

# Views from the Parish



# Views from the Parish:

## *Churchwardens' Accounts* *c.1500-c.1800*

Edited by

Valerie Hitchman and Andrew Foster

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# CONTENTS

Illustrations .....	vii
Foreword .....	ix
Kenneth Fincham	
Acknowledgements .....	xi
Introduction .....	1
Andrew Foster and Valerie Hitchman	
Balancing the Parish Accounts .....	15
Valerie Hitchman	
The Economic Impact of the Reformation on Two Canterbury Parishes .....	47
Sheila Sweetinburgh	
London Parish Records and Parish Studies: Texts, Contexts, and Debates over Appropriate Methods .....	63
Gary G. Gibbs	
Counting Communities, Counting Cultures: Problems and Progress with Early Modern Churchwardens' Accounts in Western England and Wales .....	89
Katharine K. Olsen	
Churchwardens' Accounts and the Confessional State in Ireland, c.1660-1750 .....	109
Toby Barnard	
Early Modern Churchwardens' Accounts in Ireland .....	121
Evie Monaghan	
Vermin, Churchwardens and Support for the Parish Poor .....	143
Christopher Webb	

The Public Sphere and the Parish Pump: Finding Politics in the Churchwardens' Accounts, 1639-1643.....	157
John Walter	
Music and Religious Identity in Elizabethan London: The Value (and Limitations) of the Churchwardens' Accounts.....	179
Jonathan Willis	
Afterword: Voices from the Pews .....	199
Joan Dils	
Appendix I.....	203
Canons of the Church of England relating to the Work of Churchwardens	
Appendix II.....	213
What Advice was Available to Churchwardens on their Duties?	
Appendix III .....	215
Labour and Building Costs in Southeast England during the Seventeenth Century	
Notes on Contributors.....	221
Index of Names and Parishes.....	227

# ILLUSTRATIONS

## Examples of Churchwardens' Accounts

St Mildred, Tenterden, Kent .....	14
Norton in Hales, Shropshire .....	46
St Peter and St Paul, Aylesford, Kent .....	108
All Saints, Biddenden, Kent .....	198

## Illustrations, Graphs and Charts within Essays

Map of South-east England .....	17
Expenditure of Parishes .....	19
Bolton Percy, Yorkshire, Churchwardens' Accounts .....	144
Millington, Yorkshire, Constables' Accounts .....	147
Millington, Yorkshire, Churchwardens' Accounts .....	147
Heslington, Yorkshire, Polecats Recorded in Accounts .....	150
Poppleton (Nether), Yorkshire, Polecats Recorded in Accounts .....	151
Bolton Percy, Yorkshire, Polecats Recorded in Accounts .....	152
Annual Income of Ten London Parishes .....	184
Musical Expenditure of Ten London Parishes .....	185
Musical Expenditure of Nine London Parishes .....	186
Daily Labour Rates in South-east England .....	216
Building Costs in South-east England .....	219



## FOREWORD

This collection of essays is the first fruit of a highly successful conference on “Early Modern Churchwardens’ Accounts: Uses and Abuses” held at the University of Kent on 23 October 2010. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, churchwardens’ accounts were chiefly the preserve of historians exploring the pace and trajectory of religious change across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but, as several contributions to this volume demonstrate, they are increasingly consulted by those interested in the broader landscape of the period, including popular politics, social and economic history and gender studies. A particularly welcome feature is the emphasis here on Wales and Ireland, whose holdings of churchwardens’ accounts, amid the entire furore over the “new” British history, have been little studied and are conspicuous by their absence from standard accounts of the period.

The conference in 2010 also warmly endorsed the proposal to construct a database of churchwardens’ accounts, and this is now going ahead, thanks in very large measure to the unflagging persistence of Valerie Hitchman, honorary fellow of the School of History at Kent, assisted by Beat Kümin and the Parish Studies network at Warwick. The database will allow scholars to map their locations and contents with much greater precision than is now possible and to explore the full riches of churchwardens’ accounts. This group of essays demonstrates just how valuable a source they can be.

