

London Metropolitan Archives

Information Leaflet Number 3

Records of Nonconformists in London



A simple definition of a Nonconformist would be ‘One who does not conform to the doctrine or discipline of an established church’ or more specifically as a ‘member of a church dissenting from the Anglican church’.

Following the development of a Nonconformist denomination is rarely a simple or straightforward task. The majority of denominations change significantly at some point in terms of structure, direction and name. These changes are usually due to factors such as shifts in ideology and relationships with the established church. It can be an equally daunting task for the genealogist to keep track of a dissenting ancestor as denominations merge and individuals realign their faith. For example, it is not unusual to encounter John Smith the Presbyterian, who becomes a Congregationalist before realigning his faith to the established church. This leaflet outlines the sources which are held here (and elsewhere) which may be useful in tracing Nonconformists from London.

The majority of Nonconformist records which are held at this office relate to the Methodist, Congregationalist, Baptist and United Reformed (a union of the Congregational and Presbyterian churches) denominations, dating predominantly from the 19th and 20th centuries. We also hold a smaller selection of records which relate to a variety of other denominations such as the Society of Friends and Seventh Day Adventist as well as records of some foreign churches such as the Dutch Church in Austin Friars, the Hamburg Lutheran Church in Little Trinity Lane, and the Scots Church, London wall.

As well as those of individual Nonconformist churches, we also hold records of several Nonconformist organisations such as the Protestant Dissenting Deputies, the London Congregational Union, Bunhill Fields and New Bunhill Fields Burial Grounds and the National Education Association. Our catalogues can be searched online at our [website www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/lma](http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/lma) . A detailed guide to non-conformist registers previously held at Guildhall Library can be found in *Nonconformist, Roman Catholic, Jewish and Burial Ground Registers* (Guildhall Library Publications, 3rd ed, 2002). A copy is available at the Information Desk.

Nonconformist records prior to 1837

Registers of Nonconformist Congregations

Baptism/Birth

Nonconformist congregations did not produce registers of birth, marriage or death until the 1640's as they were reluctant to provide written proof of active dissent for those who chose to persecute and condemn nonconformity. Registers of baptism were the most frequently kept Nonconformist congregational record prior to 1837. When recorded in a congregational register, it is likely that the baptism would have been conducted privately at a meeting house or at the minister's private residence.

Therefore, the amount of information which was recorded depended entirely on the preferences of the officiating priest. At best, you could expect such registers to record details such as the parents' names, the mother's maiden name, the hour of birth and number of children already born to the family. Baptists were most likely to record births and baptisms in a congregational register during the 17th and 18th centuries, although it is also possible to trace early Congregational and Presbyterian records of this nature.

Marriage

Prior to Lord Hardwick's Marriage Act of 1753, it had been possible for dissenting couples to marry at their congregational meeting house. Although ceremonies of this nature were not valid by law, the public contract which was made by the parties constituted a legal marriage. With the notable exception of Baptists, it was common for Nonconformist couples to marry within the Anglican church. Baptists were often forced to marry outside the established church as the clergy were predominantly reluctant to practice the marriage ceremony for the un-baptised. With the exception of Jewish and Quaker marriages, after Hardwick's Act every marriage in England had to be performed in the churches and chapels of the Church of England. Marriage registers of the majority of nonconformist denominations are infrequent before the Hardwick Marriage Act, after which they are virtually non-existent until 1837. Where Nonconformist congregations kept marriage registers at this time, the detail provided will again depend largely on the preferences of the priest and contents can therefore vary. However, one would expect to find at least the full names of the couple and the bride's father.

Death and Burial

Bunhill Fields

It is possible to trace details of the burial of a Nonconformist through two sources prior to 1837, records of Nonconformist burial grounds and Anglican parish registers. The first Nonconformist burial ground in the British Isles was Bunhill Fields in City Road, Islington. It was established in response to the 1662 Act of Uniformity which led to a general refusal by Anglican priests to inter in church ground those who would not recognise the ecclesiastical supremacy of the king. Registers of burials and indexes from 1713 until closure in 1854 are available at The National Archives. London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) holds interment order books and transcripts of inscriptions 1789 – 1854 (CLC/271/MS/01092/1-18). A microfiche index to the interment order books is available from staff at the Information Desk. A set of copies of location and section plans of Bunhill Fields prepared in June 1973 by the City Architect (CLC/271/MS38987) are in the map drawers in the Information Area.

