

Finding Irish Ancestors: A Guide to Civil and Church Records

Class 3: Leveraging Church Parish Records

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Church of Ireland Parish Registers

The Church of Ireland was the Establish Church of the country until 1869. Parish boundaries follow those of the civil parish. Starting in 1807, pro forma registers started being used. These were pre-printed column headers that clergy used to add more details for each sacramental event. While the Church of Ireland's records start earlier than Catholic or Presbyterian church records, nearly half (approximately 1,000 sets of parish registers) were destroyed in the Four Courts fire. Transcripts of some of the destroyed parishes do exist. Many of the County Heritage Centers have indexed Church of Ireland records on <https://www.rootsireland.ie/>

Baptism Records

Baptisms within the Church of Ireland were conducted week or months following a birth. For upper echelons of society or if a child was near death, the ceremony may have been held privately.

- Pre-19th century records include:
 - Date of baptism
 - Date of child
 - Godparents' names
 - Parents' names (Mother's maiden name not usually provided)
- 19th Century – Present records include the following:
 - Date of birth
 - Date of baptism
 - Date of child
 - Parents' names (including mother's maiden name)
 - Parents' residence
 - Father's occupation
 - Name of officiant who performs ceremony

Marriage Records

Weddings were traditionally held at the bride's parish church.

- Pre-19th century records include the following:
 - Names of the parties
 - Date of the wedding
- 19th Century – Present records include the following:
 - Names of the parties
 - Date of wedding
 - Addresses of the parties (parish)
 - Names and addresses of witnesses (often family)

Burial Records

- Pre-19th century records include the following:
 - Name of deceased
 - Date of burial
 - Relationship (not always stated)
 - Parents' names if child died young
 - Spouse name (mostly women's burials)
- 19th Century – Present records include the following:
 - Name of deceased
 - Age of deceased
 - Date of burial
 - Address (parish)
 - Relationship
 - Parents' names if child died young
 - Spouse name (mostly women's burials)

Online Databases and Repositories

- IrishGenealogy.ie - All surviving Church of Ireland baptism records, marriage, and burial registers for Dublin City
- Index to Church of Ireland Diocesan Marriage Licenses - <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/koha:217297>
- Ireland, Church of Ireland Search Forms for Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1731-1870 - <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/koha:217297>
- Anglican Record Project – ongoing project to digitize baptism, marriage, and burial registers for Church of Ireland – <https://churchofireland.org/about/rcb-library/anglican-record-project>
 - Digitized Church Records at Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) - <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/digitised-church-records-available-proni> (viewable onsite at PRONI)
 - Virtual Treasury of Ireland – Parish Registers and Parochial Returns - <https://virtualtreasury.ie/item/PROI-ETC-4-1>

Roman Catholic Parish Registers

Due to the events of the 17th and 18th centuries (namely penal laws and other restrictions for Catholics), most Roman Catholic records don't begin until the 1820s and 1830s. Records for poorer areas in the west of Ireland (i.e., Donegal, Mayo, etc.) start even later. The boundaries of Catholic parishes are distinct from civil parishes (which align with the Church of England). A great online tool for understanding Catholic parish boundaries and their relation to civil parishes, finding nearest churches, and more is at: <https://www.swilson.info/rcparishlink.php> John Grenham's site (<https://www.johngrenham.com/>) also provides relevant boundaries, available records, and more.

Baptism Records

In Catholic baptisms, children were baptized immediately after birth, usually within a few days. The first child was usually baptized in the mother's parish (a great tip when trying to discern maternal origins!). Similar to Church of Ireland baptisms, children who were near death may have been baptized privately and recorded in the parish registers with a notation.

- 1850s - pro forma registers started being used
- Pre-1850s Baptism Records include the following details:
 - Child's name
 - Date of baptism
 - Parents' names (mother's maiden name usually not listed)
 - Names of two sponsors
- 1850s - Present Baptism Records include the following details:
 - Child's name
 - Date of baptism
 - Date of birth
 - Parents' names (sometimes mother's maiden name is noted)
 - Place of residence
 - Names of two sponsors (one of each sex)
 - Name of officiant who performed ceremony

Marriage Records

Catholic weddings traditionally took place at the bride's parish church, where she was baptized.

