



Parish Registers

In Wilts.

A discussion is being carried on in the *Times* on the subject of Parish Registers. A correspondent, who visited something like 100 parishes in the county of Wilts, and by the courtesy of the incumbents perused the registers, gives his description of the condition in which he found them. "In some," he says, "but few, instances they were perfect, some were mutilated, some were kept in clerkly handwriting, some were badly written and worse spelt. At Westwood, Wilts, now a separate rectory, but some years ago one of the seven parishes in charge of the vicar of Bradford-on Avon, I found the registers in an unlocked iron chest, open to any one. They had been shamefully treated, and I heard that a former churchwarden was in the habit of tearing out the leaves to light his pipe, and he also utilized the bell ropes for wagon lines; there was then no resident parson. At North Bradley, in the same county, is a forged entry of a baptism, in the latter part of the last century, when the vicar was non-resident and the clerk had charge of the registers. The late Archdeacon Daubeny, afterwards vicar, discovered the insertion, and there is now a letter from him between the pages of the register calling attention to the forged entry. Boyton registers, also in Wilts, where the late Duke of Albany resided, are most unique and in capital order. The entries of marriages during the Commonwealth are numerous and in good handwriting; they were performed by the civil power. The registers of Hill Deveril, Wilts, were imperfect by the loss of a book. On the death of the Dowager Duchess of Somerset a few years ago, the volume was discovered in her possession and returned to the parish. The oldest registers in Wilts are at Bratton, in Westbury parish; they date from 1539, and are perfect to the present. My experience of parish registers in Wilts has been to show me that they were kept as they formerly were, by a paid servant, generally an attorney, they are, as long as that system lasted, in good order; but where they fell into the hands of the parish clerk their condition is lamentable. Beside the entries of baptism, marriage, and death, some persons made notes of remarkable local events; such is the case at Wyllye and Imber, in Wiltshire, the former recording a terrific thunderstorm, the latter some murders that took place in the parish. The rector of Stapleford in the 17th century had a horror of Nonconformists and Quakers, and he never fails to express his opinion. A former churchwarden of Dinton proclaims in the register that he is the best boxer in the parish with the exception of the rector's son. This was during the last century. Parsons nowadays carefully look after their registers; 50 years ago many rural parishes had no resident parson, and I think I may say that, as far as I have seen, registers suffered more between 1700 and 1820 than at any other time. I may add that three or four years ago I found the parish churchwarden's account book in the middle of last century on the counter of the shop at Longbridge Deveril; some leaves had been used, but I rescued the remainder."

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