

Guide to Parish Records

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Parish Records

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Since 1978, with the passing of the Parochial Registers and Records Measure, the long-term care of parish registers and other important parochial archives has been covered by law. The 1978 Measure was brought up to date by the Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 1992, which came into force on 1st January 1993.
- 2 This leaflet has been produced by the Advisory Group of the Church of England Record Centre, but with the advice and approval of the Council for the Care of Churches, the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, and the Society of Archivists. The Society represents the Diocesan Record Offices and it is to the Diocesan Record Office (usually the County Record Office, which will advise in cases of doubt) that parishes should look for advice and guidance on the care of record material, ancient or modern.

What to Keep

- 3 When the majority of older parish registers and records have been deposited in the Diocesan Record Office, most parishes will only be responsible for records of current administrative value. Many of these will be of little or no historical value. Some, however, will be. The purpose of this leaflet is to give guidance to parish officers on which records ought to be kept and which may safely be thrown away when they are no longer required for administrative purposes. For ease of reference records have been grouped into separate subject categories.

CHURCH SERVICES

- 4 All **registers of baptisms, marriages and burials** need to be kept permanently. So do the **registers of banns, confirmations and services**. It is strongly recommended that parishes keep an archive copy of any orders for special services or any surveys for church attendance. There is no need to keep **baptism certificate counterfoils, or copies of burial or banns certificates**.

CHURCH BUILDINGS AND PROPERTY

- 5 Churchwardens are required by the Care of Churches and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure 1991 (which came into force on 1st March 1993) to compile and maintain (in the form recommended by the Council for the Care of Churches) a **terrier and inventory** and a **logbook** giving details of alterations, additions and repairs to and other events affecting the church or the articles or land belonging to it, and with a note of the location of any other relevant documents.

- 6 The churchwardens must send a copy of the inventory to the person designated by the bishop as soon as practicable after it has been compiled, and it would be wise also to send a copy to the Diocesan Registrar if he is not the designated recipient. They must notify the designated recipient of any alterations at intervals laid down by the bishop.
- 7 The terrier and inventory and the logbook must be produced by the churchwardens to the parochial church council at the beginning of each year, together with a signed statement to the effect that the contents are accurate. Mention should be made of new items, losses or disposals.
- 8 Previous **terriers, inventories and logbooks** should be retained, as should **faculties, archdeacons' certificates** under the pre-1991 legislation, and accompanying **papers, photographs, plans and drawings. Plans, correspondence, accounts and photographs** relating to major repairs or alterations should also be retained. Many parishes keep or have in the past kept a **logbook** or **scrapbook** recording parish events over the years and these are very valuable records for ecclesiastical and social historians. It is strongly recommended that all parishes maintain some similar type of document, and the form of logbook published by the Council for the Care of Churches allows space for this.

PARISH ADMINISTRATION

- 9 The core documents are the **minutes** of the Parochial Church Council and its committees. If these are no longer written by hand in bound volumes, it is important that the **signed copies of minutes** are properly kept. Pasting or sticking typed copies in bound volumes is not recommended because of the generally unsound archival quality of glues and adhesives. Care must be taken, too, with ring binders because of the metal parts, which may rust. Loose minutes should either be properly bound into volumes or kept in an archival box, in which case the pages should be consecutively numbered.
- 10 One archive set, preferably bound, of all **parish magazines** should be kept with the other parish records. An archive set of the **weekly notice sheets** should also be kept if the parish does not produce a parish magazine or if the weekly notice sheets contain information of long-term interest.
- 11 **Correspondence** relating to routine parish administration need not be kept, but **letters or reports** relating to major developments in a parish should be retained if they contain important information. Parishes should retain an archive copy of important circulars or of **questionnaire forms**; and should also retain any **statement** as to the conditions, needs and traditions of the parish (a 'parish profile') produced by the parochial church council under the Patronage (Benefices) Measure 1986 on a vacancy in the benefice, as well as other documents held for or on behalf of the parochial church council or churchwardens in relation to the vacancy and the appointment of the new incumbent. Other examples of important documents which should be kept are **maps** of the parish specially prepared for church purposes, **church electoral rolls**, and **parish audits**. All documents should be dated. A copy should be kept of all **printed items**, such as **booklets**, produced by the parish.