The continued reluctance of the Anglican church to read the burial service over dissenters led to the growth of burial grounds attached to Nonconformist meeting houses during the 18th century. Where registers were kept, they are likely to record only brief details of the interred. Nonconformist ministers who performed burial

services for interments in these grounds were obliged by law to inform their local Anglican minister when a burial took place. Although it seems likely that this level of co-operation was rare, it may be possible to trace entries of this nature in some Anglican registers.

Anglican Registers

Birth and Baptism

Two acts of parliament were passed in 1695 and 1700 in an attempt to ensure that within every parish, all Nonconformist births were recorded with the Anglican priest. It is widely regarded that these acts were largely ignored by the clergy and that the vast majority of nonconformist children were baptised into their parents' denomination and never recorded in the parish register. Some Anglican priests subsequently created and maintained lists of un-baptised children within their parish. Where they survive, such lists may be inserted into the parish baptism register. If the baptism of a child of dissenting parents was recorded in the parish register, it is possible that the entry may indicate the denomination of the parents.

Marriage

As very few Nonconformist ministers practised the marriage ceremony prior to the Hardwick Act of 1753, the majority of nonconformist marriages before this date took place within the Anglican church. After this date, to be legally recognised, all marriages had to take place within the Church of England. Unfortunately, the Anglican registers rarely give any indication of a dissenting bride or groom. However, the Anglican church would have been reluctant to perform the marriage ceremony for an un-baptised bride or groom of Baptist parentage.

Death and Burial

Although most entries will be largely unremarkable, it should be possible to find most dissenters recorded in Anglican burial registers. Occasionally it is possible to identify the burial of a Nonconformist by the inclusion of a derogatory comment about a member of a denomination which the Anglican priest particularly disliked.

Additional Anglican Records - Fee Books

When a Nonconformist was buried outside of the parish churchyard, on his own land for example, it was not unusual for the Anglican Priest to attempt to collect what he considered his customary burial fee. A search of the parish fee books and accounts may be worthwhile when a burial cannot be located in the parish burial register.

Records held at the National Archives

As a part of the procedure instigated by the process of Civil Registration, a commission was launched in 1837 to enquire into the existence of Birth (Baptism), Marriage and Death (Burial) registers of Nonconformist congregations with a view to

obtaining their deposit with the Registrar General. This action was consolidated by the introduction of the Non-parochial Registers Act in 1840. Despite initial reservations, many congregations deposited their registers with the Registrar General. Where congregations had recorded their Births, Marriages and Deaths in Minute Books, they frequently created a register from these entries specifically for deposit. The first catalogue to the registers was published in 1841 and recorded 1445 Quaker, 79 Catholic, 6 Unitarian, 194 Presbyterian, 871 Methodist, 1278 Congregational and 431 Baptist Congregations. A further 292 registers were collected in 1857.

These registers are held at the National Archives in Kew and are available on microfilm. A list of the registers is available at the Information Desk at LMA. The registers can be searched online at www.bmdregisters.co.uk. This is a subscription based website.

Dr. William's Library, 14 Gordon Square, London SW1 0HG

Due to the increasing need of individuals to be able to provide evidence of birth, the Dissenting Deputies (representing Baptists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians) established a register to record the births of their children in 1743 at the Dissenters Library. The register was open to any parent prepared to pay the fee of 6d to register the birth of their child and was subsequently used by many parents other than those of the three denominations. Although clearly most popular with dissenters from the London area, births were recorded by parents from across the British Isles. By 1837 the register contained 48,975 entries. These records are currently held by the National Archives and are available on microfilm.

