



User Guide 1 – A Brief Guide to Civil Registration

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Introduction

Civil registration was introduced in England and Wales on 1 July 1837. Scotland and Ireland followed in 1855 and 1864. It was, thereafter, a requirement for all **births, marriages and deaths** to be registered with the local registrar (although penalties for non-registration were not introduced until 1875).

The only similar records before 1837 are the records of baptisms, marriages and burials performed by the Church of England and other churches (see page 4).

For the purposes of civil registration, the country was divided into registration districts, each covering the same area as one or more poor law unions; the unions themselves, created in 1834, were each made up of a number of parishes, chapelries or townships, grouped together for the relief of the poor. Every registration district therefore contained a number of parishes. The boundaries of registration districts later changed a number of times, principally in 1937 and 1974.

The County of Durham was divided into registration districts, in 1837, corresponding to its poor law unions: Auckland, Chester le Street, Darlington, Durham, Easington, Gateshead, Houghton le Spring, Lanchester, Sedgefield, South Shields, Stockton, Sunderland, Teesdale, Weardale and, later, Hartlepool. Auckland Registration District, for instance, contained the 33 townships of 9 different parishes or chapelries. (The large parishes in County Durham were already subdivided, for taxation purposes, into townships, which became civil parishes in 1866.) Over time the registration districts were regularly altered so that the civil parishes are each found in a number of different districts at different times. A guide to the areas included in each registration district is available in the Record Office publication *Durham Family History Gazetteer* (1996). This can be ordered at the Record Office or through our online shop: recordofficeshop.durham.gov.uk/pgPubDetail?ID=941879.

Registration

From 1837 only a registrar could register births and deaths, and only a superintendent registrar or Church of England clergyman could register marriages. From 1898 it has also been possible for non-conformist ministers to be authorised to register marriages.

Copies of entries

Local registrars were required to send copies of the entries in their registers, each quarter, to their superintendent registrar, who then sent these on to the Registrar General's office. Originally this was in Somerset House, London, then St. Catherine's House, and now at the General Register Office in Southport.

So there are two copies of each certificate of birth, marriage and death. One is kept by the superintendent registrar in their registration district and one by the Registrar General. Copies of the register entries of marriages performed by church clergy are collected each quarter, and the details sent to the Registrar General. The duplicate register, used whenever a church marriage is performed, is sent to the superintendent registrar when it is filled, and the main register deposited with the local County Record Office.

The General Register Office also holds other registers: still-births; births and deaths at sea; births and deaths in aircraft; armed services births, marriage and deaths; consular registers of births, marriages and deaths; registers of service deaths in World Wars I and II, and; adopted children. Details of these records are available at www.gov.uk/browse/births-deaths-marriages

Copy certificates

The original registers retained by the superintendent registrar for each registration district (and the copies collected from clergymen) are indexed quarter by quarter. The registers themselves are not available for inspection.

Certificates of entries in registers for a particular area can be supplied, on payment of a fee, by the superintendent registrar for that area (see below).

For the whole of England and Wales and for the other registers referred to above, these can be supplied by the General Register Office (OPCS, Box 2, Southport, Merseyside, PR8 2JD). Certificates can be ordered online from www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/Login.asp

Marriage certificates can also be supplied by the County Archivist where marriage registers are held by the Durham County Record Office.

Further details of the costs of certificates and the fees for searches are available from any superintendant registrar or the General Register Office.

Current registration districts

Copy certificates from **County Durham** Registration Service should be ordered from:

Cockton House, 35 Cockton Hill Road, Bishop Auckland, DL14 6HS

Telephone: ring 03000 266000 and choose option 2

Email: bishopaucklandregisteroffice@durham.gov.uk

Website: www.durham.gov.uk/article/2256/Order-a-copy-of-a-certificate

Durham County Registration Service is currently indexing the birth, marriage (completed) and death registers within the county and this information is available online in a searchable database at gro.durham.gov.uk.

Contact details for the other registration districts which include parts of the historic County Durham are currently as follows:

Darlington Register Office, Backhouse Hall, Bull Wynd, Darlington DL1 5RG
www.darlington.gov.uk/your-council/register-office
(01325) 346604 registeroffice@darlington.gov.uk

Hartlepool Register Office, Civic Centre, Victoria Road, Hartlepool TS24 8AY
www.hartlepool.gov.uk/info/20002/births_marriages_and_deaths/396/order_a_copy_certificate
(01429) 523337 registrar@hartlepool.gov.uk

Stockton on Tees Register Office, Nightingale House, Balaclava Street, Stockton on Tees TS18 2AL
www.stockton.gov.uk/stockton-council/births-deaths-marriages-and-civil-partnerships
(01642) 527720 registrars@stockton.gov.uk

Gateshead Register Office, Civic Centre, Regent Street, Gateshead, Tyne & Wear NE8 1HH
www.gateshead.gov.uk/People%20and%20Living/Births-Deaths-and-Marriages/Home.aspx
(0191) 4333000 registeroffice@gateshead.gov.uk

South Tyneside Register Office, 10 Broughton Road, South Shields, Tyne & Wear NE33 2RN
www.southtyneside.gov.uk/article/34706/Births-deaths-marriages
(0191) 4246350 registrars@southtyneside.gov.uk

Sunderland Register Office, PO Box 108, Civic Centre, Sunderland, Tyne & Wear SR2 7DN
www.sunderland.gov.uk/copy-certificates
(0191) 5205553 registrars@sunderland.gov.uk

GRO Indexes

The Registrar General compiles alphabetical indexes (popularly known as the "St. Catherine's House Indexes") from the information sent to them by superintendent registrars. These indexes cover the whole of England and Wales. There are separate indexes for births, marriages and deaths and the indexes can be searched online at www.freebmd.org.uk (free of charge), www.ancestry.co.uk (subscription only) and www.findmypast.co.uk (pay as you view).

