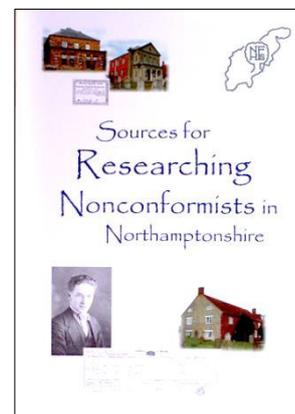


NORTHAMPTONSHIRE NON-CONFORMIST RECORDS

Northamptonshire has a long history of non-conformism. There were 18 Independent (or Congregational) meetings that were formed before 1700 including Rothwell 1655, Creaton, Crick, Kettering, Kilsby, Northampton Castle Hill, Oundle, Weedon and Wellingborough in 1662. Likewise there were 18 Baptist chapels established before 1764. Methodism came later, the first society is that at Whittlebury in 1763 when a farmhouse was licenced for preaching. The Society of Friends (Quakers) developed during the 1640s and was well established in the county by 1660 particularly at Northampton, Kettering, Wellingborough and Bugbrooke.

It is quite possible therefore that at least some of your ancestors may have attended a non-conformist place of worship and this article will give you an overview of some of the records available. Please be aware, that the survival of registers and records is somewhat patchy.

It is helpful to have an overview of the different beliefs of the various denominations and how they are structured and administered. A useful publication is NFHS Guide to Non-conformist records in Northamptonshire, written by Graham Ward, which is available from our bookshop or online via Parish Chest (£2.50) or look at the national websites for each religion.



Registers

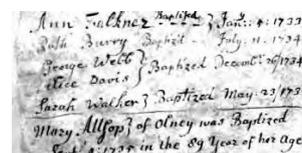
Large numbers of non-conformist registers were collected by the General Register Office in 1837 when civil registration began and are now held by the National Archives. Copies of the majority of these are available on microfilm at Northamptonshire Archives (NRO). Those for classes RG4, RG5 and RG8 can be searched online at ancestry.co.uk or findmypast.co.uk

With the 1753 Hardwick Marriage Act, marriages outside the Church of England were forbidden with the exception of Quakers and Jews. Although a restriction on nonconformists, it meant that, largely, nonconformist families did at least appear in parish records when they were married.

As the administration of non-conformist chapels differed from the Church of England not all registers survive for all periods. Additionally, some may still be held with the chapel or meeting house. Please see below under Northamptonshire Archives for more details on their holdings.

Some chapels including Baptists, Independents and Society of Friends had their own burial ground. Methodists rarely did and are likely to be buried in the parish churchyard and you often find non-conformists buried together in a section of the churchyard set aside for them.

This extract from Weedon/Flore URC shows that Mary Allsop of Olney was baptised Sept 9 1735 in the 89th year of her age!



1851 Religious census

This was taken at the same time as the population census. It sought data on attendance at public worship, the number of sittings available in churches and chapels, attendance on 30 March and other information, often including date of establishment. For the family historian, it can give a useful list of the various places of worship in a town or parish. Using Potterspury as an example the following (summarised) information is given:

St Nicholas – population 1061, ancient church, morning attendance 275, Sunday scholars, 147, afternoon – general congregation 308, Sunday scholars 163. Note: the evening service is given up at the moment and the afternoon service is given up in the summer.

Independent Meeting House –erected 1693, rebuilt 1780. Attendance on 30 March 150, Sunday scholars 85.

Overall, about 51% of attendees were Anglicans and 49% non-conformists, and again shows that your ancestor may well have attended a non-conformist meeting – even if he was first baptised in the parish church. The 1851 Religious Census for Northamptonshire edited by Graham Ward was published by the Northamptonshire Record Society in 2007.

New buildings

The increase of the urban populations in Victorian times, particularly in the 'shoe towns' led to the formation of many new chapels. Additionally, a new chapel may form as a split from an older established congregation in a nearby village. Non-conformists were prepared to travel some distance to other villages to worship.

