



English and Irish Nonconformist Records

Michelle Dennis looks at records left by those who rejected the Established Church of England

WHAT IS A NONCONFORMIST OR DISSENTING ANCESTOR? The term is used to describe those who rejected the practises of the Established Church of England (Anglicans). This included Methodists (Wesleyan and Primitive), Presbyterians, Puritans, Baptists, Quakers (Friends or Strangers), Unitarians, Independents and Congregationalists. The term usually refers to protestants, but also may include Catholics and Jews.



Exiled nonconformists landing in America. (Public Domain)

The theological belief in the priesthood of all believers, i.e., that a person may communicate directly with God without the need of a clergyman to intercede, distinguished all dissenters from practising Anglicans. At the time, this was seen as blasphemy by the Anglican Church. Dissenters also did not conform to its customs, regulations, or sacraments.

Modern religious dissent in England stems from the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660, and from those who by dissenting from the 1662 Act of Uniformity, were labelled nonconformists or dissenters. The Act of Uniformity insisted that all men in holy orders, every minister, teacher, lecturer, or university fellow, must submit to Anglican authority

and to the bishops, as if they were appointed by God. If such ministers were unable or unwilling to conform, they were ejected from their livings (religious and government appointments).

Although most clergy conformed to the Church of England's strict rules, many refused to do so. Almost 1,000 (a sixth of the total) lost their employment, and approximately 2,000 clergymen and teachers suffered in England and Wales between 1660 and 1662, creating a permanent split in the religious life of Britain. Often the nonconformists had powerful support from outside the church, including major English industrialists like Josiah Wedgwood.

Acts of Parliament that affected our ancestors

- Act of Uniformity 1662
 - ejecting nonconformists requiring them to conform to the Anglican Common Book of Prayer and the 39 articles (statements of belief contained therein).
- The Conventicle Act of 1664 – forbidding the meeting of more than 5 people for unauthorized worship.

- Five Mile Act of 1665 – forbidding dissenting ministers living within 5 miles of an incorporated town of their previous living, and disallowing dissenting ministers to teach (often a fall-back career for clergymen).
- Toleration Act of 1689 – allowing dissenter worship in licenced buildings provided they took the oaths of allegiance and supremacy. (This excluded Quakers who could not take an oath, and Unitarians who did not accept the doctrine of the Trinity).

Denominational Differences

Major differences existed between the denominations in doctrine, church government, worship and ministry. Some examples are:

- **Baptism** – Baptists do not practice infant baptism, only baptising adults who express belief in Christ. Quakers do not practice baptism or celebrate the eucharist. Methodists, Presbyterians, and Independents all practice infant baptism.
- **Worship** – Quakers do not believe in having a minister but have a shared practice of worship. Most other denominations have a formal leader of the congregation such as a minister, pastor, etc. Independents/Congregationalists believe that a person may communicate directly with God without the need of a clergyman as an intermediary.
- **Church Governance** – Methodists were not considered independent congregations, but were governed from the Conference, Circuit and District system. Baptists were totally independent congregations.
- **Women's role** – Methodists included women leaders and evangelists, Baptists and Presbyterians did not.

Church Discipline

Discipline of the congregations was maintained in two main ways – by peer pressure from other members to conform and act appropriately, and formally by the leaders of the church. Church minutes may refer to disciplinary issues, and even dismissals. Drunkenness and failure to attend church regularly were common issues and would have been dealt with accordingly. Records of these disciplinary issues may exist in church minutes. Drunkenness was a big problem and Temperance societies encouraged members to make abstinence pledges

and held strong anti-alcohol community campaigns and meetings.

Dissenters In Your Family



BMDRegisters web page. (www.bmdregisters.co.uk)

There are two main ways to discover if you have a nonconformist in your family. If you are unable to find them in the established church records, it is worth looking for a nonconformist baptism, marriage, and/or burial. A good place to start is the Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial BMDs Service, www.bmdregisters.co.uk (free index).



Family bibles were often passed down through the generations and may reveal clues such as pledge cards.

