

## My Ancestors were Nonconformists – how can I find them?

Talk by Michael Gandy at *'Who do you think you are?' Exhibition, Olympia, 1 March 2009*

Michael Gandy gave us a whirlwind tour of nonconformists in his 45 minute talk – I cannot guarantee the absolute accuracy of the following notes – but hopefully they will give you an insight into the religious life in Britain that he vividly described.

**Puritans** were widely distributed around the country before 1642, but they did not exist as separate groups, as they attended the same churches as everyone else. This was because there was a wide range in the style of worship according to the particular minister installed in each parish. At this time the Clergy were appointed to a parish by the Lord of the Manor – and if he held puritan views, then he would appoint a minister with similar views. The vast majority of the population still lived in rural areas and were agricultural labourers. The labourers of the parish had no option but to attend their parish church, because anyone who refused to attend church for religious reasons could be summoned to the Quarter Sessions and fined. However in practice this type of punishment was more generally reserved for Roman Catholics.

Puritans with strongly held views could also be called before religious courts – though these records are very difficult to find – often they would be accused of fornication; but in reality this was a result of their refusal to marry in church. Most Puritans believed that marriage was merely a civil contract, not a sacrament, therefore it was a private arrangement, as was divorce. This was at a time when most couples entering into marriage did so for reasons of economy and convenience rather than for love. Many women were already pregnant, or may already have borne children by the man they married, and it was expected that the husband would provide food and shelter whilst the wife would bear a succession of children to become workers to support the family. If for any reason the husband failed to provide, it was quite common for the woman to informally 'divorce' him and find herself a new husband.

**The Civil War of 1642** resulted in the destruction of the Church of England as the national church. At this time, informal groups that had existed for decades began to emerge:

- **Independents** – Congregationalists and separatists – these groups believed in complete equality of everyone who belonged, they chose to come together to hear people discuss the views and beliefs, but their leaders had no authority
- **Presbyterians** – whose Ministers dictated exactly what the parishioners should do
- **Baptists** – against baptism for children, and believed baptism was merely a public statement of a person's belief and initiation into adulthood – so records of the event were not necessary (causing problems for family historians!)
- **Quakers** – believed that no one can tell you to do anything – God will tell you what he wants you to do, through your own spiritual understanding. Their meetings were often held in Friends' houses and are generally well recorded. These records are held in the National Archives and also at the Friends House Library in Euston.

Most of these religious groups did not keep records of baptism but did keep records of births. They also kept records of announcements of marriages and of burials. The National Archives now hold all the records which were previously kept at the Family Records Centre.

### **The 1662 Act of Uniformity and the Book of Common Prayer**

This Act required that all Ministers must be ordained by a Bishop and all services must follow the new Book of Common Prayer to the letter – it was an attempt to get rid of all the Dissenters, but it had the effect of many ministers leaving the Church of England – the Quarter Sessions which had to deal with them are a rich source of records.

**The 1689 Act of Toleration** granted freedom of worship to Nonconformists such as Baptists and Congregationalists but did not apply to Catholics or Quakers who continued to be excluded from political office and from Universities. From 1691 the recognised groups could build their own Chapels.

The Quarter Session Records cease in 1691 and from this period all non conformist records are held at the National Archives.

By 1760 the number of these religious groups has halved but in the late 1700s, we see the rise of Methodism. The Methodists kept very detailed records for baptisms, but still all Marriages and Burials had to take place in the Church of England (except for Quakers and Jews).

**The Quakers** particularly objected to the requirements for burials – they believed that after death the bodily remains turned to dust and that burial amounted to worship of the human remains. They did not see any need to use holy ground for burials and certainly did not have gravestones (in fact, some Quakers went so far as to remove gravestones of their ancestors from parish burial grounds). They did however erect plaques in honour of the memory of a person.

**Methodists and nonconformists** were all lower middle class – the working classes could not read so were unable to read the Bible in order to make their own interpretation of it. The upper classes remained in charge of selecting their minister – who would provide the sort of structure they paid him to provide.

However the **1832 Reform Act** allowed the middle classes to take control.

The **1834 Reform of the Poor Law** removed the power previously held by the Church to deal with the poor and the Board of Guardians took over.

The introduction of **Registration of births in 1837** meant that Baptismal Certificates were no longer required and also that marriages could now take place in Register Offices (so you will find many early Register Office marriages for Quakers and other non conformists).

In **1853 Borough Cemeteries** were set up, so this mean that even burials need not take place in Church.

In **1858 a Central Probate system** was introduced, so this removed the need for probate to be dealt with in the Church Courts.

In **1870 State Education** was introduced, removing the need for religious schools ad in 1906 there was an attempt to have religion removed from the curriculum of state schools.

Michael Gandy assured us that Nonconformist records do exist, just not necessarily in the same places as Anglican parish records. He suggested searching

- Land Records
- Court Records
- Business Records
- Probate Records
- Apprenticeships

to find those elusive ancestors.

If you want to learn more – Michael has written a book “Family History Cultures and Faiths” published 2007 by the National Archives. ISBN 9781905615117