

PARISH REGISTERS: A PLEA FOR THEIR PRESERVATION

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Parish registers: a plea for their preservation by T. P. Taswell - Langmead

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T. P. TASWELL - LANGMEAD

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FOR

THEIR PRESERVATION.



BY

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52



"All the property in this country, or a large part of it, depends on Registers."
LORD CHIEF JUSTICE BEST.

"I consider there is nothing of more importance than the endeavouring to deposit
in some secure place the Registers of Births, Baptisms, and Funerals."
MR. BARON GARROW.

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CONTENTS

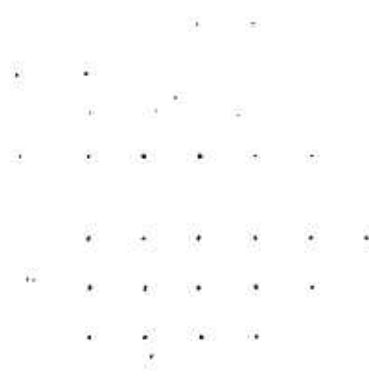
	PAGE,
INTRODUCTORY	5
IMPORTANCE OF PARISH REGISTERS .	7
DISGRACEFUL CONDITION OF PARISH REGISTERS.	9
DANGERS AND DEFECTS OF THE PRE- SENT SYSTEM	16
THE REMEDY	21
CONCLUDING REMARKS	26
THE BISHOPS' TRANSCRIPTS '	29

4

3

2

1



1

2

3

4

5

PLEA FOR PARISH REGISTERS.

INTRODUCTORY.

By the Civil Registration Act,* passed 17 August 1836, the State for the first time undertook the duty of registering in one Central Public Office the Births, Marriages and Deaths of all the inhabitants of England and Wales irrespectively of their religious opinions.

Since June 1837, (when the provisions of the Act came into operation) duplicates of the entries of all Births, Marriages and Deaths in England and Wales, have been regularly transmitted to the General Register Office, London, where they are alphabetically indexed, on a most elaborate plan, and rendered accessible to the public for a small search fee.

As a certified copy of any entry in the books of the Registrar-General is receivable in evidence "without any further or other proof of such entry," the modern parish Registers since June 1837 possess little of that peculiar value and interest which attach to the *Old Parish Registers*. These latter, however, still remain of the utmost importance, and are a part of our National Records even more deserving of careful preservation than many of the documents stored in the fire-proof buildings of the Public Record Office. Yet the act of 1836 strangely omitted to make any provision for the safe-custody of these old registers (which, in many instances, date back to the year 1538): an omission still more surprising when we consider the grave nature of the facts disclosed in the printed Parish Register Abstract which had been presented to both Houses of Parliament three years previously.†

For the institution of Parish Registers, we are indebted to

* "An Act for registering Births, Marriages and Deaths in England. 6 & 7 Will. IV., c. 86.

† See p. 10. *post*.

Thomas Cromwell, the energetic Minister of Henry VIII. In 1538, acting as Vice-gerent of the King in all matters Ecclesiastical, he issued an Injunction to the Clergy ordering every parson, vicar or curate for every church to "keep one book or register wherein he should write the day and year of every wedding, christening and burial ... and also there insert every persons name that should be so wedded, christened and buried." To ensure the safe-keeping of the Register book, it was further ordered that the parish should "be bound to provide of their common charges one sure coffer with two locks and keys," one key to be retained by the parson the other by the churchwardens.

Similar Injunctions were issued by King Edward VI, in 1547, and by Queen Elizabeth in 1559; in which latter year also every minister on institution was required to subscribe a protestation that he would keep the Register-books according to the Injunctions.

One of the most important regulations for the preservation of the old registers was contained in Canon No. LXX., authorized by King James in 1603 by which copies of all Parish Registers then extant were ordered to be made on parchment and preserved. For the future the registers were to be kept in "one sure coffer, with three locks and keys" one for the minister and one for each of the churchwardens. Nearly all the older registers now extant consist of the parchment copies executed in obedience to this Canon.

Passing over the further regulations as to parish registers contained in the ordinances of Parliament in 1644 and 1653, and in the Acts of Charles II. William III. and George II.* we come to Mr. (afterwards Sir) George Rose's act of 1812,† which

* 30 Car. II. c. 3. s. 4; 6 & 7 Will. III. c. 6; 7 & 8 Will. III. c. 65; 26 Geo. II. c. 38.

† "An Act for better regulating Parish and other Registers of Births, Baptisms and Burials in England" 52 Geo. III. c. 146. It is this Act which commits the ludicrous blunder of first enacting a penalty of 14 years' transportation for falsifying the register, and then directing that half the penalty shall be received by the informer.!

though ill drawn and with many imperfections of detail, contained several important provisions for perfecting the mode of registration. By this Act, registers of Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, were directed to be kept by each incumbent in separate books of parchment or paper to be provided by the King's Printer at the expense of the respective parishes according to Scheduled forms, such books to be preserved "in a dry well-painted iron chest in some dry safe and secure place" within the usual residence of such incumbent (if resident within the parish) or in the parish church.

From 1813 to the present time the form of the registers has been governed by the regulations of this Act—but its provisions for the safe-custody of these records have in too many instances been most shamefully neglected: and like the precautions of earlier times have utterly failed to preserve the registers in their integrity.

IMPORTANCE OF PARISH REGISTERS.

It is no mere antiquarian interest which attaches to these records. Their safe-custody is a matter of practical importance, not to any one class of the people only, but to all classes. Every individual be he rich or poor, peer or peasant, has an interest in the preservation of our Old Parish Registers; but, to the poor man, of whose existence they constitute almost the only record, it is of special consequence to preserve intact

"These simple annals of the Village Poor."

"While the rich" said Lord Elcho, in moving for leave to introduce the Bill which afterwards became the Act by which the system of Civil Registration was applied to Scotland,* "have their title-deeds, their parchments and their sculptured monuments, there is literally no record of the poor man's birth or death except the Parish

* 17 & 18 Vict. c. 80.