PARISH FINANCE

- 12 Most parishes generate a considerable quantity of financial records, but not all of these need be kept permanently. The **annual accounts** of all parochial church council funds should be retained in perpetuity. , in a loose-leaf format which provides for the inclusion of audited accounts.) Other supporting documents, including **cash books, bank statements, wages records, vouchers** and **routine correspondence** should be kept for at least seven years. **Planned giving** and **covenant records** should be retained for at least seven years after the end of the covenant.

PARISH ORGANISATIONS

- 13 Where separate organisations in a parish maintain their own records the general guidance given in paragraphs 7-10 above should be applied.

OTHER RECORDS

- 14 In most parishes the clergy will keep **records dealing with pastoral matters** many of which are likely to be highly confidential. It is recommended that in such cases a careful selection of such material be retained but that if it is deposited in the Diocesan Record Office it should not be made accessible until a reasonable period has elapsed from the events described. The exact period should be determined by the incumbent of the parish in consultation with the Diocesan Record Office. The same applies to **confidential papers** regarding the selection of any new incumbent for the parish.
- 15 In most cases the parish records fall clearly into a category in which they either have to be retained or may be destroyed after they have ceased to be current. However, there is a small number of records where historical value is limited but the bulk is considerable. In such cases it is permissible to retain a representative sample of the records, the sample to be determined by the parish in consultation with the
- 16 Diocesan Record Office. Examples of such records are **public notices, rota duty lists, offertory accounts** and **preliminary drafts of minutes or accounts**. If it is considered desirable to sample such records, or to include within such a sample the routine correspondence and vouchers recommended for eventual destruction in paragraphs 8-9 above, then the basis for the sample must be determined at the outset and rigidly adhered to. A good basis for sampling is to keep all records in the sample categories for a fixed period, e.g. one month in every year, or one year in every ten. Where doubt exists the Diocesan Record Office will be able to advise. If in any doubt you should consult the Diocesan Record Office for advice and recommendation.
- 17 It is important to keep a copy of all **printed service books, communion booklets, Bibles** etc. as they are replaced by new versions. Many churches have finely bound altar and desk editions of the Book of Common Prayer and of the Bible. Since the coming of the Alternative Service Book and more versions of the scriptures, some are no longer in regular use. They are, however, of value and should be kept safely in the vestry. Some dioceses have a repository for them.
- 18 **Hymn and prayer books** and **psalters, service sheets** and **communion booklets** no longer in use, are of value for the study of liturgy in the parish. It is wise to keep one copy of each.

- 19 There was a fashion in the 1950s and 1960s to set up a **parish devotional lending library**; their contents reflect the spirituality of the period. If there is a plan to dispose of the books, a list should be compiled and kept with the parish papers, and the Diocesan Advisory Committee on Books and Manuscripts consulted in the first instance.
- 20 In all cases, records will last better if looked after in the first place. Avoid steel pins for fastening papers together, and cheap brown paper, envelopes or newspaper for wrapping up records. Coloured or recycled paper is not suitable for records which are likely to be retained as permanent archives,
- 21 and good quality pen ink should be used in preference to pencil or ballpoint pen. It is especially important to avoid damp storage conditions.

The Computer in the Parish

- 22 One development which deserves mention is the increasing use of computers in the production of parish records. Typically, these are personal computers (PCs), owned by the incumbent, the parish or a member of the congregation, and operating standard word-processing or database packages. The assistance such systems can give, particularly in larger parishes, can be very considerable, and we should not wish to discourage their use for record-keeping purposes. However, it might be helpful to touch upon two aspects which have general relevance.