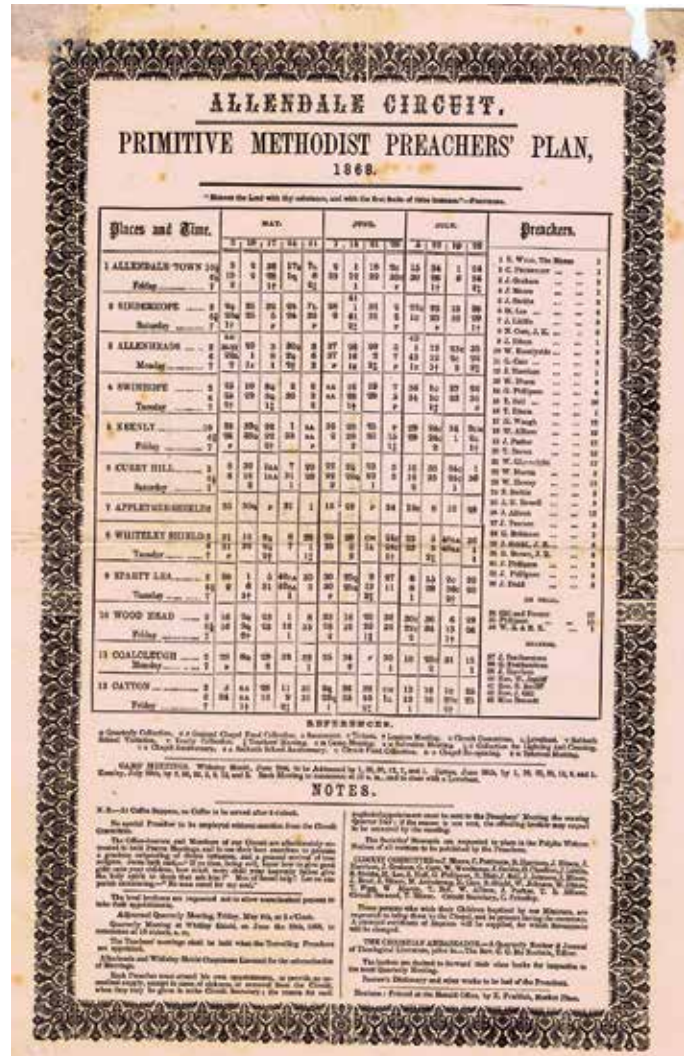
Try looking among inherited books and papers, perhaps finding a clue in your family memorabilia. Family diaries and bibles sometimes contain clues such as pledge cards, Sunday School cards, etc. My large old Luke family ancestor's bible contained three small paper cards that were used as bookmarks.

One of the cards was a Band of Hope liquor abstinence promise card dated 16 Nov 1881, from the Philadelphia Primitive Methodist chapel in Durham. The British Newspaper Archive, www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk, has many entries about the chapel activities.

The cards gave me important clues enabling me to know where to look for my ancestors recording the denomination (Primitive Methodist), the chapel



Band of Hope cards belonging to the author's ancestor, Jane Gray.



A Preacher's Plan for the Allendale Circuit which includes the name of the author's ancestor Joseph Ritson.

location (Philadelphia, Durham, England), and dates my ancestor Jane Gray attended the chapel (May 1881, May 1882 and 16 November 1881).

Another genealogical clue may be in your ancestor's music and hymn books. I found an old Primitive Methodist hymn book of my 3x great grandfather, listing his name, and the chapel to which he belonged – Houghton Le Spring, Durham.

Once we know the geographical location of our ancestor's place of worship, we can look at other records. Durham Records Online, www.durhamrecordsonline.com, contain many nonconformist baptisms, marriages and burials including Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Congregational, Methodist, and Baptist for Durham and Northumberland.

Some chapels kept their own registers available online on subscription websites such as Ancestry and Find My Past. The Hope of Violet Town Methodist

Chapel in Victoria, Australia was established in 1874, and its membership register records my grandfather, with his name, address, occupation, and date.

For Methodists also try The Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland website at <http://dmbi.online>. You can search by people or placename. My ancestor Joseph Ritson 1852-1932 was a Primitive Methodist preacher in Northumberland, and I found a biography on this site which included his birthplace, ministry training, where he taught as a teacher, and several books that he authored.

Record Types

There are two types of records you may find for a dissenting church your ancestor attended:

Chapel Records

- Minute books - Sunday School Anniversaries,

Sabbath School visitations, Preacher Examining, Quarterly Meetings, finances, leaders' meetings and committees.

- Programmes, members' rolls, magazines, yearbooks, preachers circuit plans, class & pew rent books.