Kenneth Fincham  
Head of the School of History  
University of Kent  
April 2015



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors would like to thank our contributors for bearing with us as the volume has taken time to come to fruition. We also thank our respective long-suffering spouses, Philip Hitchman and Julia Foster, for their customary support. We are obviously very grateful to Joan Dils and Kenneth Fincham for their assistance and willingness to add a few words to this collection, and to the School of History, University of Kent, for assisting with financial costs associated with this volume. We are grateful to The Reverend Canon Lindsay J. Hammond, The Reverend Chris van Straaten, The Reverend Alexander Bienfait, Richard George, and the Borthwick Institute for Archives, University of York, for permission to use photographs of parish documents in their care. We would also like to thank all the archivists and search room staff in the many County Record Offices that we have visited over several decades. And finally, we would like thank Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their enthusiasm for this project now translated into book form with the help of our proof reader Susan Morecroft.



## INTRODUCTION

ANDREW FOSTER AND VALERIE HITCHMAN

We hope that this collection of essays will achieve a number of simple aims. First, that it will raise the profile of innumerable humble and not so humble churchwardens and their accounts, and illustrate a variety of uses to which those accounts might be reliably put by historians of different specialisms, and several “periods” spanning the years 1500 to 1800. Secondly, that through various case studies drawn from different parts of the kingdom, it will showcase their use in different contexts and provide comparative material when discussing similarities, changes, and subtle differences across the British Isles. Thirdly, that thanks to all of our contributors commendably and openly discussing a range of difficulties encountered in locating, identifying, reading and interpreting churchwardens’ accounts, the collection will offer constructive and helpful advice to all those previously put off by these often difficult documents. Fourthly, that discussion of sources and methods will highlight opportunities for systematic rather than occasional, anecdotal use of such material. Finally, that this collection will thus lend context to ideas promoted some time ago for the development of a comprehensive database of the survival of churchwardens’ accounts for the British Isles over a much longer period stretching from the Middle Ages to the mid-nineteenth century. Only when such a database comes into being will historians be able to use them with greater assurance than now.

This collection of essays has been long in gestation since many of them began life as papers given for a day conference on “Early Modern Churchwardens’ Accounts: Uses and Abuses”, held at the University of Kent in October 2010. The fact that this conference was lively and well attended is a mark of the interest that these accounts can generate. This was witnessed again at the annual conference of the Warwick Parish Studies Network held in 2012, when we called for help with moving forward the idea of the database.<sup>1</sup> That grand idea will shortly come to

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<sup>1</sup> For reports of both of these conferences see [www.balh.co.uk/lhn/article\\_file\\_lhn-volliss97-8.xml.html](http://www.balh.co.uk/lhn/article_file_lhn-volliss97-8.xml.html) for the Kent conference and for Warwick see [www2](http://www2).

fruition with the help of Professor Beat Kümin and Dr David Beck of the University of Warwick; if it is achieved it will owe much to the heroic efforts of Dr Valerie Hitchman who has worked tirelessly to establish a framework for action.<sup>2</sup>

One aim of this collection—as indeed was the case with the original conference—is to establish an agenda for further research on the value and uses of churchwardens’ accounts. All of the contributors write with an acute awareness that we still have much to learn in our work with these complex sources. All are well aware that we are only sketching an outline of some of the topics that can be discussed using churchwardens’ accounts. All note issues about methods and ways of reading between the lines to extend the use of this material to subjects not previously imagined. These are essays written in an investigatory spirit, designed to encourage others on what is likely to be a team endeavour, typical of so much historical research in the new “digital age”.