DATA PROTECTION

- 23 The first, which is of immediate concern, relates to the Data Protection Act 1998. Briefly, the Act seeks to regulate the use and disclosure of personal information stored in computer-processable form. It applies only to data on living persons. Persons or organisations keeping such data are normally required to register with the Data Protection Registrar and must as, a general rule, disclose to any enquirer all data they hold directly relating to that enquirer. There is a number of exemptions from all or some of the provisions of the Act, but such exemptions are strictly defined, and are easily nullified. For example, the Act appears to exempt personal information required purely for keeping parochial electoral rolls on the grounds that such information has to be published by law. However, if computer-stored electoral roll details are used for any other purpose, such as fund-raising, the exemption is lost.
- 24 It should be emphasised that the Act is quite complex, and many of its provisions have not yet been tested in the courts. For the time being the best advice is: if in doubt, register. The current (1994) charge for registering is £75.00 for a period of up to three years. General information about the Act can be obtained from the Office of the Data Protection Registrar, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 5AF, Tel 0625 535777. For up-to-date
- 25 information as to how the Act might affect the administrative functions of parochial church councils, it is advisable in the first instance to get in touch with the diocesan office.

LONG-TERM STORAGE

- 26 The second aspect concerns the longer-term problems of storage of computer-generated data. There is at present no general agreement on how long a **floppy disk** or **magnetic tape** will retain information. There is, however, agreement that much depends on the conditions in which such magnetic media are stored. Dust, smoke, magnetic fields (caused by lightning conductors, water pipes, hot water radiators etc.) poor stacking and extreme temperatures can all lead to loss of data, as many computer users will have discovered to their cost. Even where storage conditions are perfect, a poor-quality disk or tape may not retain data for the three to four-year period that, typically, material such as the records of building work or financial transactions requires. Leading manufacturers of disks and tapes currently claim that, properly stored, their products will stay good for 'a very long time'. The lesson seems to be that if people use good-quality media of recent manufacture and, most importantly, store them properly, medium-term storage on disk is a reasonable proposition.
- 27 In future, **optical disks** (close relations of **compact disks**) will probably provide a good long-term archiving medium, but at present their cost and complexity put them out of reach of parishes.
- 28 For the present, the safest option is to make a **'hard copy'**, i.e. a paper print-out, of data likely to be needed long term. It is important to use a good quality paper and to consider the condition under which the printouts are stored. As far as paper quality is concerned, the considerations are the same as for any paper: use the best that can reasonably be afforded. Avoid, if possible, paper containing a high percentage of woodpulp (e.g. newspaper) or any other with a high acidic content. Suppliers are normally able to advise on suitable grades of ordinary and continuous stationery. If in doubt, the Diocesan Record Office may be able to advise. Although paper quality is important for long-term use, proper storage conditions are crucial.

AVOIDANCE OF ACCIDENTAL ERROR

- 29 When considering computer-processed records, it is worth remembering that the main cause of information loss is likely to be operator or system error (e.g. the accidental erasure or overwriting of a file, or a hard-disk failure) rather than failure of the archiving medium. The maintenance of good back-up procedures is strongly recommended.

YOUR PARISH RECORDS: A GUIDE TO WHAT YOU SHOULD KEEP

- 30 The following table gives suggested minimum periods for keeping each type of parish record less than 100 years old. Talk to your Diocesan Record Office if you are in any doubt.

PRESERVE	Important material which needs to be kept permanently. It is acceptable to deposit originals and keep photocopies for parish use
DESTROY	Ephemeral material which can be discarded once its purpose has been served. Do not destroy if there is any possibility that the document may be required as evidence
REVIEW/SAMPLE	Material where a proportion needs to be kept, either by reviewing its value after an agreed period, or by taking a sample

TYPE OF RECORD	KEEP IN PARISH (Number of years after completion)	FINAL DECISION
<i>Completion</i> is defined as the time when the whole document ceases to be current (e.g. when work is finished and paid for; when the register/terrier etc has been replaced).		
CHURCH SERVICES		
1. Baptism, marriage, burial, and confirmation registers	30 (maximum)	Preserve
2. Banns registers	1	Preserve
3. Service Registers	5	Preserve
4. Orders of Service	5	Preserve
5. Baptism Certificate counterfoils; copy burial certificates; applications for baptisms, banns	1	Destroy
6. Intercession lists	5	Review/Sample
CHURCH BUILDINGS AND PROPERTY (but see also Legal Documents)		
<i>Church, furnishing and contents:</i>		
7. Faculties, citations, Archdeacons' certificates and accompanying material	5	Preserve
8. Terrier and inventory, logbook	1	Preserve
9. Architect's quinquennial reports	5	Preserve
10. Minutes, accounts, specifications, tenders, contracts, plans, photographs, drawings and other papers relating to major works to the church (especially if a liturgical re-ordering is involved)	5	Preserve
11. Contracts, tenders, specifications for minor works	6	Destroy
12. Organ specifications, contracts, papers (visitors may appreciate having details of the specification on view in the Church porch)	5	Preserve
<i>Parsonage House:</i>		
13. Plans, photographs, drawings	5	Preserve
14. Papers re major works (as in 10)	5	Preserve
15. Papers re minor works (as in 11)	6	Destroy
16. Quinquennial reports	5	Preserve

