

CHAPTER V

RECORDS OF THE CHURCH REGISTERS

'The short and simple annals of the poor.'—GRAY, *Elegy*.

BE the interest to the reader of this present chapter what it may, the history of our Berkshire village would be wanting in something of its completeness were no reference made to the records of the parish registers.

In an iron chest of prodigious weight, and in the keeping of the Vicar, there are stored books of which, by reason of their contents, it would be difficult to overstate their importance and their value, recording as they do the births, the marriages, and the deaths of inhabitants of the village and others for now more than three hundred and fifty years, and so affording information—often desired and sought for—in the matter of the history of families. And many is the request that is made to the writer, even in the course of a single year, for such reliable information as the registers alone can give in regard to the birth, marriage, or burial of a particular person, whatever the reason or object for which the information be asked.

Added to their value as chronicles of such events in the lives of families, the Church registers serve a useful purpose in furnishing the names of the Vicars of the parish at different periods, through their signatures as ministers of the particular rite. And further, there attaches to them a special

interest, containing as they often do, manuscript notes setting forth—and entirely apart from the purpose for which they exist—such facts and events incidental to the life of the parish as may seem by their importance, in the mind of the particular minister, to call for special mention, and thus to be handed down for the remembrance and benefit of succeeding generations.

The register books are deemed to be the property of the parish, and in legal proceedings would be properly regarded as the property of the Churchwardens. The custody of the registers is in the incumbent, or other officiating minister, by whom they are to be kept in an iron chest—provided by the parish for this purpose—in his own house or in the Church. Such importance is attached to their possession that they are only to be taken from the chest for the purpose of making entries, or of making search in them for any lawful purpose, and then only under the supervision of their clerical custodian.¹ For certificates of entries, and for search over an indefinite period, payment may by law be demanded. For refusal, or for omission without reasonable cause to make an entry of marriage, and for injury to, or loss of, the register, a clergyman renders himself liable to a fine of £100.²

Whatever record may have previously existed of such events as those set forth in the registers³ it was not until 1538 that their registration was formally and officially enjoined. In that year Henry VIII, through his Vicar-General, Thomas Cromwell,

¹ 52 Geo. III, C. 146, § 5.

² 6 and 7 William IV, C. 86, § 42.

³ See footnote p. 43.

ordered that in every parish the priest should keep a written account of all marriages, births, and burials. This injunction was reinforced by Canon. Like many a parochial innovation, such registration order was viewed with dislike and suspicion, and failed to command universal obedience.

The earliest Shrivenham parish register dates from the year 1575, and in the Vicariate of George Ellys. The book is headed in bold characters—**PAROCHIA DE SHRIVENHAM. Anno Dom. 1575,**

and contains entries until 1640. It is in good preservation, though on account of the formation, the fading of the letters, and the abbreviations used, the entries make very difficult reading, and in many an instance are only to be deciphered by those experienced in early registration. Nor is the difficulty lessened by the intermingling of births, deaths, and marriages in the same register. The use of separate books for the registering of those events belongs to later times.

The second in historical order of the register-books, dating from the year 1640, opens with the name of the Vicar of the time—the Rev. William Pound—thus:

'Guil: Pound in art. Magi, sacris ordinibus institutus et hujus Ecclæ curatus. Anno 1640. 1 mo. die Aprilis.

The Registere Booke of Shriuenham, Watchfeilde, and Bourtons.

As the parish of Shrivenham formerly included, besides Watchfield, the parishes of Bourton, Longcot, and Fernham, the earlier Shrivenham registers chronicle the baptisms, marriages, and burials of those in that area. In this register the entries

Handwritten entries from the earliest parish register, including names and dates of marriages.

John Corke and Anne Tommi
of Shrivenham were married
the 3th of October a 1614.

Thomas Tannen and Dora
the Cop were married at
Shrivenham the 25th of
November 1614.

Thomas Duden and Jane
Hame were married at Shrivenham
the 16th of February a 1614.

Thomas Appall and Mary
Kynge were married at Watchfeilde
the 7th of May a 1615.

Thomas Conlon and
Margaret Deillon were
married at Watchfeilde
the 7th of May a 1615.

Thomas Appall and
Mary Kynge were married
the 17th of June 1615.

Thomas Sparrow
and Marie Gamil were
married at Watchfeilde
the 5th of October 1615.

Thomas Appall and
Mary Kynge were married
the 17th of June 1615.

William Blagrove and
Mary Deillon were
married the 21st of Oct
a 1617.

