

**GLEANINGS FROM
WILTSHIRE PARISH REGISTERS**
(WAHNS Lecture)

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There are about 2000 pre-1812 Parish Registers in Wiltshire. Steve Hobbs has analysed them as sources of information re social life etc. These records are a unique source.

Pre-1812 there were blank pages on which the record keepers could put their own annotations etc.

Parochial Registers and Records Act – to preserve the records. This prevented damp damage etc but the increased increase in family history meant that they were in danger of being destroyed by many people handling them. This led to them being put onto microfiche. This, together with the work of the Mormons, meant that records were indexed and recorded in a way that they would not have been formerly.

e.g. there is a note that on Thursday 15th March 1693, 49 houses were burnt in **Netherhaven** and 4 in **Fittleton**.

1596, the Manor of **Shrewton** was done away with. The freeholders and parishioners had no structure. They got together and drew up a 17 point agreement as to where they were going to put their animals. All the signatories were included and it was written in the Shrewton parish register in 1600 – “as a place of record”. It was somewhere people could go in order to refer back to. It was a safe and permanent place for posterity.

In the 1750s Sir George Cobb’s infallible cure for the bite of a mad dog (rabies) was pasted into the Parish Register at **Beechingstoke**. It had actually come from Vietnam! Below it, in the register, was a handwritten recipe for the same purpose - the latter did not include musk whereas the first did!

1752 there is a note of how the new incumbent of Beechingstoke found deterioration – the former vicar having died after only two years in post.

1611 – 1620, in **Durrington**, a list of preachers coming to Durrington Church was recorded in the Parish Register. “Strange Preachers” meaning those from outside the parish – not ‘odd’! The texts taken by each were also recorded. In Sturt, also, a similar record was kept.

Broughton Gifford, the Revd. William Hicks who was rector in the late 17th and early 18th century, kept a record of improvements that he carried out to both to the rectory and to the church itself. It was useful for the incumbent to place on the record the improvements he had done: it was usual procedure for the estate of a deceased former incumbent to be charged if work needed doing due to his neglect when in office.

Highworth 1735 “The most violent storm in the history of man!” though the recorder was evidently given to hyperbole because every subsequent storm was also the worst ever.

John Talman recorded the tearing down of the old and building of the new vicarage in the **Durnford** Parish Register.

Thomas Hewitt of **Westbury** appeared to be the most litigious man in Wiltshire. He was always very concerned and anxious that things should be done by the book. The record in question relates to the chapel of **Dilton** which is well worth visited. He wrote much non-flattering information about his parishioners.

Seagry in the 1730s there was evidently a problem about getting evidence from parishioners about tithes paid over time to the incumbents. A parishioner’s statement of recollection is stuck into the parish register with sealing wax.

Local weather conditions were of paramount importance in an age when food was not brought in from abroad. In the parish of **Long Newton** the clergyman recorded in great detail the weather patterns of 1707.

Under an Act of 1653, the control of the parish register was taken away from the vicar and given to the Parish Registrar (or Register) who was often a lay person. There had been problems during the Civil War in keeping these up and this act was designed to overcome these.

By 1658 it all drifted back to the old system of keeping records so the new system only held good for 5 years in fact.

In **Devizes**, the Clark family held the position of Parish Record Keepers for several generations – for both parishes. They took a proprietorial attitude over the registers – in one instance defacing a 16th century book by removing a page with a blank side to use this some 80 years later.

Their children appear to have been allowed to draw pictures in the margins! Doodles figure in many and sometimes there was beautiful calligraphy.

The Clark's son had written a poem which was added to one page. This poem in fact comes up if you search Aldregus and Arthur in Google Books and had been published in 1727. The poem was probably published in a broadsheet of the 1720s and has found its way into Google Books as a result.

Urchfont – John Crooks in the 17th century wrote a poem in the register: “Man is as glass, life is as water.....”

Christian Malford there is a drawing of the preacher in the pulpit with the Register (Registrar) in a smaller pulpit and a diagram of all the parishioners sitting in the pews in front of them.

There are proven omissions in some registers. Four pence had to be paid to the Vicar for every baptism that took place. However, paupers did not have to pay this and perhaps the baptisms of these people were not always assiduously recorded.

William Hicks at Broughton Gifford used the Parish Record to record narratives and inexplicable events relating to parochial life in the locality.

There are many references to the granting and letting of pews in the church whereby families had their own pews in which they always sat. Pew Agreements are included in Steve Hobbs book.

The bounds of the parishes were very important and were beaten each year. They were recorded in many Registers – notably **Everleigh**.

In **Marlborough** there is a list of those who subscribed to the fund for an organ – this gives their trades so is useful as a mini trade directory.

Woodborough – there is a rare survivor of the 1811 census (the originals were all destroyed) as that for the locality is pasted into the register.

Defence of the Realm Act of 1803 (background to Thomas Hardy's novel, “The Trumpet Major”) provided for all the livestock in the county to be herded into one place. The records that were closed in 1812 were pasted into the Parish Record of **Wintersloe**.

Lists were kept of *Aliens* (those foreigners who were in the area) and *Quakers* – who were singled out because they refused to swear an act of allegiance.