What emerged at the original Kent conference—and is well reflected in this collection—is the sheer variety of uses to which churchwardens’ accounts may be put, the richness of this source, the extent of material over time, and the tantalising gaps in our knowledge in different parts of the British Isles. And one feature of this collection is that it attempts to cover those parts of the United Kingdom where churchwardens’ accounts may be most readily found—including Wales and Ireland where they are not so readily found—but not Scotland.<sup>3</sup>

Churchwardens’ accounts are known about by many, but perhaps fully understood by relatively few. They form one of the key elements of parish records—the contents of the celebrated parish chest—and yet we still do not know precisely how many accounts survive for England and Wales, and in what condition.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, debates still rage as to how accounts were

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warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/calendar/parishsymposium.

<sup>2</sup> Valerie Hitchman has negotiated the eventual appearance of a database on the University of Warwick website under the auspices of the Parish Studies Network for which we thank Professor Beat Kümin—the framework will appear in 2015. <http://warwick.ac.uk/cwad>

<sup>3</sup> The role of the parish churchwardens was undertaken by secular authorities north of the border, the civic jurisdictions within which a kirk was situated, a comment on the different form that Protestantism took in Scotland where a Presbyterian system based heavily on Calvin’s Geneva was established post Reformation. The particularities of Ireland and Wales are well covered by our contributors to this volume.

<sup>4</sup> Cox, *Churchwardens’ Accounts from the 14th Century to the Close of the 17th Century*, 1913, and W. E. Tate, *The Parish Chest*, Cambridge University Press, 1960, were the pioneers in this field.

created, why, for whom, by whom, how they were used, what they might encompass, and why they are found in varying numbers across the country, unevenly scattered for rural and urban parishes alike.<sup>5</sup> Local and regional historians have long exploited churchwardens' accounts, but usually on a relatively local scale affording little context or scope for comparative analysis.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, a few excellent transcripts of churchwardens' accounts have been published by various County Record Societies and University Libraries although these tend to be for only one or two parishes within their collection.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> B. Kümin, *The Shaping of a Community: the Rise and Reformation of the English Parish c.1400-1560*, Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996; A. Foster, "Churchwardens' Accounts of Early Modern England and Wales: some Problems to Note, but Much to be Gained" in K. French, G. Gibbs & B. Kümin, eds., *The Parish In English Life 1400-1600*, Manchester University Press, 1997, pp. 74-93; C. Burgess, "The Pre-Reformation Churchwardens' Accounts and Parish Government: Lessons from London and Bristol", *English Historical Review*, cxvii, 471, 2002, pp. 306-32; the debate between Kümin and Burgess continued in *English Historical Review*, cxix, 480, 2004, pp. 87-116; for a judicious practical stance see: E. Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath*, New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> See pioneering work by members of the "Spufford school", well caught in the collection of essays edited by M. Spufford, *The World of the Rural Dissenters 1520-1725*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, see particularly, E. Carlson, "The Origins, Function, and Status of the Office of Churchwarden, with Particular Reference to the Diocese of Ely", pp. 164-207. See also J. Craig, "Co-operation and Initiatives: Elizabethan Churchwardens and the Parish Accounts of Mildenhall", *Social History*, 18, 3, October 1993, pp. 357-380.

<sup>7</sup> Among which: W. Bennett, *The Churchwardens' Accounts of the Parish of Burnley*, Burnley Historical Society, 1969 [covering several chapelries between 1728 and 1780]; A. Hanham, *Churchwardens' Accounts of Ashburton 1479-1580*, Devon and Cornwall Record Society NS vol. 15, 1970; P. Northeast, *Boxford Churchwardens' Accounts 1530-1561*, Suffolk Record Society xxiii, 1982; C. J. Litzenberger, *Tewkesbury Churchwardens' Accounts 1563-1624*, Gloucester Record Series vol. 7, 1994; C. C. Webb, *Churchwardens' Accounts of St Michael, Spurriergate, York 1518-1548*, Borthwick Texts and Calendars 20, 1997; L. A. Botelho, *Churchwardens' Accounts of Cratfield 1640-1660*, Suffolk Record Society xlii, 1999; D. P. Dymond, *The Churchwardens' Book of Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire 1496-c.1540*, Cambridgeshire Records Society, vol. 17, 2004; J. Middleton-Stewart, *The Records of the Churchwardens of Mildenhall*, Suffolk Record Society vol. lvi, 2011; J. Dils, *Reading, St Lawrence Churchwardens' Accounts 1498-1570*, Berkshire Record Society vols. 19 and 20, 2013. The expenditure associated with churchwardens' accounts can sometimes be found in "town" or "municipal" accounts. E. White, *Village Government and Taxation in Later Stuart Nottinghamshire: the Gedling "Town Book" 1665-1714*, Thoroton Society Record Series vol. 45, 2010; J. H. Fearon, *Parish Accounts for the "Town"*

