

## **A NATIONAL DATABASE FOR CHURCHWARDENS' ACCOUNTS**

### **A much under used historical source: the churchwardens' accounts and the database now being created.**

**By Dr Valerie Hitchman**

If you are unfamiliar with, and have never looked at churchwardens' accounts please do not let the word 'accounts' deter you – the early, pre-c.1850, churchwardens accounts are often full of local information offering glimpses into the community for which they were produced – they are not just a set of figures.

Churchwardens were elected annually or bi-annually, and were responsible for the financial affairs in the parish for which they had to account. The accounts were presented annually, usually, at Easter each year. The churchwardens were primarily concerned with those matters for which they were responsible, the nave of the parish church, the decoration and furnishings of same, the churchyard, and recording the money collected and spent for those purposes.

This entailed the collection of the church rate, the poor rate, the clerk's wages, and payment to the organist if there was one. They also, sometimes, had to act as landlords; letting church property, collecting rents, and maintaining the property. They recorded routine and non-routine expenditure such as the running costs of the church, provision of communion bread and wine, visitation costs, cleaning and repairs, protection against pests such as moles in the graveyard, and vermin within the parish, maintenance of bells, walls and fences, etc. They regularly produced an inventory of church goods, and often made payment to the vagrant (or wandering) poor passing through the parish – payment to ensure they moved on and did not become a financial burden to the parish. This was especially true where pregnant women were concerned.

Within the larger towns and cities the churchwardens collaborated with guilds and fraternities or other parish groups whenever funding was required for larger projects. In smaller parishes, where there were no such guilds or fraternities nor gentry or wealthier parishioner the problem of fundraising was constant. The poverty in many parishes meant that decoration and repairs were not undertaken through lack of money, even the provision of essentials was sometimes lacking. Private benefactions might or might not be recorded in the annual accounts and some work might not be recorded under payments. Much voluntary work, as today, might go unrecorded. The Rector or impropiator, often a leading laymen in the area, or the Crown, Archbishop, Bishop, educational establishment, or guild, were responsible for the upkeep of the chancel.

Much will always depend on the ability, honesty, and conscientiousness of the churchwardens and the detail of their accounts. Their task was an onerous one. Beside the financial responsibilities, their work with the church courts could find them presenting a parishioner, their neighbour, for 'crimes' ranging from non-appearance at church services to sexual indiscretion. They also had to physically collect the various annual rates from all

parishioners, again, their neighbours. The very nature and content of their annual accounts could be contested at the annual meeting, and should be taken only as an indication of activity. C. Burgess in “The Pre-Reformation Churchwardens’ Accounts and Parish Government: Lessons from London and Bristol”, *English Historical Review*, cxvii, 471, 2002, pp. 306-32, argues that many churchwardens’ accounts might best be seen as provisional documents presented verbally and subject to minor alterations on the day. Indeed, debates continue as to how accounts were created, why, for whom, by whom, how they were used, what they might encompass, and why they are found in varying numbers across the country, unevenly scattered for rural and urban parishes alike. B. Kümin, *The Shaping of a Community: the Rise and Reformation of the English Parish c.1400-1560*, 1996, and A. Foster, “Churchwardens’ Accounts of Early Modern England and Wales: some Problems to Note, but Much to be Gained” in K. French, G. Gibbs & B. Kümin, eds., *The Parish In English Life 1400-1600*, 1997, pp. 74-93, expand on this problem.

Yet despite these problems, churchwardens’ accounts do provide historians of many interests and specialisms with a ‘treasure trove’ of information. Many are aware of churchwardens’ account, but they are, perhaps, only fully understood by relatively few. They form one of the key elements of parish records—the contents of the celebrated parish chest—and yet we still do not know precisely how many accounts survive for England and Wales, and in what condition. Both J. C. Cox in *Churchwardens’ Accounts from the 14th Century to the Close of the 17th Century*, 1913, and W. E. Tate, *The Parish Chest*, 1960, were the pioneers in this field.

Local and regional historians, including M. Spufford, *The World of the Rural Dissenters 1520-1725*, 1995, J. Craig, “Co-operation and Initiatives: Elizabethan Churchwardens and the Parish Accounts of Mildenhall”, *Social History*, 18, 3, October 1993, pp. 357-380, have long exploited churchwardens’ accounts, but usually on a relatively local scale affording little context or scope for comparative analysis. Similarly, a few excellent transcripts of churchwardens’ accounts have been published by various County Record Societies and University Libraries although these tend to be for only one or two parishes within their collection which are wonderful examples of particularly interesting and detailed sets of accounts. Those for pre-Reformation Bristol and for Reading, come to mind, and these need to be set against small rural parishes. Not everywhere has the riches of Morebath. E. Duffy. *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*. 2001.

