

Somerset Archive and Record Service

Information Leaflet

RECORDS OF THE DIOCESE OF BATH AND WELLS



Introduction

The Diocesan collection contains records going back to 1309. It is one of the largest and most important collections held in the Somerset Record Office, though many items are extremely fragile.

The collection contains the administrative records of the diocese, the area over which the bishop of Bath and Wells had ecclesiastical jurisdiction. The diocese was set up in 909 and covers virtually the same area as the pre-1974 county of Somerset.

Bishops' Registers (D\D\Breg)

The earliest surviving register is that of Bishop John Drokenford, 1309-1329. Thereafter, the registers survive in an almost unbroken series. The registers are chronological records of the bishops' main administrative decisions. In the medieval period they contain entries on the ordination and appointment of clergy, election of heads of religious houses, visitations, consecration and patronage of churches, granting of licenses to celebrate masses and a wide variety of other business. The later registers tend to relate mainly to ordination and appointment of clergy.

The registers have been published for the period 1309-1559 as volumes of the Somerset Record Society. The early registers are in Latin.

Records about Visitation

Visitation was the process by which the bishop and his associates periodically sought to enforce ecclesiastical discipline. Allegations of immorality, disrepair of churches, improper conduct of services and a wide variety of other matters were 'presented' during the visitation. The records include:

- The Act Books of the diocesan courts (D\D\Ca).
- Clergy lists (D\D\Vc), c. 1530-1879, which list the names of parish priests.
- Visitation Articles (D\D\Va), 1840-1901, which are the replies from churchwardens on the state of the church and parish.
- Visitation Presentments (D\D\Vp), 1818-1879, which are the churchwarden's returns on the annual visitations.

Records of Ecclesiastical Courts

Church courts dealt with allegations about the disrepair of churches, failures of church attendance and the improper conduct of services, as well as with the correction of moral offences. The courts also heard disputes between individuals relating to defamation, tithe payments, marriage, probate and other matters.

The records include:

- The Act books (D\D\Ca), 1458-1917, are in Latin until 1733 and are usually arranged topographically.
- Deposition Books (D\D\Cd), 1530-1754, recording evidence of witnesses called to testify. These are in English.
- Papers in causes (D\D\Cp), containing formal papers, depositions and other documents. They survive best for the 18th-19th centuries.

The Ordination, Appointment and Service of Clergy

The records include:

- Bishops' Registers (D\D\Breg) - see above.
- Ordination papers (D\D\Bo), 1697-1837, including testimonials, baptismal extracts and nominations of curates. (A card index is available in the searchroom). Also held are 16 boxes of un-indexed ordination papers, 1874-1973, arranged chronologically then alphabetical (ref: acc. G/2706, D/D/*), please ask staff for details.
- Presentations (D\D\Bp), c. 1550-1973, which are written requests from the patron of a living to the bishop to institute a priest to a vacant benefice. (A card index is available in the searchroom).
- Subscription Books (D\D\Bs), 1661-1903, recording clerics' public assent to Church of England doctrine.
- Papers in cases brought under the Clergy Discipline Act (D\D\Bd), 1844-1921.
- Benefice Returns (D\D\Rb), 1815-1837.

The Building and Repair of Churches

The records include:

- Bishops' Registers (D\D\Breg), which detail the consecration of churches.
- Consistory Court Act Books (D\D\Ca) provide information on the repair and furnishing of churches.
- Faculty papers (D\D\Cf), from 1760, provide information and plans for many church building and restoration projects.
- Inventories of church contents exist for 1907-1966 (D\D\Ri).

Parsonage Houses and Glebe Land

The records include:

- Mortgages for the building of parsonage houses, 1780-1971 (D\D\Bbm).
- Orders for the repair of parsonage houses, 1872-1923 (D\D\Bbo).
- Glebe terriers (D\D\Rg), 1571-1693, which usually include a description of the parsonage house and a detailed terrier of the glebe land in a parish.

Probate Records

See the separate leaflet on *Wills* for details on Somerset wills.

Other records include:

- Probate and Administration Acts are recorded in the License Books (D\D\OI), 1558-1850.
- Administrator's accounts (D\D\Cta) which record the expenses of administering a deceased person's estate, from the late 16th century to the early 18th century.

Licenses

The Bishop exercised miscellaneous licensing functions. These included:

- Marriage licenses (D\D\Cm). These exist from 1574 and were issued to couples not wishing the publicity or delay involved in marrying by banns.
- Protestant Dissenters' Meeting-House Licenses, (D\D\Rm), 1736-1852.
- Licenses for Schoolmasters, Midwives and Surgeons can be found in the License Books (D\D\OI).

Records of Peculiars (D\D\P)

'Peculiars' were those places in the diocese that were exempt from the bishop's jurisdiction for various reasons. The records date from 1662 and tend to resemble those for the diocese at large.

Miscellaneous Records Collected for Registration Purposes

- Bishops' Transcripts (D\D\Rr). From 1598 transcripts of each year's parish register entries were sent annually to the bishop. They often fill in gaps in the parish registers and are available on microfiche in the Orchard Wyndham room.
- Tithe Maps and Apportionments (D\D\Rt). These were compiled as a result of the Tithe Commutation Act of 1836, and set down the tithes payable for lands in all parishes. See the *Maps* leaflet for further information.

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