



Nonconformist Records

The largest groups of nonconformists in England and Wales were Baptists, Congregationalists and Methodists. Numerically smaller were many groups including Churches of Christ, Presbyterians, Quakers, Salvationists and Unitarians. An understanding of the origins and the beliefs of nonconformists is valuable to appreciate the nature, scope and location of extant records. That a veritable treasure trove of records may be found is as possible as a total black hole!

Of the denominations noted above, no further mention will be made of Salvationists or Churches of Christ. The Churches of Christ are very similar to Baptists and Independents as far as records are concerned. The Salvation Army was only formed in the latter part of the C19th so is outside the period covered by much of this article. Salvationists are addressed in the Society of Genealogists (SoG) [My Ancestors](#) series, as are most of the other denominations covered here. Catholics and Jews are not nonconformists as their origins do not stem from the Church of England.

Origins of nonconformity

Baptists, Independents (later Congregationalists), Quakers and English Presbyterians have their origins within the early to mid C17th Church of England. In the period before the English Civil War there was truly a “broad church” of practices and beliefs within the Church of England. With the advent of the civil war, the “nonconformist” groups were in the ascendant; however with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 those clergymen with more Calvinistic beliefs, along with all clergymen soon found themselves required to “conform” to a set of beliefs – the 39 articles of the 1662 book of common prayer as prescribed by the Act of Uniformity of 1662. Those who refused to conform were ejected from their livings and forbidden to hold services for their congregations. Many eminent clergymen dissented and, at this time, the term dissenter rather than nonconformist was used. Following the Act of Uniformity's failure to stamp out dissent, further punitive legislation was enacted which resulted in meetings of worship taking place in all sorts of rural places including barns. It is these congregations which became Baptists, Independents or Presbyterians. The Quakers never had clergymen so were distinct in this respect, but suffered the same restrictions.

Towards the end of the C17th with the ascent of William of Orange to the throne, legislation became somewhat eased for dissenters, however many restrictions affecting the populous remained well into the C19th such as admission to university and public office.

Methodists, of whom many branches existed in the C19th, came out of the Church of England at the end of the C18th. This was when the Evangelical Revival in England and Wales was becoming well established across all Protestant denominations, particularly the erstwhile dissenters.

Further details of the history of nonconformist denominations may be found in the Society of Genealogists [My Ancestors](#) series and references therein.

Nonconformist governance and records

Early dissenting congregations were to some extent underground organisations and this factor along with the belief in the “priesthood of all believers” meant congregations were isolated and self governing. This isolation in large part lasted through to the C19th and C20th. In such a climate, the keeping of records was unwise. When kept, records were likely to be held by an individual. It is not surprising therefore that Baptist and Congregational records only exist in significant quantities from the late C18th with records then considered as belonging to the local church. Presbyterianism differed from other dissent in that the Presbyterians were more concerned with church government and, indeed wished to return to the Church of England. Presbyterianism almost died out in England and Wales. Quakers also differed in that they had a more organised structures which has the benefit that many more of their early records survive.

In the late C18th some Baptist county groupings occurred culminating with the Particular Baptist Union in 1813. It was not until the C19th that Congregational churches formed loose associations by county and nationally. For instance, the Lancashire Congregational Union was formed in 1806 (a very early example) but the Congregational Union of England and Wales was not formed until 1832. Individual chapel records continued to be held locally but may now be deposited at the county record office or town library. The term “locally” henceforward should be taken as meaning either the county record office or town library.

Methodist records were the responsibility of the local church or the circuit, a group of churches, and these are likely to be deposited locally, as are Unitarian records. Quaker records have generally been deposited in the local record office or a University library but those of London are at [Friends House Library](#).

Local deposits are often best initially found through the National Archives “[Access to Archives](#)” site even when the local record office has an online catalogue.