Registers of nonconformist congregations after 1837

On the 1st July 1837, the State took control of the process of the registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths in England and Wales. From this point, every Birth, Marriage or Death had to be recorded with the Registrar General regardless of creed.

Nonconformist Registers at LMA

Whereas the Nonconformist registers which were collected by the Registrar General predate 1837, the majority of our registers date from the mid 19th to the 20th century. The pre 1837 registers which we hold are volumes which were withheld from the Registrar General. Lists of the Nonconformist registers which we hold for each of the present London boroughs and some of our holdings for the City of London can be found in our collection of main family history sources known as 'London Generations'. Registers for Staines and Sunbury are listed under Surrey. See also Nonconformist, Roman Catholic, Jewish and Burial Ground Registers published by Guildhall Library, 2002. A copy is available at the counter in our Information Area.

The archives listed in this volume have not been included in the London Generations lists.

The Nonconformist registers held by LMA from 1694 to 1921 have been digitised by Ancestry and can be searched and viewed online on the Ancestry.co.uk website. A list of the churches and chapels included can be viewed on the Ancestry London, England, Non-conformist Registers, 1694 -1921, database.

If we do not hold post 1837 registers of the congregation which you are researching, you should contact the appropriate London Borough Archives or denominational Archive or Society.

Birth and Baptism

After 1837, registers of Birth or Baptism created by a Nonconformist congregation generally tend to be very similar in terms of content to the Anglican parish registers. Generally, details such as the dates of birth and baptism, names of child, parents and godparents, father's occupation and the name of the officiating minister will be recorded.

Marriage

Following the 1836 Registration Act, Nonconformist congregations could apply to have their meeting house licensed for marriages. This legislation proved to be extremely popular with the dissenting denominations and subsequently many congregations gradually began to produce marriage registers. Marriage records created after Civil Registration are again likely to be very similar in content to those of the established church. The majority of our collection of Nonconformist registers are post 1837 registers of marriage, although the majority of these date from around 1890 onwards.

Death and Burial

Where a register of deaths and burials was kept by a dissenting congregation it is likely to only provide minimal information such as dates of death and burial, although some may note where the deceased was buried if outside the churchyard (on his own land for instance). Where a register of burials or deaths was not kept by the congregation, deaths may have been recorded in minute books or noted on the church roll.

19th Century Nonconformist Burial Grounds

At LMA we hold the interment order books of Bunhill Fields 1789-1854 (CLC/271/MS01092/1-18) and the records of New Bunhill Fields Burial Ground (B/NBF) between 1831 and 1853. Initially a small burial ground attached to Upper Street Independent Chapel, this was extended in 1817 when, as it was used for the interment of Nonconformists, it became known as New (or Little) Bunhill Fields. We also hold Bishop's Transcripts of the records of several 19th century Quaker burial

grounds at Isleworth (DRO/BT/076), Winchmore Hill (DRO/BT/075), Tottenham (DRO/BT/078), Uxbridge (DRO/BT/079), Stoke Newington (DL/T/083) and Reigate (DW/T/9591) and a microfilm of an interment order book for Whitechapel Quaker Burial Ground 1777-1781 (CLC/196/MS22364).

From the mid 19th century the main Nonconformist burial ground in London was Abney Park Cemetery in Stoke Newington High Street. Records of burials between 1840 and 1927 are held at Hackney Archives Department; indexes are available at <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~abneypark/abneyy.html>

Additional Records of Nonconformist Congregations

Minute Books

Minute books are frequently the earliest available records of a nonconformist congregation. They can provide an invaluable insight into the activities of the congregation and include details such as attendance at meetings, admission of new members and disciplinary proceedings. It can also be possible, usually within early minute books where the congregation did not create separate registers, to find births, marriages and deaths recorded.

Magazines and Yearbooks

Another good source of general information are the magazines and yearbooks which many Nonconformist congregations published. Both the Baptist and Congregational denominations also produced magazines which had a national circulation. These include Church and Household (1896-) and Christian Witness (1844-1878). Alongside these denominationally specific publications, there were also several titles such as The Evangelical Magazine (1793-1909) which had a general circulation among Nonconformists.