Historians have made a habit of raiding churchwardens' accounts for specific themes as well as by place and time. One thinks of David Cressy's excellent work on bell ringing across the country to celebrate national holidays, birthdays, and great battles.<sup>8</sup> Ronald Hutton kick-started a number of profitable lines of enquiry simply through the production of a bold and very useful appendix listing early modern churchwardens' accounts to his marvellous book on the ritual year.<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Fincham and Nicholas Tyacke made great use of such records for their ground-breaking work on *Altars Restored*.<sup>10</sup> John Morrill and others had earlier pointed to what might be done for the neglected years of the Interregnum to show the continued purchase of communion bread and wine, and the use of the *Book of Common Prayer* rather than the state *Directory for Public Worship*.<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Willis has since demonstrated clever and systematic use of accounts to reveal much about continued musical traditions within parishes after the Reformation.<sup>12</sup> All of these examples just illustrate the use made of early modern records; much more could be said about other periods.

In other words, while many historians know about these records in some detail for their own area or favourite topic, we still need a "roadmap" to the survival of such records across the country to provide a context to research, and a sense of the parameters within which we work. And we now know that the roadmap must stretch to encompass more than 125 record offices and over 3,350 parishes in England and Wales with surviving accounts.<sup>13</sup> The database project will provide such context for

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*of Bodicote, Oxfordshire 1700-1822*, Banbury History Society vol. 12, 1975.

<sup>8</sup> D. Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989.

<sup>9</sup> R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: the Ritual Year, 1400-1700*, Oxford University Press, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> K. Fincham and N. Tyacke, *Altars Restored: The Changing Face of English Religious Worship, c.1547-c.1700*, Oxford University Press, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> J. Morrill, "The Church in England, 1642-9", in J. Morrill, ed., *Reactions to the English Civil War 1642-1649*, London: Macmillan, 1982, pp. 89-114.

<sup>12</sup> J. Willis, *Church Music and Protestantism in Post-Reformation England*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> These record offices include, amazingly, the famous Huntingdon Library in California, USA, and it is possible that more accounts may turn up as interest in this topic grows and various collections within other libraries are scrutinized. The figure of 3,350 parishes covers a long period, but still suggests a percentage survival rate higher than that originally envisaged for the early modern period; the survival rate does improve post 1660, but still not uniformly across the British Isles. More parishes with surviving accounts are found through scrutinizing the

historians and archivists alike, for the latter too will benefit, having usually catalogued what might be in their local collections without full knowledge of how those collections compare with others, and what riches they might possess.<sup>14</sup>

The essence of churchwardens' accounts lies in understanding the nature of the financial details recorded. It is common knowledge that these accounts should never be trusted entirely: scribal errors are common, columns of figures have often been poorly added or subtracted, and it is difficult to assimilate fully what is entailed in a financial year looking simply at receipts and expenditure. With records extending over many decades there is also a need for some kind of work-related "price index". This needs to go beyond the famous "Phelps Brown and Hopkins' Index" of consumables, for church maintenance entailed many specific services and costs.<sup>15</sup> A series of accounts covering many years is clearly useful to historians, but to be of real value it is important to be able to factor any price inflation into calculations. Valerie Hitchman created such an index for south-east England during the seventeenth century, but one covering a much larger area and longer period would give historians much more evidence.<sup>16</sup>

In looking at the range of items generally covered in churchwardens' accounts we glean a mass of evidence relating to parish government. We see how churchwardens operated within their communities, collected income and levied the occasional rates, and also how they responded to directives from above, most notably from archdeacons with whom they possibly had most regular contact, with bishops and their diocesan chancellors, with a variety of civil lawyers who worked for the ecclesiastical authorities, and more rarely, contact with an archbishop through the conduct of a Metropolitan visitation. Some of what they record might stem from secular government intervention, as with the Interregnum when ordered by Parliament to use the *Directory for Public*

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printed catalogues whenever a physical visit is made to a record office.

