

Village Echoes

Nowadays we are all familiar with the need to register births using a standardised form. However, before the days of civil registration, the recording of these events lay with the parish in which the birth occurred. The entries in the baptismal register for St Mary's give us an insight into aspects of village life in past years, but also provide us with a history lesson. The earlier entries in the register are sometimes accompanied by comments.

The first baptisms were recorded in 1558 showing the child's surname, Christian name, the name of the parent(s), usually just that of the father, and the date of baptism – date of birth was not recorded. Pity poor 'Andrew' who was baptised in November 1561: neither his surname nor the names of his parents were recorded. However, there is a comment - "a harlot" - presumably his mother. A child born out of wedlock was frowned upon by the Church and the fact recorded when the child was baptised. The register from the 16th to the 18th century indicates that the number of illegitimate children (referred to as "base-born") baptised each year was generally in low single figures. However, between April 1583 and December 1586 seventy base-born children were baptised!

As previously stated, it was the date of baptism, not birth, that was shown in the register. However, between January 1654 and March 1661, the child's date of birth is shown instead, a consequence of the English Civil War. The ejection of the clergy had caused irregularity in the keeping of parish registers and in 1653 Parliament ordered that all registers should be placed in the hands of laymen called "Parish Registers". The change was reversed following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

Some of the entries in the register are of particular interest. Henry Ballard was baptised in June 1663 and there is a comment that his mother was in her 59th year when he was born! William Sennock was baptised in June 1749 but "Elizabeth the mother [was] buried the same evening.". Although having an illegitimate child was usually a badge of shame, Ann Doe doesn't appear to have been too bothered: when her son, George, was baptised in February 1798, the comment in the register was "Base born. The said Ann is wife of Henry Doe who is in jail and who she saies is not the father of her child.". Apart from comments on particular parishioners, the register also sheds light on various aspects of history. It was common in the 17th and 18th centuries for wealthy families to have servants from areas that had been colonised. In June 1690 William James, "A West Indian about 15 years of age and then servant to Sir James Hayes", was baptised. Sir James, of Bedgebury, was the first Deputy-Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company. In March 1766 Thomas (we do not know his surname) "A negro servant to Charles Bathurst Esq" was baptised.

From the start of the 18th century, the occupation of the child's father is often given and these entries give an insight into local trades and professions. Although many, such as carpenter, labourer, tailor, and weaver are recognisable to us today, some need explanation: Sarah Apps, baptised March 1815, was the daughter of a mantua maker (a term for a dressmaker); Martha Dennis, baptised in March 1820, was the daughter of a wool-stapler (someone who buys wool from a producer; sorts and grades it; and sells it to a manufacturer); Charles Pinson, baptised December 1816, was the son of a post-chaise

driver from Stonecrouch (a post-chaise was a coach used for the transportation of mail and passengers, and Stonecrouch was the site of the posting inn); and John Ford, baptised April 1821, was the son of a cordwainer (a maker of new shoes as opposed to a cobbler who repaired shoes).

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