Baptism, marriages and burials

Nonconformist baptism (or birth for Baptists and Quakers), death and burial records up to 1837 were required to be deposited with the Registrar General when civil registration was introduced. These records, if deposited, are available on microfilm at the National Archives in classes RG4 to RG8. The individual records of births and baptisms only are indexed at the Mormon's [Family Search](#) website as part of the International Genealogical Index (IGI). The British Vital Records Index (BVRI) contains many baptisms and marriages, but is only available on CD. However, as always, more information may be recorded in the original document, film of which may be in the county record office or local main library. Many microfilm copies are available at the [SoG](#) or [LDS library](#) in Exhibition Road, London. Some nonconformists would have the birth of their children entered into the Parish baptism register, it being the only legal evidence of age. Often the entry would appear as if it were a normal baptism but sometimes it would be explicit that it was a nonconformist entry. Stating an entry to be a birth rather than a baptism is also a strong indication of nonconformity.

From 1754 up to 1837 all marriages (with the exception of Quakers and Jews) had to take place in the parish church. Marriages of nonconformists during this period will normally have no indication of their nonconformity, though a marriage by licence could be an indicator of nonconformity.

Some chapels had burial grounds but the majority of nonconformist burials would be in the parish churchyard, often in a section set aside for dissenters. More recently burials may also be in municipal cemeteries. Many of these are now to be found on the [National Burial Index](#) (NBI). The SoG's London Burials Index is also a useful resource accessible through [Origins](#). In all cases, the chapel may have kept its own records and local newspapers are likely to have an entry.

Since 1837 records may be found either with the church or deposited in the local or county record office. A number of records, particularly from closed chapels, do get deposited many years after the chapel has closed.

Marriage records will only exist from 1898 or later when it became possible for a “named” person to administer marriages, the named person usually being the minister. From 1837 the marriage could take place in the chapel, but only with the registrar present, so the marriage certificate will appear in the registrar's records, as with a register office marriage, and only from the certificate will it be evident that it was a non-conformist marriage at a chapel. On the [UKBMD](#) indexes the location included in the “Church/Register Office” column is a strong indication of a nonconformist (or Roman Catholic) marriage.

The National Archives series RG4-RG8 are now indexed online at [BMDRegisters](#). [RG4](#) and [RG5](#) include 3 birth registries and their records; these are indexed on the BVRI. [RG6](#) are Quaker records and digests, [RG7](#) covers the Fleet prison and other churches where irregular marriages were contracted. [RG8](#) covers burial grounds.

Minutes of meetings

Quaker records with their highly structured organisation go back to the mid C17th and [Friends House Library](#) has records of where these are deposited. Transcriptions of some of these records are published; these may also be found at [SoG Library](#). For other denominations minute books, if deposited, are likely to be in a local record office. The best of these records will give names of members, candidates for membership, miscreants though not always with the misdemeanour, officers as well as much else. Minutes may also give a flavour of the activities of the congregation.

Membership

Membership records exist in many forms. Often these were working documents so could contain much updating particularly with respect to addresses but also when someone was accepted into membership (perhaps by transfer from another congregation) and when they ceased to be a member. Lists may also exist for election to an office, often in chronological order of membership. These will normally be found in the local record office.

Miscellaneous records

A flavour of the range of records of use to the family historian is given here:-

- Seating Plans – who sat next to whom – how prominent was their position
- Bazaar Souvenir Books. These might be hardcover and exceed 100 pages giving names of all the groups in the chapel together with adverts, particularly of member's and adherent's businesses
- Scrapbooks and souvenir histories
- Special services (annual sermons, induction of new minister) where a printed order of service was used
- Monthly magazines

What exists for a particular congregation is unpredictable.

Denominational publications

The Handbook (or Yearbook) of many denominations is probably the most useful source for family historians. The latest edition also lists the “incumbent” who may have the records or know what became of them. Starting publication in the C19th, these annual publications contain details of all affiliated congregations such as numbers of members, seats in chapel, the number of Sunday school children and teachers and the year of establishment. Names (and obituaries) of ministers and some officials appear. [Dr Williams's Library](#) has an almost complete run of these for Congregationalists and the [SoG](#) has a good series for Baptists. Otherwise they will be found in denominational libraries.