<sup>14</sup> The Historical Association produced useful pamphlets that included: D. Dymond, "Churchwardens' Accounts" in K. M. Thompson, ed., *Short Guides to Records, Second Series: Guides 25-48*, and in the 1997 edition, 25, 11-15; likewise, the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research published C. Drew's, *Early Parochial Organisation in England The Origins of the Office of Churchwarden*, St Anthony's Hall publications, no. 7, 1954.

<sup>15</sup> E. H. Phelps Brown and S. Hopkins, "Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables Compared with Building Prices", *Economica*, 23, 1955.

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix III.

*Worship* rather than the old *Book of Common Prayer*.<sup>17</sup>

The whole topic of what was involved in “routine”, “annual church maintenance” needs more work. Valerie Hitchman has provided a useful pie chart of annual expenditure for a “typical” parish community: what are now needed are many more real examples from around the country for different periods.<sup>18</sup> There is no end to what historians may glean from these records, or to the number of ways in which we need to analyse them to provoke fresh approaches and appreciations. They reveal interesting details of journeys that cry out to be mapped: evidence of what a local community looked like, and how far the churchwardens were expected to travel on official business, to attend visitations or consistory courts. They reveal the costs of such travel. They thus provide valuable evidence of what might be fashionably called “social networks”. Church inventories could be listed for their own worth, for more could be said about the interiors of churches, what they contained, and how that changed over the period. Related projects might take in the gradual emergence of parish libraries, involvement in civic ceremonies, regional feast days and celebrations, alongside the more routine perambulations of the parish boundaries.

Churchwardens’ accounts reveal much about the interaction between Westminster and the provinces. They reveal the purchase of books and utensils under orders given by archbishops and bishops, and also by the Privy Council, usually through proclamations.<sup>19</sup> Material is just coming to light regarding orders for fasts and national prayers.<sup>20</sup> The importance of

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<sup>17</sup> J. Morrill, “Church in England”, pp. 93-4; J. Maltby has made a close study of the *Directory*, for early work on which see: “Suffering and Surviving: the Civil Wars, the Commonwealth and the Formation of ‘Anglicanism’” in C. Durston and J. Maltby, eds., *Religion in Revolutionary England*, Manchester University Press, 2006, pp. 158-80.

<sup>18</sup> Hitchman, “Balancing the Parish Books” in his volume, pp. 15-44.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth’s Injunctions of 1559, together with Matthew Parker’s first Metropolitan Visitation which commenced a year later, set the agenda for many episcopal visitation articles of enquiry to follow, codified more fully in the Canons of 1604: C. Cross, *The Royal Supremacy in the Elizabethan Church*, London: George Allen & Unwin; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969, pp. 178-82; W. Kennedy, *Elizabethan Episcopal Administration*, vol. I, Alcuin Club Collections, xxvi, 1924, cxxx-cxl; W. Kennedy, *The ‘Interpretations’ of the Bishops & their Influence on Elizabethan Episcopal Policy*, Alcuin Club Tracts, viii, 1908.