Nicholas Dyffe and
Mary Galloway were married
the 13th of April a 1617.

generally are more legible, though there are degrees of merit in the clearness of the handwriting of respective Vicars! Independently of its records, there is a note in this register of the names of Isaac Green, of Shrivenham, and Joseph Meysey, of Bourton, as being Churchwardens in the year 1683. The register further contains specifications, which read quaintly, for making good the boundaries of the Churchyard, and are set forth on this wise—

'A true cobby taken out of an old Register in Paper Belonginge to the Parish of Shreuenham made in the yeare of our Lord 1566¹ concerning the makinge and Repayringe of the Church yard mounds.

The walls of the churchyard are to be made as followeth. Imprimis: 15 yardes next Salop farme are to be made by the 5 yard landes off Sandowne.

Itn. [Item]: The next unto that, 30 yardes for the 4 ffarms whereof the first Parte—by Salopp.

Itn. The next with freestone by Watchfeild.

Itn. The next to the other freestone by the tythinge of Shrevenham, and the other freestones are to be made by Longcott.'

The register next following, and bearing date 1653, affords special interest as containing 'an Act Touching Mariages and the Registering thereof; and also touching Births and Burials' enforced during the period of the Commonwealth. The Act demands that 'a Book of Good Vellum or Parchment shall be provided by every parish for the registering of all such Mariages, and of all Births of Children, and Burials of all sorts of people within every Parish', and further enacts that the safe keeping of the book shall be in the hands of

¹ There is no trace to be found of the register here referred to, the earliest existing register dating from 1575.

'some able and honest person such as shall be sworn and approved by one Justice of the peace in that Parish', such able and honest person to be chosen by the inhabitants and householders of every parish, and for a period of three years. This 'Book of Vellum' was dutifully provided by our parish according to the requirements of the Act and is inscribed—

'BAREBONES PARLIAMENT'.

The Register opens with a formal and lengthy declaration by Thomas Fettiplace of ffernham, one of the Justices of the Peace, of the choice and due appointment on the 12th November 1653 of one Thomas Foaring as the first custodian of the registers for the prescribed period. Five years later, an entry on the 12th May 1658 reads:

'I William Pounds, Clerke, and Minister of the Gospell did take the oath of Register before Thomas Fettiplace of ffernham, Esq. one of the Justices of the peace for the County of Berks, and for a period of three years.'

Under this Act of the Commonwealth the Registrar, whether in Holy Orders or not, or a Justice of the Peace, was authorized to solemnize marriages, and there are several entries in the register of this period bearing the signature of the aforesaid Thomas fettiplace, that attest this fact. It may be worthy of comment that under this Act it is births and not baptisms that are required to be registered, and in the register a leaf is set apart for recording the births of Dissenters' children not baptized, from the 1st May 1695. Under such heading, however, there is no entry made.

As to other provisions of this Cromwellian

Act it may be of some interest to note that the publication of banns might be made (if the parties so to be married shall desire it) in the Market-place next to the Church or Chapel, on three market days between the hours of eleven and two. The Prayer Book service for the solemnization of marriage being disallowed at this period, the marriage ceremony was of the briefest possible description, being merely a civil function, and consisting only in the giving and plighting of a troth either to the other; but in the exchange of vows between the man and woman the duty of obedience to her husband is demanded on the part of the wife!

The Act further enforces severe penalties on those concerned in forced and clandestine marriages of persons under age (being 16 years for the male, 14 for the female); in the case of the former the offending party being rendered liable to the forfeiture of one-half of his real and personal estate to the Commonwealth, the other half to the party forced into the marriage, 'and shall further suffer strict and close imprisonment, and be kept in hard labour in some house of correction or other publique working house during life,' whilst not less severe penalties are prescribed under the Act in the case of guardians or others aiding and abetting such marriages.¹

¹ In the matter of clandestine marriages, it may be of interest to note the following inscription of a register of much later date: 'A Register Book for Marriages in all Parish Churches and Chapels conformable to an Act of the 26th of King George II, intituled "An Act for the better preventing of Clandestine Marriages".'

Under this same Act, but for the purposes of the Act only, ready means are afforded for the union of benefices, of which much is to be heard in those days, through the power given to Justices of the Peace. The procedure if simple, is somewhat arbitrary!

'It is also enacted that where there are small parishes . . . or no usual morning exercise on the Lord's days, the Justices of Peace at their General Sessions, or any three or more of them, may unite two or more of such parishes to other Parishes (at their discretions) which shall be accepted one Parish.'