Denominational magazines were common and again many of these can be found at [Dr Williams's Library](#). The [SoG](#) has a run of Methodist/Wesleyan Magazine and Friends Quarterly Journal. The Evangelical Magazine (a product of the evangelical revival) was published monthly from the late C18th and bound copies may be found locally as well as on eBay! These magazines are what many of our ancestors would be reading and reflect concerns and issues of the time.

Ministers

Ministers may be found in denomination year books and local records. Many ministers will be found in denomination magazines mentioned above. Those who were very prominent will be found in the [Dictionary of National Biography](#) (DNB). Most major libraries will hold the DNB as does the SoG. Occasionally “Who's Who” type publications occurred and these will generally list ministers and prominent lay people. Ministers will feature prominently in the local press. Brief details of many Congregational ministers may be found in the [Surman index](#).

Newspapers

From the late C18th, local newspapers progressively reported chapel events and might be the only source of information on events associated with the congregation. Furthermore they will often express an opinion on or give a flavour of the event. Progressively local papers are becoming available, with search facilities, online. Many [C19th British newspapers](#) may be accessed and searched if you are in academia or your local library subscribes. Local libraries will often have indexes to local publications.

[The Guardian](#) (formerly the Manchester Guardian) archives are becoming available on line and [The Times](#) is also available on line.

Most denominations have published newspapers and magazines; these may be found in denominational libraries or at the [British Newspaper Library](#).

Local newspapers are the most likely to serve the needs of the family historian.

Location of records

Probably the most likely place to find nonconformist records is the local (county or town) record office. Nearly all record offices may be found through search engines or from the [ARCHON](#) Directory; some record offices have their catalogues online. The National Archives [A2A](#) site is particularly valuable for finding deposited material, not only within the expected locality, but that which is deposited in unexpected locations.

Denominational history societies and family history societies

There are websites for historical societies for many denominations and often separate sites for family history. They vary a lot in their usefulness for family history. Below the URLs of useful ones are given (as of April 2009). [GENUKI](#) has a number of articles on religion and [rootsweb](#) also has denominational forums, but they seem not to be very active.

Baptist Family History is briefly covered on the [Baptist Historical Society](#) and the [Strict Baptists](#) websites.

The [United Reformed Church History Society](#) contains English Presbyterian and Congregational material. It has a useful “find a church” link which may facilitate communication with the local church.

Individual Methodist churches may be found together with certain aspects of Methodist history at the [Methodist Church](#) website. The [Wesley Historical Society](#) also has many links for Methodism.

The [Quaker Family History Society](#) (for British ancestors) has a wealth of information.

The [Unitarian](#) website is very useful. In particular, on the research page towards the bottom is a link to where records are deposited. In addition to Unitarian congregations, this also includes General Baptists and English Presbyterians.

Denominational libraries

Many denominational libraries are now special collections in Academic libraries and will be referenced in the history society links above. It will be unusual for the family historian to find useful genealogical material in these libraries. Much more likely to be found is material that contextualises the life of an individual.

A vast amount of nonconformist material, particularly for English Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Unitarians is to be found in [Dr Williams's Library](#).

At [John Rylands Library](#) the main Methodist collection is held and much United Reformed Church material (Congregational and English Presbyterian) is indicated on the [United Reformed Church Historical Society's](#) website.

The [Quaker Library](#) at Friends House has links to genealogy sources

Conclusion

The foregoing is far from exhaustive. More information is becoming available through the web as further documents are deposited and cataloguing improved. Searching regularly will often be rewarded.

Getting to know something of the practices and beliefs of the denomination will help to make sense of many of the records. A good starting point is the relevant [My Ancestors](#) book where references to denominational histories will be found.

This document was written by Michael Isherwood.
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