fleeing over the border to Gretna Green or perhaps to the Channel Islands. England now stood at great variance with the law in both Scotland and Ireland.The strangest thing is surely why Parliament failed time and time again to stop the trade.The abuses were obvious, but presumably many thought the remedy would be worse than the disease.

Mention must be made of one valuable source for missing marriages in this difficult period. London witnessed the rapid emergence of a huge clandestine marriage trade which attracted people from great distances. Certain churches and chapels, such as Holy Trinity Minories and St James Duke Place, saw prodigious increases in marriage totals, so much so that between the combined totals (of these two places alone) of around 2,500 marriages annually, equalled perhaps half of all weddings taking place in the capital at that period. Such registers of clandestine and irregular marriages are now for the most part indexed and coming online.

Parish registers are the mainstay of English genealogy, but, in conclusion, something ought to be said very briefly about other types of information, some of it of the highest interest, which may be found throughout the centuries down to the advent of printed books in 1812 when, ironically, neat and efficient pre-printed spaces automatically precluded such additional casual record-keeping.

Anyone who idly scans the inside-covers, fly-leaves and marginalia of such registers may find a veritable microcosm of human life in past centuries: there are contemporary references to church fabric, furniture and plate, ecclesiastical fees, rites and usages,

crime, the weather, social behaviour, human peccadilloes and misfortunes, local censuses, parochial libraries, lists of parish officials, the children of Anabaptists and other dissenters, the collecting of money for local and national disasters (when sometimes extraordinarily large sums were offered), excommunications and much more besides, all haphazardly but carefully penned by a zealous clerk or minister in the recording of daily life in his own little part of the great patchwork of English parishes.

To take a few examples at random: Stone-in-Oxney has detailed lists of churchwardens, sidesmen, collectors and surveyors for the 1620s-1630s (KHLC: P353/1/2); at Rolvenden there are analyses and totals of baptisms and burials from (KHLC: P308/1/1); and Thurnham notes churchwardens, overseers and sidesmen and (KHLC: P369/1/1). In summary, then, there is no telling what is to be found other than by serendipitous casual browsing, for all such details will not appear in published indexes.