Whatever may be said of the Act of 1538, by stressing its importance and usefulness it marked an era in the keeping and preservation of parochial registers, and affords some testimony to a higher standard of education attained by the clerical profession. 'For before this time, probably, the clergy were not often sufficient penmen to keep such registers.'¹ With such favour was this ordinance of Cromwell's regarded, that it was enjoined during the reigns of Edward VI, Queen Elizabeth, and James I.

Whatever irregularities in the keeping of registers may have arisen during the Commonwealth and Civil Wars,² after the restoration of the monarchy more attention seems to have been given to registration, which was probably encouraged by the injunctions of the Bishops at their Visitations.

In spite of all injunctions, the keeping of the parish registers would seem to have been far from satisfactory, the books being unsuitable in form, in material, and in bulk, the books being them-

¹ Preface to Register for Burials, 1782.

² Prior to the end of the Cromwell period the entries of birth come abruptly to an end.

selves too narrow, the parchment with which they were paged making distinct entries a matter of difficulty; the promiscuous entries of births, deaths, and marriages, with no proper columns to separate them; whilst the books themselves contained too many leaves, so that they were worn, or much thumbed and effaced, before they were filled. Remedies for such defects were found in the provision of books of more convenient size, the substitution of paper for parchment, and in the use of separate books for the registration of baptisms, marriages, and burials. In the later registers not only are the entries more easily read, but they are fuller in detail as compared with those of earlier date, and in one of such registers a separate column is provided for recording the cause of death, and the locality of the grave in the Churchyard. But the former is frequently omitted, and the latter in itself too vague for the purpose of any clear identification. In 1773 the Vicar, the Rev. B. Colton, makes the following note: 'It appears by the register preceding this date, that the last entry in that register of burials is dated March 19th, 1732, and the first entry in this register is dated April 15th, 1733, so that there is a failure of a whole year.' Dated October 25th 1736.

In connexion with the registers it may be of some interest to note that in 1678, for the encouragement of the woollen trade, an Act of Parliament directed that wool be substituted for linen in the case of all burials, and a certificate to this effect was to be handed to the clergyman officiating at the burial. For breach of such order a fine of 100 shillings was imposed, 50 shillings

being awarded to the informer, and 50 shillings to the poor of the parish. The registers contain several affidavits that the law in this respect had been complied with, attested by Sir Robert Pye, sometime lord of Faringdon Manor, and others. The Act was a most unpopular one, but it was not until 1815 that it was repealed.

Irrespective of their primary use, the Church registers afford interest, as already stated, as containing manuscript notes of local information, and chronicling facts and events in connexion with the parish which might seem to the writer at the time to call for special mention and to be worthy of recording. Some earlier registers have blank pages appended for such purpose. In addition to references already made to them in this and other chapters, there are many such notes. These are to be found chiefly in earlier registers, the later ones contain few, if any, such entries. There is much variation in the nature of the information thus given. With reference to weather and harvest conditions, it is recorded that the winters of 1784 and 1785 were so severe that most of the more tender evergreens suffered very much. Hay sold at five guineas per ton. The year 1786 was one of very great and general plenty.

Church collections for 'poor sufferers' in various localities, and other worthy objects of charity from 1690 to 1720, are also recorded, though, with few exceptions, realizing but a few shillings.¹ To record such notes in full would be to add, and unnecessarily, to the length of this chapter, but

¹ These collections were called 'Briefs', and were registered by Act of Parliament.

the following extracts may be of some little interest—

'The inclosure in Shrivenham Parish took place in 1653, or 1655.'

1780. The road from Shrivenham to Faringdon was entirely new formed and completed at the sole expense of William, Lord Barrington. The road from Ashbury towards Shrivenham was completely mended throughout that Tithing.

Whilst further testimony (and in his own handwriting) is borne to the improved state of the roads at this time.

'Having lately examin'd the roads of Shrivenham Parish I find—that instead of being *execrably bad*, they are become very good—even for a carriage.

'As I know therefore that the parish owes this great and most useful improvement to the judicious management and steady perseverance of the present Vicar [the Rev. Mr. Barfoot Colton] I think it right that posterity should be thus informed how much his parishioners and the neighbourhood are indebted to him.

October 17th, 1780.'

DAINES BARRINGTON.

1788. In this year all the roads in the parish were everywhere made good.

From register dated 1782:

'That ancient piece of antiquity (in this neighbourhood), the White Horse, was cleaned for many years by William, Lord Barrington, but the ground on which the horse is cut being allotted by the Commissioners of the Uffington Inclosure, 1775, to William, Lord Craven, his lordship has since that time cleansed it annually at his expense, and has twice celebrated the scouring of the Horse with every country diversion, at both which sports there were computed to be 30,000 spectators.'