<sup>20</sup> S. Taylor, N. Mears, A. Raffae, P. Williamson, with L. Bates, eds., *National Prayers: Special Worship since the Reformation, vol. I: Special Prayers, Fasts and Thanksgiving in the British Isles, 1533-1688*, Church of England Record Society, 2014.

this interaction may be picked up today, for only through the efforts of hundreds of local historians may we be able to put together evidence of the kind of people who served as churchwardens at different periods, their social background and status. And only local evidence can supply important missing information about the significance of their work for their local churches, most particularly in providing examples of occasional regional re-building campaigns too easily subsumed under the banner of “what the Victorians did for us” at the moment. We need to learn much more about the neglected eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

If questions of chronology are important, so too are those relating to geography, where debates have turned on differences between records for urban and rural locations, and more broadly between areas to the north, south, east and west.<sup>22</sup> We still need answers to questions raised about differences between wealthier and poorer parishes.<sup>23</sup> Further research might also reveal peculiarities with regard to the nature of parishes covered—and indeed a number of chapelries caught within the net.<sup>24</sup> In asking for evidence regarding income, our projected database may reveal interesting correlations between types of records and where they have been best kept, as for example, if peculiar jurisdictions might be noted as either being much worse at record keeping than the average, or much better? And either way, what might be the consequences of answers to this line of enquiry?<sup>25</sup> It is not of course clear if these questions are best phrased about the original keeping of records—or the separate matter of survival—but again the answers might be thought-provoking either way.

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<sup>21</sup> Of great value here: J. Gregory & J. Chamberlain, eds., *The National Church in Local Perspective: The Church of England and the Regions, 1660-1800*, Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003; see also: W. Gibson, *Religion and Society in England and Wales, 1689-1800*, London: Leicester University Press, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> A. Foster, *Churchwardens*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Chapels: often a source of problems to the researcher as they seem to appear and disappear fairly frequently over the period. Some do become parishes in their own right. Chapels more than one mile from the mother church had the right to have their own wardens with the same powers as those of the mother church and hence create their own accounts. G. Bray, *Tudor Church Reform The Henrician Canons of 1535 and the Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum*, Church of England Record Society, 2000, p. 373.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Foster is currently writing a study of “The Dioceses of England and Wales, c.1540-1700” that will incorporate a catalogue of diocesan, cathedral, archdeaconry and peculiar records; he claims that understanding the structure of the Church of England is vital to a better understanding of the records that were produced by “jurisdictions” so often almost at odds with each other.

Finally, more research is needed on how the role of the churchwardens developed over time, notably by reference to the range of Canons and proclamations that laid a framework for their deeds. For this reason, a list of relevant Canons has been provided along with a short list of publications designed to help the churchwardens in their duties.<sup>26</sup> These should be read in conjunction with proclamations through which the State intruded its voice. Hence, it was under Henry VIII that it was ordered that the “Great Bible” should be placed in every church after 6 May 1541.<sup>27</sup> It was under Edward VI that various changes were made regarding liturgy and that Homilies were issued for general use.<sup>28</sup> Even Mary backed up her changes by resorting to proclamations enforcing injunctions regarding heresy.<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth I intruded in the work of her churchwardens far more of course, partly because they became “government agents” in reporting Catholic “recusants” and were seen as important in maintaining local order. Numerous proclamations were issued during her reign concerning the maintenance of “peace in churches and churchyards”, the reporting of priests, the recording of “strange preachers”, and the reporting of seditious books, apart from the tightening of instructions to provide registers and transcripts thereof first initiated by Thomas Cromwell.<sup>30</sup>

It was the Canons of 1604 (notably numbers 80 to 91, 112 to 119, and mentions in several earlier ones, such as 19 ordering them to deal properly with “loiterers in time of divine service”) that really codified the work of churchwardens.<sup>31</sup> This also highlights the growth in burdens placed upon them between 1500 and 1600. Their role in working with ecclesiastical authorities in supporting the State perhaps explains why many became associated as “the Prelates’ rook-catchers” in the 1630s.<sup>32</sup> This in turn raises the question of how often these poor churchwardens were “caught between a rock and a hard place”: they had the unenviable task of

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<sup>26</sup> Appendix I for the Canons and Appendix II for the guides.

<sup>27</sup> P. Hughes & J. Larkin, eds., *Tudor Royal Proclamations, Vol. I: The Early Tudors (1485-1553)*, New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1964, item 200.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, item 313.

