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## Nonconformist Ancestors

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### INTRODUCTION

Until the sixteenth century most people in England were members of the Catholic Church, which was under the jurisdiction of the Pope in Rome. Under Henry VIII, England became a Protestant country and the Anglican Church, or Church of England became the established church, with Henry as its Supreme Head. The Anglican Church was completely separated from the Catholic Church by 1559 with the passing of the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity. Most Catholic Bishops and many priests were ejected from their posts and the celebration of the Catholic mass was forbidden. As late as 1611 people were still being burnt at the stake for their religious beliefs.

### Clues that ancestors may be nonconformist

Sometimes, family information is available so the researcher knows that there are nonconformist ancestors in the family. If there are few entries in parish registers, even though the family remained in the parish, then it is worth checking nonconformist sources. After Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1754, all nonconformist marriages had to take place in Anglican churches except for Jews and Quakers, so if the only entries found are marriage ones, this indicates the family was following some other form of worship. Finally, wills sometimes give details of funeral arrangements, which name nonconformist burial grounds.

### Roman Catholic ancestors

Until the Catholic Relief Acts of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Catholics, or papists were persecuted. Attendance at Anglican churches was compulsory until 1689 and anyone who did not attend the Church could be brought before the Courts and fined or have lands confiscated. These actions were recorded in the Recusant Rolls, which are in The National Archives.

Many Catholics were baptised, married and buried in Anglican Churches, so you find their entries in parish registers. Occasionally, the parish priest would write papist next to the entry. Catholics might be buried in the churchyard because there were no Catholic burial grounds. This might happen under cover of darkness with a ceremony conducted by their friends and relatives, although nothing would be recorded in the Church Registers.

Catholic priests were ordered to keep registers from 1563, but because of fear of persecution few early registers survive. Some early registers, dating back to 1694 are housed in the Catholic Library. The only surviving early register for Suffolk is from Gifford Hall, Stoke by Nayland c1728. This is reprinted in Volume XXV of the Catholic Record Society publications.

After Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1754, most Catholic marriages took place in Anglican Churches to make sure they were legal and there were no future problems regarding the descent of property. Some couples also had a Catholic marriage ceremony. More wealthy Catholic families might have ceremonies abroad. *Gentleman's Magazine* lists many Catholic marriages that took place both in this

country and abroad. Bury Record Office holds bound copies from 1731 to 1869.

After 1837, births, marriages and deaths are recorded under the Civil Registration system and are fairly easy to trace.

### **Protestant nonconformist groups**

Prior to 1600 small groups of worshippers broke away from the Church of England to form their own congregations. Between 1640 and 1660, the Anglican Church became Presbyterian in its practices and there was a large increase in the numbers wishing to worship in their own way. These groups of Protestant nonconformists suffered discrimination for many years. Many were classed as recusants and were included in the Recusant Rolls. These are held in The National Archives.

The Declaration of Indulgence in 1672 allowed congregations to license places of worship. Surviving licences indicate where there were meetings, usually in houses or other secular buildings, but give little information about numbers attending, or names. Between 1674 and 1687, nonconformists were again persecuted. The Tolerance Act of 1689 finally gave nonconformists the freedom to worship separately; chapels were built after this date. The largest early group in Suffolk were the Independents, who believed that every congregation should be self-governing. There was also a strong Quaker presence in Suffolk at this time. Two early Baptist congregations met in the north of the county.

In the eighteenth century there was a religious revival associated with the preaching of John Wesley. New denominations were founded who were called 'New Dissent' to distinguish them from groups such as the Independents and Presbyterians who were 'Old Dissent'. The largest of these groups were the Methodists who were founded by Wesley in 1740. The Methodists soon split into several different sects, including Wesleyans and Primitive Methodists.

### **Nonconformist records**

Nonconformists often baptised their children in Anglican churches so they could inherit property more easily. Many groups held their own registers of baptisms, marriages and burials, but these were often the property of the minister, rather than the chapel. This causes problems to the researcher as the Minister tended to move round a circuit of chapels and this needs to be identified to try and trace where the records might be held. The religious census of 1851 and County Directories can help to identify where chapels were situated. There are also useful articles in the *Historical Atlas of Suffolk*. The earliest nonconformist registers date from the 1560s, although in Suffolk, the earliest registers deposited in the record office are from the 1650s.

With the exception of Quakers, protestant nonconformists could only marry in Anglican churches between 1754 and 1837, so marriages of nonconformists appear in the parish registers between these dates. After 1837, a registrar had to attend nonconformist marriages to record them in his register until 1898 when the rules changed and chapels could gain licences to conduct marriage services.

Once a group became established, they might try and purchase their own burial ground. Historical maps sometimes show where these were situated. Burial entries can be found in Church Books. Deaths are sometimes recorded in membership lists.

Between 1837 and 1857 various attempts were made to call in nonconformist registers so the Registrar General could hold them. These registers are now deposited in The National Archives (Class RG4). Suffolk Record Office holds microfilm copies of those that relate to Suffolk. The National Archives has now made these registers available on line. It is also worth checking Church Books or minute books for registration information, as many chapels did not hold separate registers.