Church Rolls

The majority of Nonconformist congregations maintained church rolls to record membership. One would expect to find details such as the names, addresses and admission dates of members recorded within the roll. The date on which the member left the congregation is recorded less frequently. As the church rolls tend to be among the earliest records produced by dissenting congregations, it can also be possible to find further details contained within them such as dates of adult baptism (in the case of the Baptist denomination). Some 19th century church rolls also contain details of immigration to America and Canada, predominantly after 1837.

Trust Deeds

Trust deeds are the documents which provide details pertaining specifically to the trustees of a Nonconformist church. The trustees, usually a body of about twelve men, were responsible for the material upkeep of the church. The trust deeds provide information about these individuals and, as they died or were removed, their

replacements. Trust Deeds are largely held in the custody of the relevant denominational headquarters.

Other sources of information

City of London and Middlesex Sessions Records

The Sessions records make specific reference to the prosecution of nonconformists. They include certificates of convictions for holding conventicles under an act of 1664 which imposed a fine on people convicted of assembling in a group of more than five for the practice of religion other than that laid down by the Church of England (CLA/047/LR/02/02, MR/R/C). Under the 1672 Declaration of Indulgence, ministers and groups could apply for a licence to preach and hold meetings. Licences granted at this time are held by the Lambeth Palace Library and The National Archives. However this was withdrawn later the same year and the persecution of dissenters resumed.

Under the Toleration Act of 1689 ministers or groups of dissenters were permitted to apply for a licence to legitimise their meeting premises. Licences for meeting houses could be granted by both the Court of Quarter Sessions and the Bishop or Archdeacon. For records of meeting houses licensed by the City of London and Middlesex Sessions see CLA/047/LR/02/04/001, MR/R/H, MJ/S/B/B. Generally, only minimal details such as the parish in which the meeting house was located were recorded at registration.

Diocesan Records

We hold 17th and 18th century records of the Diocese of London, the Archdeaconry of Surrey and the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's Cathedral. Diocesan records include information pertaining to Nonconformist activity and licensing within the parishes.

Office Act Books

Office Act books contain information regarding individuals who were presented before the church court for misdemeanours such as non attendance at church and nonconformist activity. We hold the office act books of the Consistory Court of London (DL/C) for the 16th and 17th centuries and the Archdeaconry Court of Surrey in the Diocese of Winchester (DW/VB) for the 17th century.

Certificates for registering Dissenters Meeting Houses, 1741-1852

These certificates were produced under 1689 Toleration Act. Details generally include the location of the meeting house, denomination and less frequently, the signatures of ministers and members of the congregation.

Diocese of London: Certificates for registering dissenters' meeting houses 1689-1719, 1763 (DL/A/E/202MS09579/1-2)

Registers of dissenters' meeting houses, indexed 1791-1852 (DL/A/E/200/MS09580/1-9)

Peculiar of Dean & Chapter of St Paul's Cathedral: Commissary's muniment book mainly a record of faculties issued, but also includes notably (from ca. 1756) licences for curates, lecturers, parish clerks and dissenting meeting (CLC/313/C/007/MS25665)

Register of certificates for the licensing of dissenting meeting houses, 1779-1847 (see section DCPC, Commissary's muniment book) (CLC/313/K/A/002/MS25726)

Access to these records is at Guildhall Library.

Archdeaconry of Surrey: Certificates for registering dissenters' meeting houses, 1741-1852 (DW/D)

Further Nonconformist Records

We also hold records of many Nonconformist organisations, associations and charities. These include the registers and papers of Joanna Southcott's Sect (ACC/1040), Radnor Street Methodist Sunday School (N/M/017), Southend Homes of Rest (ACC/1296), The Liberation Society (A/LIB), The National Education Association (A/NEA), The London Congregational Union (N/C/LCU) and several Methodist Circuits and Missions. Both the Leysian Mission Circuit (ACC/3422) and Whitechapel Methodist Mission (ACC/1926) include many records of charitable activities.