<sup>29</sup> P. Hughes & J. Larkin, eds., *Tudor Royal Proclamations, Vol. II: The Later Tudors (1553-1587)*, New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1969, items 390, 407, 422 and 443.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, and see also P. Hughes & J. Larkin, eds., *Vol III: The Later Tudors (1588-1603)*, New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1969, *passim*.

<sup>31</sup> G. Bray, ed., *The Anglican Canons 1529-1947*, Church of England Record Society, 1998; see also his edition of *Tudor Church Reform: The Henrician Canons of 1535*.

<sup>32</sup> *The Letany of John Bastwick*, 1637, p. 8.

reporting their neighbours for “crimes” that might easily be alleged against them in another year. We know from visitation records that they were frequently abused and even assaulted as they went about their duties. They could not win, on which note, let us be thankful for the records that they have left us and the obvious care that they took in looking after our churches.

This collection thus provides a series of essays that seek to illustrate the value of churchwardens’ accounts for historians. Valerie Hitchman was given the task of grounding the volume with a practical piece about what typical churchwardens’ accounts might reveal, how the parishes ran, how the churchwardens went about their business, and what the “financial” year might look like when discussed at the “Annual General Meetings” held across the country traditionally around Easter each year.<sup>33</sup> This has also provided an introduction to all that can be found in her excellent book of her PhD thesis on London and its environs, notably an attempt to construct a price index for goods most associated with church maintenance.<sup>34</sup>

In similar practical vein, Sheila Sweetinburgh has provided an excellent case study of two Canterbury parishes, those of St Dunstan and St Andrew, coming to grips with the Reformation, something to compare with Eamon Duffy’s study of Morebath.<sup>35</sup> This highlights the routine costs of maintenance together with examining the effects of legislation upon the parishes as the Reformation unfolded in England. It emphasises the economic and social impact of changes and the importance of parish churches within their local economies.<sup>36</sup> This is doubly important because it picks up the significance of local craftsmen in the routine maintenance of the church and the burden that relatively lowly churchwardens carried in their parishes. It was an onerous job and we need more research on how regularly some families were called upon, how willingly they took office, and indeed, what happened if and when people refused? And no doubt patterns changed over time and differed from area to area.

These essays are followed by Gary Gibbs with his discussion of the

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<sup>33</sup> V. Hitchman, “Balancing the Parish Books”, in this volume, pp. 15-44.

<sup>34</sup> V. Hitchman, *Omnia bene or Ruinosa. The Condition of the Parish Churches in and around London and Westminster c.1603-1677*, VDM Verlag, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> S. Sweetinburgh, *The Economic Impact of the Reformation on Two Canterbury Parishes*, in this volume, pp. 45-60; E. Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath. Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*, New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2001.

<sup>36</sup> See Hitchman’s valuable price index for building materials provided in Appendix III, also discussed in her essay in this collection.

strengths of collections for London, which also starts at an earlier date than most of the essays.<sup>37</sup> While being thoroughly grounded in details, this essay is also rich in what it has to say about methods, and the care with which we need to approach our chosen topics. It sets up a theme that runs throughout the work as to what we all really mean by a “set of churchwardens’ accounts”, for there are many difficulties of classification over a long period in time. The essay has the great value of showing the richness of pre-Reformation material and why it has found such favour with historians of the late medieval Catholic Church in England like Eamon Duffy, Beat Kümin, and Clive Burgess.<sup>38</sup>

Katharine Olson then takes up the cudgels to provide an account of survivals for the “dark corners of the land”, as Puritans in the sixteenth century once referred to Wales.<sup>39</sup> This has the virtue of exposing yet more problems than enumerated by Andrew Foster and of clarifying the situation as to what survives for Wales.<sup>40</sup> She also deploys two case studies of the accounts for St Mary’s, Swansea and St Oswald’s, Oswestry to great effect, and reminds us of the difficulties of language encountered in these documents that go beyond the occasional use of dialect! Here too there are useful warnings about the need to classify what we really mean by “accounts”, which perhaps for too long has favoured the neater survival of bound volumes rather than scattered papers and rolls.