Non-Chapel Records

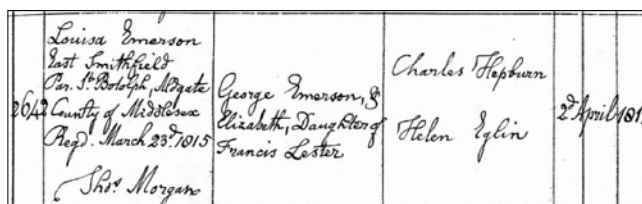
- Newspapers – church services, Sunday School notices, advertisements, celebrations, weddings, buildings, visiting speakers, fundraising, memorials, minister appointments and event write-ups – www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
- Local directories (such as Kelly's Directory of Durham in 1890) also list school attendances. Historical Directories of England and Wales website – <http://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/digital/collection/p16445coll4>
- Local History websites sometimes also contain information on individual churches and chapels.
- The 1851 Durham Religious census – church activities – https://archive.org/details/census_greatbrit00manngoog.
- Current day church websites – e.g., Durham University Methodist Society – <http://durhammethsoc.webs.com>
- Church magazines, e.g., Wesleyan Methodist Magazine for some years is available online at Google Books, <https://books.google.com>.

If you have Methodists in the family, two wonderful resources for information for individuals and chapels can be found at www.mywesleyanmethodists.org.uk and www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk.

The Wesleyan, Primitive and United Methodist Churches were separate divisions with a shared heritage and very similar organizational methods. In 1807 Primitive Methodists split from the major denomination of Wesleyan Methodism. They were called 'Primitive' because they wanted to get back to Methodism's original aims of outdoor evangelism, conversion, and strict discipleship. They started to hold outdoor all day 'camp meetings' with fervent preaching and prayer meetings. Thousands attended to the dismay of the established Methodist leaders who felt they had lost control. They therefore expelled the leaders who started their own churches around 1810.

In general, nonconformist baptism records tend to

give more information than the traditional Anglican parish registers. They often provide the mother's maiden name, grandparents, and birth order of the children.



Birth certificate for Louisa Emerson born 1815.

Sometimes three generations of a family can be found on the one document. On the birth registration for my ancestor Elizabeth Emerson in 1811 in London, the entry registered at the Dr. William's Library in London gave Elizabeth's full birthdate and abode, (East Smithfield, London), parish (St. Botolph Aldgate), father's name, mother's name, and maternal grandfather's name.

Dr William's Library in Cripplegate, London, was established by the will of Dr Daniel Williams, the leading London nonconformist minister of his day. In his 1716 will he left instructions for his trustees to house his vast collection of nonconformist records (7600 books) in a public library for the use of ministers, tutors, and students. Today it is the largest collection of nonconformist records in the world. Many of the records are listed on subscription sites including Ancestry and The Genealogist, www.the-genealogist.com/non-conformist-records (free index).

Persecution

Many nonconformist preachers and ministers were persecuted for their stance against the established church and sometimes their exploits can be found in published books online. I was able to find out more about two of my ancestors by doing a name and place search on Google Books.

My ancestor the Reverend Alexander McCoomb was born in 1705 in Rathfriland, County Down, Northern Ireland.

In 1733 several landed proprietors of the Creggan parish (14 miles south-west of Newry), invited Presbyterians to settle in their respective estates, and invited the Rev. Alexander McCombe, a licentiate of the Presbytery of Killileagh to be their minister. The Killyleagh Academy had a reputation among Anglican elites for being a training ground in heresy and advanced politics.

Alexander obtained a large amount of land in the area and leased it to a number of likeminded



The rebuilt Freeduff Presbyterian Chapel in Northern Ireland where the author's ancestor preached until his passing at the age of 90 in 1797.

Presbyterian families dating from 1744 to his death in 1794. Often nonconformists such as Presbyterians would lease each other land in the same area around a particular chapel or church.

The Irish Registry of Deeds on Familysearch contains lots of wonderful genealogical information on the families. This free resource can be searched by name or townland, <https://irishdeedsindex.net/search>.

Unfortunately, the political and religious climate at the time led to the burning down of his church, and he gave testimony that the “evil disposed persons of the papist religion (the Catholics) had destroyed his meeting house”. His testimony and a well written account of the Presbyterians of the area can be found online in several places (The Burning of Freeduff Presbyterian Church 1743)



The Octagon Chapel in Norwich, Norfolk, England. It was completed in 1756 by architect Thomas Ivory.

including Jstor, www.jstor.org/stable/20558013. Alexander was still preaching at the rebuilt Freeduff Meeting House at the age of 90, two years before he died in 1797.

Another ancestor Thomas Toft, a merchant grocer and alderman of Norwich in Norfolk, England was also a dissenter, and followed the Unitarian doctrine. Thomas was born in 1585 in Norwich, and as a young man chose to protest against the harsh traditions of the Church of England. Anyone that made their own decisions regarding religion was called a heretic and could be punished.