Northamptonshire Archives

On the open shelves in the Index Room are a number of blue folders. These lists all the non-conformist records and registers held. Generally, the indexes are listed in alphabetical order although the Methodist records are listed by circuit (there is a list of the parishes belonging to each circuit including dates/changes). Occasionally, some records may have been deposited with other official archives such as the Baptist Union but this is detailed. Below are listed some of the more useful records for your research. You can also search the Archives online catalogue for records relating to Northamptonshire non-conformist places of worship. See: <https://www.westnorthants.gov.uk/northamptonshire-archives-service>

Membership Lists

These are useful sources as they can provide details of how a member was admitted or dismissed. This could be by a statement of faith or baptism, by transfer from another place, likewise where they moved to, whether dismissed for non-attendance and often date of death. Where a new chapel was established, all those involved at the time often signed a Declaration.

Right: College Street Baptist Church, Northampton

List of members signing the Declaration on March ye 3 1698.

(annotated with later entries in a different hand)

Robert Brittain deceased

John Warner excommunicated

William Smith dismissed to ye church at Rowell [Rothwell]

Mary Henman now Hancock, now Ayre

(it is interesting to note that all the men signed first, followed by the women and that a high proportion of those named were able to sign their own names). The full list contains a large number of names.

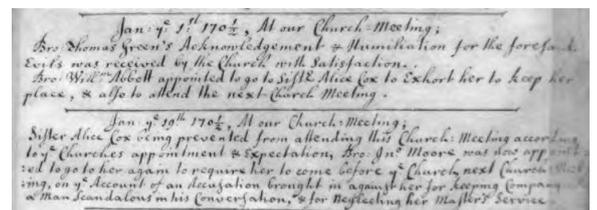


Minute Books

Many of the non-conformist places of worship were managed by the members themselves and the Minute Books contain references to decisions made. This could be about the building, the congregation, the need for a new pastor or, quite often, about the conduct of the members. The meetings were often strict about maintaining moral standards and any fall from grace was often met with a rebuke or a call for the member to appear and explain their behaviour.

The following extracts are from College Street Chapel, Northampton.

Jan ye 29th 1704: Brother John Moore was now appointed to visit Sister Alice Cox again to require her to come before ye church on ye account of an accusation brought in against her for keeping company with a man scandalous in his conversation and for neglecting her Master's service (ie not coming to chapel). Additionally, in 1710 Mary Henman was summoned to explain her 'immodest behaviour and actions and licentious expressions.



Publications

Centenary or anniversary publications can give an overview of a particular chapel and may mention your ancestor as well as giving background information. They may occasionally include photographs of ministers (where available).

Subscription Lists

Earls Barton has a building fund subscription list, others have lists for extensions or for the provision of Sunday schools. Many chapels saw it as their duty to help those who fell upon hard times and subscription lists or alms lists can sometimes be found.

The example on the following page is again from College Street.

1709 Collected for Francis Cave, Brigstock £2.13.0

1709 Collected for Mary Rowley £0.7.0

1711 Collected for John Chater of Brafield £1.3.0

Collected for ye church at Wellingborow (sic) towards a burying place for their meeting £1.0.0

1711 Collected for Will Somerley's coffin 0.7.0

Collected from house to house for Mary Hewitt who lies in jayl (sic) 10s and given to her by our deacon a further 8s 10d.

(and many others).



World War One

Many of the chapels may have erected a roll of honour to those who served or died. This is particularly true for Abington Avenue United Reformed Church, Northampton which has details of sketches of the memorial window designed by the renowned artist Frank Brangwyn. For Primrose Hill Congregational chapel in Northampton there is a copy of the unveiling ceremony programme listing the men who served and died.

Miscellaneous

You may find references to grants of land or bequests in wills to provide a meeting place. In Thrapston Baptist records, there is correspondence from Mary Ekin, Wm Griffin and Wm Porter regarding £200 left by Mary Ekin in her will to found a school for 10 boys, 5 from Thrapston and 5 from Islip. More recent records may include Mother's Union, Sunday School attendance registers, prizegiving, Bible Class, Missionary Society accounts and other related records.

Local Studies

In the Local Studies Collection of the Northampton Central Library there is a wide range of material by parish, which may include a specific chapel history or an entry in a larger parish history. They also have an extensive Biography index and Newspaper cuttings that may provide further material. You can search the catalogue online.

Further research

Northamptonshire Archives is probably the best place to start as the majority of the material mentioned above is held there.

For more information on non-conformity in Northamptonshire see Graham Ward's excellent and informative website at www.edintone.com

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