EDITORIAL COMMENT

Readers of this article and those who have studied other parish registers should gain some help from the following extracts taken from D J Steel, National Index of Parish Registers, Volume I (London: Society of Genealogists, 1968):

Later transcripts (p.26)

Many registers were recopied for one reason or another at various times in the 17th and 18th centuries. One of the earliest of these post-1598 transcripts was at Stepney [in 1613].

The keeping of the registers (pp.27-32)

All sixteenth century registers and many of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are secondary texts. It is not generally appreciated that seventeenth and eighteenth century parish registers are very frequently copies of a primary text, probably a memorandum book kept for the purpose. The writing up was done monthly and sometimes quarterly [or even annually]. Such book-keeping could only be done from notes or memoranda made at about the time of the ceremonies themselves.

This custom of copying entries into the register from a rough note book seems to have been widespread in the 18th century over most of the country and probably occurred to some extent throughout the entire period from 1538 to 1837. Where a rough register was kept, the entries were usually copied up much less frequently than weekly and it is clear that such a system made omissions due to carelessness and forgetfulness more likely. In the parish of Mitcham [Surrey] the clerk kept a rough note-book and this has survived. A comparison with the parish register shows: 'In many cases, as might be expected, entries made by the former are omitted by the latter, and vice versa. But where entries are found in both, they often disagree in the matter of dates, and sometimes even in the christian names, the surnames, or the relationship of the parties concerned.' Sometimes discrepancies between two surviving lists of entries defy explanation. Sometimes a new and more efficient incumbent copied up into the register entries he found in a paper register. Sometimes the Vicar himself appears to have kept the rough note-book. Thus in 1766, the vicar of Chatham, Kent, observes in a letter that 'the entries are chiefly brought from the Minute Book, carefully kept in the Vestry room, and it cannot be supposed that there should be any material variation in the case'. A similar book was kept at St Margaret's Rochester, but a great many entries were omitted in the copying into the register.

Some clerks did not even use rough registers but wrote the entries on odd slips of paper with the idea of writing them in at some later date. As with a rough notebook, the entries might be abbreviated when entered up. Sometimes the parish register contains even more defective data. In the register of Rochdale, Lancs. the name of the wife is frequently not given in a marriage entry or the Christian name in a burial. [Sometimes the clerk's] notes might never be entered in the register in any form. Thus in the register of St Peter's Dorchester:
'1645. In twelve months there died 52 persons whose names are not inserted, the old clerk being dead who had the notes'. This practice explains why entries are often found in the Bishop's Transcripts but not in the register. In these cases it would appear that when the Bishop's transcripts came to be written at the end of the year the loose slips were transcribed in their proper order on the parchment.

Although vast numbers of clerical errors in parish register must have remained uncorrected to baffle the future genealogist, occasionally one finds a note of correction. In Barnstaple Parish Registers is recorded the baptism on 23rd Nov. 1794 of William son of John and Elizabeth Ley. A note has been added: 'The William was an error for John and was corrected 29th June 1843 by the Vicar in the presence of the father'.

**Information given in the Transcripts (pp.174-5)**

For the most part the Bishop's Transcripts are copies of the Parish Register although some details may be omitted as is shown by the following example: *Truro, Cornwall*, Parish Register: '9 June 1756 Richard Surgent, mariner, and Mary Williams, widow, married by licence. Witnesses, William Startridge, Edw. Terrill'. Bishop's Transcript: '9 June 1756 Richard Surgent and Mary Williams married by licence'.

Sometimes entire entries may be omitted, such as those of illegitimate children, perhaps on the principle that the less said, the better. Nevertheless, at other times these transcripts betray unmistakable signs that they, and the register are both copies of some earlier text, probably the clerk's rough notebook. Thus, the transcript may have entries not in the register, and what are actually telescoped entries in the register are given correctly. Sometimes extraordinary discrepancies occur between the two texts, such as the interchange of bride and bridegroom's surnames in a marriage entry or the interchange of the bride's surnames in two separate entries.

There is also evidence to suggest that in some cases the Bishop's Transcripts were copied from neither the register nor the rough notebook. Not infrequently one finds that a considerable number of entries are in the Bishop's Transcripts which are not in the register at all. Thus the register of St. Nicholas, Gloucester has no marriages at all for 1687 and yet the transcript shows 18 entries. These were probably copied from loose slips that were never written up in the register.

This also leads to the interesting possibility that however neglected the transcripts were in most parishes, in the eyes of some vicars or clerks they were more important than the registers.

**The Value of Bishop's Transcripts (pp.181-2)**

Emphasis has already been placed on the value of Bishop's Transcripts in 'filling in' entries missing in the parish register or in clarifying doubtful readings. As well as the genealogist and the historian, lawyers have had
frequent recourse to Bishop’s Transcripts to check suspected forgeries in parish registers. Copies of Bishop’s Transcripts are extremely useful if used with caution. Only too often the unwary searcher assumes that in searching a copy of the Bishop’s Transcripts he avoids the necessity of examining the original registers. Unfortunately, this is seldom the case, as most dioceses have at least the odd year here and there missing in a series. Thus, although copies of Bishop’s Transcripts are invaluable for checking register entries and filling in gaps, except in the case of a few dioceses they are only of limited value on their own.

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