Nonconformist ministers could be lax in keeping their records. In 1742 a General Register of the Births of Children of Dissenters was set up at Dr Williams' Library. A total of 48,975 births were recorded until the register was closed in 1837. Parents paid a small fee to have the date and place of the birth of the child and their own names recorded.

Minutes of chapel administrative meetings often include the names of members of the congregation. Some of these minute books are deposited in County Record Offices. There is also a collection in Dr William's Library.

In Bury Record Office there are transcripts of many of the early chapel records in a series of pamphlets by John Duncan.

### **Quaker records**

George Fox founded the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. They were often fined or imprisoned for their views and their refusal to take oaths, serve in the armed forces and attend Anglican services.

Quaker records can be more difficult to interpret, as they use figures for days and months because they believe that the names of pagan gods should not be invoked. Until the calendar was changed in 1752, the first month of the year was March, so prior to that year, the second month would be April and not February.

The Society's affairs were regulated at meetings. In addition to the local meeting for worship, congregations met for business matters at Preparative Meetings. Representatives were sent to district Monthly Meetings, and representatives from these attended a Yearly Meeting in London. Quakers refused the offices of the Anglican Church, so their events were not recorded in parish registers. They established their own system for births, (as they did not believe in baptism), marriages and burials. A clerk at the Monthly Meeting registered these events. Sometimes these meetings produced their own certificates, including witnesses' signatures.

Quakers had to obtain permission to marry from the Monthly Meeting, so the minutes also include these requests. The couple had to declare their intention to marry, and a check was carried out that they were free to do so. The marriage ceremony consisted of declarations by the couple and adults present at the meeting signed the certificate as witnesses. Quakers were exempt from Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1754 and continued with their own ceremonies.

In the early years of the movement, Quakers might be buried in parish churchyards, or elsewhere in private land, for example an orchard. Many Anglican clergy refused to allow Quaker burials so often Meeting Houses purchased their own burial grounds and kept burial registers. They rarely erected gravestones.

Quaker registers of births, marriages and burials up to 30<sup>th</sup> June 1837 were surrendered to the Registrar General and are now kept at The National Archive. Before depositing these registers, indexes or digests were prepared in duplicate for each Quarterly Meeting. The Quarterly Meeting retained one set of digests and the County Record Office might now hold this. The other set is held in The Library of the Society of Friends. The Quakers still maintained their own registers of births until 1959, deaths until 1961, marriages are still recorded.

The Quakers also founded many schools and their Admission registers often give useful information. These records are also deposited in The Library of the Society of Friends. Other useful sources held include Quaker journals from 1701 which list obituaries.

## Useful publications

David Dymond & Edward Martin, *An Historical Atlas of Suffolk*, Suffolk County Council, 1999  
Mark D Herber, *Ancestral Trails*, Sutton Publishing, 2000  
Michael Gandy *Tracing Catholic Ancestry in England*, Federation of Family History Societies, nd  
D J H Clifford, *My Ancestors were Congregationalists*, Society of Genealogists, 2001  
William Leary, *My Ancestors were Methodists*, Society of Genealogists, 2001  
E H Milligan & M J Thomas, *My Ancestors were Quakers*, Society of Genealogists, 2001  
Geoffrey R Breed, *My Ancestors were Baptists*, Society of Genealogists, 2002  
Alan Ruston, *My Ancestors were English Presbyterians or Unitarians*, Society of Genealogists, 2001  
R Wiggins, *My Ancestors were in the Salvation Army*, Society of Genealogists, 2001

## Useful Addresses

**The National Archives**, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU

**The British Library**, St Pancras, 96 Euston Road, London, NW1 2DB

**The Library of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain**, Friends House, 173 - 177 Euston Road,  
London, NW1 2BJ

**The Catholic Record Society**, 12 Melbourne Place, Wolsingham, Co. Durham DL13 3EH

**Dr Williams's Library**, 14 Gordon Square, London, WC1H 0AR

**United Reform Church History Society**, Church House, 86 Tavistock Place, London, WC1H 9RT

**Methodist Archives and Research Centre**, John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PP.

**The Huguenot Library**, University College, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT

**Bury Record Office**, 77 Raingate Street, Bury St Edmunds, IP33 2AR

Telephone: 01284 741212

Email: [bury.ro@suffolk.gov.uk](mailto:bury.ro@suffolk.gov.uk)

**Ipswich Record Office**, Gatacre Road, Ipswich, IP1 2LQ

Telephone: 01473 584541

Fax: 01473 584533

Email: [ipswich.ro@suffolk.gov.uk](mailto:ipswich.ro@suffolk.gov.uk)

**Lowestoft Record Office**, Clapham Road, Lowestoft, NR32 1DR

Telephone: 01502 405357

Fax: 01502 405350

Email: [lowestoft.ro@suffolk.gov.uk](mailto:lowestoft.ro@suffolk.gov.uk)

Suffolk Record Office web site: <http://www.suffolk.gov.uk/sro>

Suffolk Heritage Direct website: <http://www.suffolkheritagedirect.org.uk>