TYPE OF RECORD	KEEP IN PARISH (Number of years after completion)	FINAL DECISION
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<i>Churchyard:</i>		
17. Plans, registers of graves, faculties, citations etc. (as in 7)	5	Preserve
18. Agreements concerning maintenance of churchyard, graves and memorials	5	Preserve
19. Papers re major works (as in 10)	5	Preserve
20. Papers re minor works (as in 11)	6	Destroy
<i>Church Hall:</i>		
21. Plans, architects' reports	5	Preserve
22. Music, dancing and P.R.S. licences	6	Review/Sample
23. Agreements for use of hall	7	Review/Sample
24. Papers re major works (as in 10)	5	Preserve
25. Papers re minor works (as in 11)	6	Destroy
PARISH ADMINISTRATION		
<i>Incumbent and other ministers:</i>		
26. Institutions, admissions, licences	6	Destroy
27. Correspondence concerning appointments	5	Review/Sample
28. Union of Benefice papers, pastoral schemes and orders; plurality orders; documents establishing Team or Group Councils; Joint P.C.Cs or District Church Councils, and relevant papers and correspondence	5	Preserve
29. Ministers' papers relating to major parish developments; parish audits	5	Preserve
30. Ministers' correspondence and other papers on routine administration	6	Destroy
31. Maps of parish boundaries, street lists	5	Preserve
32. Copies of replies to questionnaires or important circulars	5	Preserve

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<i>Completion</i> is defined as the time when the whole document ceases to be current (e.g. when work is finished and paid for; when the register/terrier etc has been replaced).		
<i>Parochial Church Councils, Team and Group Councils, District Church Councils, etc.; Churchwardens and other parish officers:</i>		
33. Minutes of Council and Committees, Parochial Church Meetings, and Meetings of Parishioners for Appointment of Churchwardens	5	Preserve
34. Electoral Rolls	5	Preserve
35. 'Parish Profiles' on vacancy in benefice	5	Preserve
36. Visitation papers	5	Preserve
37. Copies of replies to Articles of Enquiry	5	Preserve
38. Parish Magazines	5	Preserve
39. Parish histories, scrapbooks, newspaper cuttings, brochures, record of gifts, photographs	5	Preserve
40. Sequestration records	7	Review/Sample
41. Visitors' books	6	Destroy
42. Routine Correspondence	6	Destroy
43. Copies of circulars sent by other organisations, non-local material	1	Destroy
<i>Parish finance:</i>		
44. Annual audited accounts	7	Preserve
45. Ledgers	7	Preserve
46. Cash books, bills, vouchers, bank statements, other subsidiary financial records	7	Destroy (unless ledger not detailed)
47. Planned giving schemes	7	Review/Sample
48. Insurance policies	2 or whilst current (7 years, in case of policies in respect of employers' liability)	Destroy

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PARISH ORGANISATIONS		
49. Parish organisations - M. U., youth clubs, choir, bell ringers, etc: Minutes, reports, accounts	5	Preserve
50. Membership lists	5	Review/Sample
51. Correspondence and contracts	6	Review/Sample
52. Choir register	3	Destroy
53. Music lists	5	Review/Sample
LEGAL DOCUMENTS		
54. Deeds, statutory documents etc; title deeds, other documents relating to title, acquisition, disposal, or rights over a property; statutory notices, orders etc, including Orders in Council for closure of churchyard; and relevant correspondence	For all documents in this category consult your Diocesan Registrar	Preserve
55. Charities: deeds, schemes, orders, minutes, accounts, distribution lists, benefactions	Consult Trustee's Solicitor	Preserve

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