In a book entitled ‘Godly Reformers and their Opponents in Early Modern England, Religion in Norwich 1560-1643’ Thomas Toft was mentioned as having been ‘counted as a non-conformist for refusing to stand for the Creed at St. Clements, Norwich’ and he was also presented to the church disciplinary council for ‘sermon gadding’ (talking about it in an aimless manner) with several neighbours. Thomas was originally a churchwarden at St. Clements, but in 1637 he organised a church rate strike among the good folk of St. Clements to ‘stymie laudian refurbishment of the church’. In 1662 the King himself decided to eject all nonconformists from public office, including Thomas, so he was removed as Alderman, and the Kings Commissioners were sworn in.

Record Locations

Large numbers of nonconformist registers were collected by the General Register Office of England in 1837 when civil registration began. Many are kept at the National Archives UK and are available to view at The Genealogist website, www.thegenealogist.co.uk/non-conformist-records.

If you have London, or surrounding parish ancestors another place to look for unusual baptisms and marriages is the Fleet Clandestine registers 1667-1754. These records are available on The Genealogist, and some are on FamilySearch.

A valid marriage in Anglican church law meant that banns had to be called for three successive Sundays in the parish churches of the couple, or a marriage license must be paid for. Parental consent must also be obtained if either of the couple were under age 21 years. There must also be valid witnesses and the marriage must take place during the hours of 8 AM and noon. So, to avoid all these conditions, a clandestine marriage (outside the Church of England) could be arranged in haste.

Couples may choose to marry clandestinely for



A Quaker meeting house and burial ground at Airton in Yorkshire.

several reasons including: privacy (no interfering parishioners or family), the cost (fleet marriages were cheaper than a parish church wedding), flexibility of dates (backdating marriages to confirm legitimacy was common), bigamy (if no banns were called, they had a good chance of the marriage going undetected), and secrecy or speed (to hide a pregnancy).

These clandestine marriages did comply with English common law and were valid for the purposes of inheritance and proof of legitimacy (of children, etc.). Attempts were made by the authorities to stamp out irregular and clandestine marriages, and they were officially banned by the Marriage Act in 1754. Marriage ceremonies held in Methodist chapels were legalised in 1837. Some congregations kept their own birth (not baptism) books as well as burial registers.

The National Archives UK holds other nonconformist records for Quakers (Friends), Baptists, and other denominations so it is worth searching the Discovery catalogue for your area of interest at <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>.

Another great source of nonconformist records is at Genuki UK and Ireland Genealogy, www.Genuki.org.uk. Here you will find a list of all the known church records for the particular town or city.

For example, if I search for “Alnwick, Northumberland church records” in the search box, I am presented with what records are available including two Church of England churches, two Catholic churches, as well as three Methodist chapels and six Presbyterian Meeting Houses, and where to find the records.

Another way to search by an ancestor’s town or city is to use the very useful Online Genealogical Index website at www.ogindex.org/search. This website will list the available baptism, marriage and burial registers (both Church of England and nonconformist) for a particular place in England or Wales. You can sort the records by county, town, dates and birth/baptism, marriage, death, or burial record.

Some of our nonconformist ancestors immigrated across the world to find religious freedom and founded their own churches, educational establishments, and communities. So, look beyond the Anglican parish registers and Bishops Transcripts and see what you can find! ©

more nonconformist resources

The Official Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial BMDs Service – www.bmdregisters.co.uk

London England Nonconformist Registers 1694-1931 – www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/1906

England & Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970 – <https://search.ancestry.com.au/search/db.aspx?dbid=2972>

England & Wales Non-Conformist Record Indexes 1588-1977 – <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1666142>

Dissenting Academies Online – <https://dissacad.english.qmul.ac.uk>

England & Wales, Quaker Birth, Marriage, and Death Registers, 1578-1837 – <http://search.ancestry.com.au/search/db.aspx?dbid=7097>

Quakers – Library of Religious Friends, London – <https://quaker.org.uk/resources/library>

The National Archives UK – records from Dr Williams Library 1742-1865, GRO 1836-1970, Presbyterian, Independent & Baptist Registry 1742-1837, Wesleyan Methodist Metropolitan Registry 1818-1838 – <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/SearchUI/details/redirect/?CATLN=3&CATID=12174&CATREF=rg+5>

Baptist Historical Society – <https://baptisthistory.org.uk>

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