- Pre-1850s Marriage Records included the following:
 - Name of couple
 - Date
 - Location of ceremony
 - Names of witnesses
 - Parents' names (if underage)
 - Dispensations issued (if applicable)
- 1850s to Present Marriage Records included the following:
 - Name of couple
 - Date
 - Names of witnesses
 - Priest's name (signed on marriage record)
 - Parents' names
 - Date and place of baptism (if outside of parish)
 - Dispensation issued (if applicable)
 - Residence of couple
- Dispensations may be needed for the following reasons:
 - Less than three banns to be announced/published
 - Marrying during Lent or Advent
 - A close familial relationship with the number of degree kinship often noted
 - 2nd degree (1st cousins) requires a papal dispensation
 - 3rd degree (2nd cousins)
 - 4th degree (3rd cousins)

Burial Records

You may find individual burials mixed in with other parish records. Very few burials were recorded as clergy were not given instructions (as they were for baptisms and marriages). The Catholic Church did not start buying graveyards until the 1820s. Prior to this it was under the authority of the Church of Ireland.

- Pre-1850s Burial Registers included the following:
 - Names of deceased
 - Date interred

- 1850s to Present Burial Registers included the following:
 - Name of deceased
 - Date of death and/or burial
 - Residence
 - Age or description (young or old)

Online Databases and Repositories

- National Library of Ireland - <https://registers.nli.ie>
- Ireland Catholic Parish Registers, 1655-1915 - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61039/>
- Ireland, Catholic Parish Registers, 1740-1940 - <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/2820100>
 - Note: not all records will have image attached

Presbyterian Parish Registers

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland was established by Scots during the plantation of Ulster in the 17th century with the majority settling in the counties of Antrim and Down. Many Presbyterian church records do not begin until the 1820s and 1830s. It was illegal until 1782 for a Presbyterian clergyman to perform marriages. Unlike Civil Parish and Roman Catholic parishes there are no formal parish boundaries. The structure of the Presbyterian church is arranged by the following:

- Kirk (local church) - governed by a Kirk session, which consisted of ordained teaching elders (ministers) and ruling elders elected by congregation
- Presbytery – body of ministers and elders that supervise local sessions and ordain ministers
- Synod – has authority over a group of presbyteries
- General Assembly – oversees doctrine and assembly, led by an elected Moderator

The Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland includes maps of churches and links to other information (<https://presbyterianhistoryireland.com/web-resources/congregations/map-pci-congregations/>).

Tip – Look for your early Presbyterian ancestors in Church of Ireland records!

Baptism Records

Baptisms were conducted weeks or months after birth; siblings may be baptized at the same time.

- Pro forma registers started being used in the 1820s
- Pre-1820s Baptism Registers include the following:
 - Child's name
 - Date of baptism
 - Parents' names (mother's name not usually included)
- 1820s - Present Baptism Registers include the following:
 - Child's name
 - Date of birth
 - Date of baptism
 - Parents' names (including mother's maiden name)
 - Parents' residence (townland)
 - Names of sponsors
 - Name of officiant who performed ceremony

Marriage Records

Before 1782 it was illegal for Presbyterian ministers to perform marriages. Many Presbyterians married in the Church of Ireland. The ceremony was often performed at the home of the bride. In 1819 the Presbyterian Synod decreed each minister was required to keep a register of marriages performed by him.

- Pre-1820s marriage records include the following:
 - Name of the couple
 - Date of marriage
 - Name of bride's father (even if deceased)
 - Names of two witnesses
- 1820s - Present Marriage Records includes the following:
 - Name of couple
 - Date of marriage
 - Name of bride's father (even if deceased)
 - Residence of each party
 - Names of two witnesses
 - Groom's occupation

Tip - If you can't find a marriage record in the parish registers, check the Kirk session minutes. These records can be found at the Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI).

Burial Records

Burial records were rarely kept by Presbyterian churches as penal laws prevented maintenance of their own graveyards. Until the 19th century, dissenting ministers could not perform burial services unless a Church of Ireland rector was present. When records do exist, the records include:

- Name of deceased
- Date of burial
- Age
- Residence (late 19th century)

Online Databases and Repositories:

- FindMyPast
 - Ireland, Non-Conformist Births & Baptisms (1701-1913) - <https://search.findmypast.ie/search-world-records/ireland-non-conformist-births-and-baptisms>
 - Ireland, Non-Conformist Marriages - <https://search.findmypast.ie/search-world-records/ireland-non-conformist-marriages>
 - Ireland, Non-Conformist Burials - <https://search.findmypast.ie/search-world-records/ireland-non-conformist-burials>
 - Ireland Down Ballyronney Presbyterian burial plots 1895
- Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland – <https://presbyterianhistoryireland.com/collections/archives>
 - Guide to Congregational Records - <https://presbyterianhistoryireland.com/collections/archives/guide-to-congregational-records/>
- Digitized Church Records at Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) - <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/digitised-church-records-available-proni>
(viewable onsite at PRONI)

Publications

Grenham, John, *Tracing Your Irish Ancestors (5th Edition)*. (Genealogical Publishing Co., 2019).

Ryan, James, *Irish Church Records: Their History, Availability and Use in Family and Local History Research* (Flyleaf Press, 2001)