Can't Find What You're Looking For?

If records of a London congregation have not been deposited here or at The National Archives, make sure that the church or chapel does not still function. It is possible that they may still be in the care of the incumbent at the church or chapel. If the congregation which you are researching proves difficult to trace, there may have been changes in its denomination, name and location. Current denominational yearbooks will provide a good starting point for locating congregations within a particular area and telephone directories can also be useful. Records of Nonconformist congregations can also be found at the London Borough Archives.

Denominational Societies

Although most Methodist and United Reformed congregational records have been deposited with either county or local record offices, if you have been unable to trace

your Nonconformist ancestors in the aforementioned sources you may wish to contact the following organisations;

The Baptist Historical Society www.baptisthistory.org.uk

The United Reformed Church History Society, Westminster College

Maddingley Road, Cambridge CB3 0AA [website: www.urc.org.uk/](http://www.urc.org.uk/)

The Wesley Historical Society (Methodist) [website: www.wesleyhistoricalsociety.org.uk](http://www.wesleyhistoricalsociety.org.uk)

The Quaker Family History Society [website: www.qfhs.co.uk](http://www.qfhs.co.uk)

Further Reading

The following titles are available in our library.

General

MULLET, M. *Sources for the History of Nonconformity*. British Records Association, 1991. (60.56 MUL)

PALGRAVE-MOORE, P *Understanding the History and Records of Nonconformity*. Elvery Dowers, 1987. (60.56 PAL)

STEEL, D. *Sources for Nonconformist Genealogy and Family History*. Phillimore, 1973. (R60.53 SOC)

Denominational

BAPTIST UNION OF GREAT BRITAIN. *The Baptist Union Directory 1998-1999*. The Baptist Union of Great Britain. 1998 (R54.2 BAP)

BREED, G. R. *My Ancestors Were Baptists*. Society of Genealogists, 1995. (R54.2 BRE)

CHARTERS, P. *A Brief History of the Methodists in Ponders End*. University College London. 1993. (54.3 CHA)

CLIFFORD, D. J. H. *My Ancestors Were Congregationalists*. Society of Genealogists, 1992. (54.1 CLI)

DAVIES, R & RUPP, G. *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*. Epworth Press. 1965. (54.3 DAV)

GARLICK, K. *Garlick's Methodist Directory, 1983*. B Edsall & Co Ltd, 1983. (R54.3 GAR)

- LEARY, W. *My Ancestors Were Methodists*, Society of Genealogists, 1982. (R54.3 LEA)
- LYELL, J. P. R. *Some Records of Presbyterianism in Hampstead 1662-1912*. George Pulman and Sons Ltd, 1912 (54.5 LYE)
- PAYNE, E. A. *The Baptist Union, A Short History*. Ebenezer Baylis and Son Ltd, 1959. (54.2 PAY)
- PERRY, T. *An Independent People*. K. P. & D Ltd, 1969. (54.1 PER)
- RUSTON, A. *My Ancestors Were English Presbyterians*. Society of Genealogists, 1993. (R61.2 RUS)
- TUDUR-JONES, R. *Congregationalism in England, 1662-1962*. Independent Press Ltd, 1962. (54.1 JON)
- UNITED REFORMED CHURCH IN THE U.K. *Year Book, 1999*. The United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom, 1999. (R54.1 UNI)
- WELCH, E. *Two Calvinistic Methodist Chapels, 1743-1811*. London Record Society, 1975. (60.56 LRS)
- WHITLEY, W. T. *The Baptists of London, 1612-1928*. Kingsgate Press, [1928]. (54.2 WHI)

Our library also holds several volumes of transcripts of non-Anglican registers. See Information Leaflet No.60 for further details.

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London Metropolitan Archives
40 Northampton Road
London
EC1R OHB

Telephone: 020 7332 3820
Fax: 020 7833 9136
Email: ask.lma@cityoflondon.gov.uk

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