The indexes give the name of the individual, the quarter in which his or her birth, marriage or death occurred, and the registration district in which it occurred. A series of reference numbers follow, which are of relevance only to the General Register Office.

Indexes up to 1983 were compiled for quarters of the year (e.g. March quarter - January, February and March; June quarter - April, May and June) by the date of registration. A birth or death may be registered in a quarter later than that in which the event occurred. From 1984 the indexes are compiled for the full year and give the month and year of the event.

Birth indexes from September 1911 onwards contain the maiden name of the mother.

Marriage indexes from January 1912 onwards give the name of both parties to the marriage under both entries.

Death indexes from January 1866 to March 1969 give the age of the deceased; from April 1969 the deceased's date of birth is given.

More complete indexes for births and deaths, including the mother's maiden name on all births and the age on all deaths, can be searched by logging into the GRO system: www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/Login.asp.

The St Catherine's House Indexes have also been microfilmed, and the films purchased and made available to the public by some local libraries, record offices and branches of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormon Church), including:

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, The Linkway, Billingham, Cleveland TS23 3HG
(Tel: 01642 563162)

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Family History Centre, Alexandra Road,
Sunderland, Tyne & Wear SR2 9BT (Tel: 0191 5285787)

Darlington Library, Local Studies Section, Crown Street, Darlington DL1 1ND (Tel: 01325
349630)

Durham Clayport Library, Millennium Place, Durham, DH1 1WA (Tel: 0191 3864003)

Middlesbrough Central Library, Victoria Square, Middlesbrough TS1 2AY (Tel: 01642
263358)

Newcastle City Library, Humanities and Arts Department, Princess Square, Newcastle upon
Tyne NE99 1DX (Tel: 0191 2610691)

North Yorkshire County Library, Thirsk Road, Northallerton, North Yorkshire DL6 1DF (Tel:
01609 776202)

Northumberland Record Office, Morpeth Library, Gas House Lane, Morpeth, Northumberland
NE61 1TA (Tel: 01670 504084)

South Tyneside Borough Library, Prince Georg Square, South Shields, Tyne & Wear NE33
2PE (Tel: 0191 4271818)

Sunderland City Library, Central Library and Arts Centre (Local Studies Section), Fawcett
Street, Sunderland, Tyne & Wear SR1 1RE (Tel: 0191 5141235)

Teesside Archives, Exchange House, 6 Marton Road, Middlesbrough TS1 1DB (Tel: 01642
248321)

York City Library, Museum Street, York YO1 2DS (Tel: 01904 655631)

Parish Registers

Parish registers commence in 1538 (although many early registers have been lost), and they record the ecclesiastical ceremonies of baptism, marriage and burial (rather than the births, marriages and deaths recorded by the civil registration authorities from 1837).

The Durham County Record Office holds a large number of registers for parishes in the diocese of Durham (the area between the Rivers Tyne and Tees) and that part of the diocese of West Yorkshire and the Dales which is in the county of Durham. Microfilm copies of these registers are available for inspection in the public search-room of the Record Office. Full details of the registers held by Durham County Record Office can be found online at www.durhamrecordoffice.org.uk/article/10528/Search-Church-Registers or in our handlists <http://www.durhamrecordoffice.org.uk/article/10936/Guides-to-Records>.

Some registers are retained in parishes and, where this is the case, it will be necessary to contact the appropriate member of the clergy: names and contact details can be found on the Church of England website www.achurchnearyou.com.

A number of limitations must be born in mind when searching church registers:

- (1) Parish registers are the records of the established church and do not necessarily contain information on all the inhabitants of a parish.
Prior to 1837 all marriages (except for Quakers and Jews), and almost all burials, were registered at the local parish church, but births often were not. By the end of the nineteenth century the non-conformist churches had their own systems of recording events; we hold some registers for Baptist, Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic churches and for the Society of Friends. Into the 20th century there is a decrease in the proportion of children baptised and an increase in register office weddings and in burials in municipal ceremonies rather than church burial grounds.
- (2) It is essential to know the parish in which the baptism, marriage or burial took place, and this may not be the parish in which the people concerned were living.
The boundaries of parishes have changed, especially in the nineteenth century when many new parishes were created, and a village or part of a town may be in different parishes at various dates. It must be remembered that a large town could contain a substantial number of parishes by the end of the nineteenth century (Sunderland, for instance, had 28). Civil registration districts, which are given on birth, marriage and death certificates, have different boundaries from parishes.
- (3) Only a comparatively small number of registers are indexed, all unofficially, and the coverage and standard of indexing is variable.
- (4) Difficulties over the handwriting can occur in the earlier registers and entries were sometimes made in Latin.

1837 Non-Parochial Registers Commission

The National Archives holds copies of birth, marriage and death registers made retrospectively by some non-conformist church ministers from 1837. Many of these which are relevant to County Durham are available on microfilm at the Record Office.