These record society volumes produced, over many years include: W. Bennett, *The Churchwardens’ Accounts of the Parish of Burnley*, Burnley Historical Society, 1969; A. Hanham, *Churchwardens’ Accounts of Ashburton 1479-1580*, Devon and Cornwall Record Society NS vol. 15, 1970; P. Northeast, *Boxford Churchwardens’ Accounts 1530-1561*, Suffolk Record Society xxiii, 1982; C. J. Litzenberger, *Tewkesbury Churchwardens’ Accounts 1563-1624*, 1994; C. C. Webb, *Churchwardens’ Accounts of St Michael, Spurriergate, York 1518-1548*, 1997; L. A. Botelho, *Churchwardens’ Accounts of Cratfield 1640-1660*, 1999; D. P. Dymond, *The Churchwardens’ Book of Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire 1496-c.1540*, 2004; J. Middleton-Stewart, *The Records of the Churchwardens of Mildenhall*, S 2011; J. Dils, *Reading, St Laurence Churchwardens’ Accounts 1498-1570*, Berkshire Record Society, vols. 19 & 20, 2013; A. Craven, *The Churchwardens’ Accounts of St Mary’s Devizes, 1633-1689*, 2016; J. Mattingly, *Stratton Churchwardens’ Accounts, 1512-1578*, 2018; V. Hitchman, *Norton in Hales, Shropshire. Churchwardens’ Accounts and Memoranda Book 1701-1810*, 2019.

The churchwardens’ accounts have been used to identify landholdings and buildings in a parish, especially where the property provides income to the church. They reveal details of church services and patterns of expenditure on item such as communion wine. Expenditure on routine and extraordinary repairs such as extensions and rebuilding campaigns can be used by archaeologists and architectural historians to date structures, and those interested in material culture can measure the impact of the Reformation, Interregnum, Restoration, and Queen Anne’s bounty on the church. Specialist debates have been sparked on such matters as bell towers, the placing of ‘altars’ in the 1630s, the programmes of re-arrangement and the ‘beautification’ of interiors carried out at various periods throughout history.

Historians have made a habit of raiding churchwardens' accounts for specific themes as well as by place and time. One thinks of David Cressy's excellent *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England*, 1989, recording bell ringing and community bonfires across the country. Ronald Hutton's *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: the Ritual Year, 1400-1700*, 1994, and Kenneth Fincham and Nicholas Tyacke made great use of such records for their ground-breaking work *Altars Restored: Changing Face of English Religious Worship, c.1547-c.1700*, 2007. John Morrill, and others have shown what might be done for the neglected years of the Interregnum. In *Reactions to the English Civil War 1642-1649*, 1982, J. Morrill has used churchwardens' accounts to show the continued purchase of communion bread and wine, and the use of the *Book of Common Prayer* rather than the state *Directory for Public Worship*. J. Walter, in "The Public Sphere and the Parish Pump: Finding Politics in the Churchwardens' Accounts, 1639-1643", in V. Hitchman and A. Foster, eds., *Views from the Parish: Churchwardens' Accounts c.1500-c.1800*, 2015, pp. 157-177, has used the accounts to look at public politics during the mid-seventeenth century and Jonathan Willis has demonstrated clever and systematic use of accounts to reveal much about continued musical traditions within parishes after the Reformation in *Church Music and Protestantism in Post-Reformation England*, 2010. Both Katherine French, in *The People of the Parish. Community life in a Late Medieval English Diocese*, 2001, and Gary Gibbs, in *Five Parishes in Late Medieval and Tudor London*, 2019 use the accounts extensively to look at parish communities and their internal relationships in both medieval and early modern England. John Craig is currently working on literacy in Early Modern England using the accounts. Further use of the accounts can be found in M. Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 1988; E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400 – c. 1580*, 2005; J. Spurr, *The Restoration of the Church of England, 1646-1689*, 1991; N. Mears, and A. Ryrie eds., *Worship and the Parish Church in Early Modern Britain*, 2013. These examples illustrate just some of the many uses made of these records; much more could be said about all periods. The churchwardens' accounts can kick-start a number of profitable lines of enquiry simply through the production of this database

There is much for the economic historians too. Taken over a long period the changing pattern of parish income sources can be traced through the wealth or poverty of the parishioners and emphasize the difficulties faced by the churchwardens. An attempt has been made to construct a price index for common building materials by V. Hitchman, in *Omnia bene or Ruinosa? The condition of the parish churches in and around London and Westminster c1630-1677*, 2009, in line with more famous retail price indices. By Phelps Brown, E. H. & Hopkins, S. V. *A perspective of wages and prices*. 1981.

Family historians can also find the churchwardens' accounts useful, depending on the details presented within them. The various rate lists will indicate the status of parishioners and may also give the profession, especially, if work is undertaken for the churchwardens. It is not uncommon for the craftsmen and profession to be named within the accounts – masons, tilers, plasterers, daubers, carpenters and plumbers regularly appear in the accounts.

More local historians are needed to make careful studies of the churchwardens' accounts. We need to consider the work of churchwardens within their parishes; who served as churchwardens and did their status within the parish impact on what they achieved, or did not achieve? The focus is generally centred on the clergy and the local gentry, but what about the occasional illiterate churchwardens who signed with a mark but might have had an astute head for figures?

While many historians know about these records for their own area or favourite topic, we still need a "roadmap" to the survival of such records across the country to provide a context to research, and a sense of the parameters within which we work. That roadmap stretches to encompass more than 125 Record Offices, Local History Libraries, Churches and other depositories, one of which is the Huntingdon Library in California. Currently, it is believed that almost 6,000 parishes in England and Wales have pre-1850 accounts surviving. The database

project will eventually provide full details of the surviving accounts for historians and archivists alike. For the latter will benefit. Having familiarity with what is in their local collections without knowing how those collections compare with others, they are unaware of what riches they might possess. The database presents us with an opportunity to question the survival of churchwardens' accounts for different geographical regions, jurisdictions and types of parishes and explore possible changes in patterns over time.

The benefits of using the churchwardens' accounts has been outlined, but the problem of location and surviving dates is a major drawback to using them. In some cases, especially with older catalogues the overseers' accounts are frequently described as churchwardens, rarely the other way round. Both paper and on-line catalogues generally give only the first and last date of the contents of each documents. Where a document contains more than just the churchwardens' accounts, such as vestry minutes or other officer's accounts, the catalogued dates may not be relevant to the churchwardens' accounts. For example a document described as vestry minutes with some churchwardens' accounts 1666-1724 may only have one or two accounts or may only give income and expenditure totals. These totals give no indication of how that money has been spent. In some parishes where the churchwarden and overseer are the same person, the accounts are usually within the same documents and frequently muddled. Many documents, especially those covering early years, are volumes created many years later from loose, individual sheets of accounts. These volumes can contain an uninterrupted run of accounts, long runs of accounts with occasional years missing, have several short runs of accounts or have only occasional years surviving. It is a lottery.

On-line catalogues are unforgiving and restrictive. Errors and variations in data entry and the way that the search engine has been programmed means that many documents are missed and many are listed which should not be. Problems arise because documents can be described as churchwardens, churchwardens', or church wardens. Also entries have been found where the document is described as parish accounts, church accounts, general accounts, receipts and disbursements, or expenditure. None of this allows for the occasional spelling mistake or typographical error. In some parishes the overseer of the poor is described as the churchwarden of the poor or the churchwarden and overseer of the poor. In both cases the accounts tend to be only overseer or charity accounts.

In counties where there are several County Record Offices such as Yorkshire (a nightmare!), Cumbria, Kent, Suffolk, Sussex and London, documents are not always where you would expect to find them. Also, documents are sometimes located in small Local History Libraries or have been retained by the parish. There is also the problem of parishes which have changed county or where the diocese wishes all the parish documents to be held in one location. The Welsh parishes are a particular problem with several changes of policy over the last few years. Originally, all documents were held in local record offices, then the decision was made for them all be held in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. Before that process had been completed the decision was reversed and County Record Offices were reintroduced so that the documents were 'near the people they relate to'. As several of the Record Offices had closed the re-establishment of the County Record Offices has taken time. Now the National Library of Wales still holds a large number of parish documents; those deposited within private collections. Although most original Welsh counties now have their own Record Office, there are two exceptions; Carmarthenshire records are temporarily housed in West Glamorgan Record Office, Swansea, and the records for Montgomeryshire, Radnorshire, and Brecknockshire are in Powys Record Office, Llandrindod Wells.

It was the frustration caused by these problems that led to this crazy but much needed project. Following a conference held in Kent in October 2010 (yes it has taken that long to get this far) the project was born and completion is in sight. The database lists all known churches within each historic county, whether parish church, chapel of ease, or private chapel; thus providing valuable context for comparative use, and suggesting pointers for yet further areas of

research. Furthermore, the diocese, archdeaconry and deanery for each is given as well as its status as Rectory or vicarage, and if it is an ecclesiastical peculiar. Searches can be made in both the main parish list and the individual county lists and all data can be copied for private use. For each county the survival of every account is recorded into a spreadsheet allowing researchers to see clearly which parishes have accounts surviving for any individual year or period. The total expenditure of each surviving account is given on the individual parish spreadsheets.

As with everything else the pandemic has had a major impact on progress but as life returns to some semblance of normality I am appealing for help, so that this project can be completed before I reach my 'best before date'. Can you help with this important project? Are you close to one of the County Record Offices listed below? Would you be able to work in the Record Office with me or alone? I will meet with all volunteers and work with them for a day or more and some help may be available with travel costs or parking. A day or half a day most weeks would be wonderful but any regular help would be appreciated, even if only for a few weeks. The task involves noting the date of each account along with the total expenditure. The task is not difficult, although the writing may sometimes prove a challenge in one or two documents. If that proves too difficult, they can be noted and left for myself, or a colleague, to check. Maybe you have a friend who might be interested in helping with this project either alone or with you? Two is Company and can make the take more enjoyable.

Please contact me if you would like more information. [v.hitchman@kent.ac.uk](mailto:v.hitchman@kent.ac.uk)

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The County Record Offices where data is still to be collected are: -

**Cornwall (Redruth)**  
**Dorset (Dorchester)**  
**Leicestershire & Rutland (Wigston Magna)**  
**Shropshire (Shrewsbury)**  
**Warwickshire (Warwick)**

**Devon (Exeter)**  
**Herefordshire (Hereford)**  
**Lincolnshire (Lincoln)**  
**Somerset (Taunton),**  
**Worcestershire (Worcester)**