A pleasing feature of the conference held at Canterbury in 2010 was the appearance of not one but two speakers to talk about Ireland, another even darker area as far as the English were concerned. Toby Barnard and Evie Monaghan’s essays should be read together for the clever ways in which they tease out the surviving material for Irish parishes, reveal surprising conclusions about co-existence in some parishes, and conclude that what we have is rather better after 1660 than before.<sup>41</sup> Between them,

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<sup>37</sup> G. Gibbs, “London Parish Records and Parish Studies: Texts, Contexts, and Debates over Appropriate Methods”, in this volume, pp. 61-86.

<sup>38</sup> E. Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath*.; Clive Burgess has also made major contributions in this field with articles like “Pre-Reformation Churchwardens’ Accounts and Parish Government: Lessons from London and Bristol”, *English Historical Review*, cxvii, 2002, pp. 306-32; see also his valuable editions of Bristol accounts published by the *Bristol Record Society* in 1995 and 2000. B. Kümin, *Shaping the Community*.

<sup>39</sup> K. Olson, “Churchwardens’ Accounts: Perspectives, Problems and Progress from Wales and the Marches”, in this volume, pp. 87-105.

<sup>40</sup> A. Foster, “Churchwardens”, pp.74-93.

<sup>41</sup> In this volume, T. Barnard, “Churchwardens’ Accounts and the Confessional State in Ireland, c.1660-1750”, pp.107-118; E. Monaghan, “Early Modern Churchwardens’ Accounts in Ireland”, pp.116-138.

they extend cover into the eighteenth century, suggest greater links between England and Ireland than one might have expected, and highlight slight differences in record keeping amidst acknowledged problems regarding the status of the Church in Ireland working against the grain of a predominantly Roman Catholic country. They also make us acutely aware of the loss of records associated with the fire at the Public Record Office in Dublin in 1922.

For something completely different, Chris Webb picks up on what might be seen as the social elements of the work of churchwardens, given that so much information is usually devoted to fabric repairs and maintaining services. He shows what their accounts might reveal about country customs and the wider community of the poor.<sup>42</sup> Churchwardens made many rather curious payments during the course of a typical year: to wandering wounded soldiers and vagrants, to the boys who killed vermin like moles and badgers that made a mess of parish churchyards and crops, or those who shot birds, and paid money in response to “parish briefs” that carried news of distress stories elsewhere, news of fires, plagues, or the plight of prisoners held by Barbary pirates in the Mediterranean.<sup>43</sup> Here are examples of how churchwardens were an essential part of the “fabric” of any given community, for they helped to organise perambulations at Rogationtide, and the occasional feasts that sustained poorer folk in difficult times of the year.

John Walter focuses on a relatively short time-span to consider what the churchwardens’ accounts reveal of the turbulent times when the British Isles were engulfed in civil wars and the loyalty of all was tested.<sup>44</sup> This reveals how these documents were sometimes politically as well as economically and socially sensitive. It also serves as a reminder that churchwardens, although primarily officials of the parish, could be drawn into responding to “secular” authorities at certain times like the 1640s. It raises a host of questions about what happened to “parish government” during the Interregnum and suggests that one line of future research would be to pick up what might have changed in the parishes when churchwardens apparently just picked up their roles again under the

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<sup>42</sup> C. Webb, “Vermin, Churchwardens and Support for the Parish Poor”, in this volume, pp.139-152.

<sup>43</sup> For more about “parish briefs” see the classic works: J. E. Smith, *Bygone Briefs*, London: Wightman & Co., 1896, and W. A. Bewes, *Church Briefs: Royal Warrants for Collections for Charitable Objects*, A. and C. Black, 1896.

<sup>44</sup> J. Walter, “The Public Sphere and the Parish Pump: Finding Politics in the Churchwardens’ Accounts, 1639-1643”, in this volume, pp.153-173.

renewed tutelage of their archdeacons and rural deans after 1660.<sup>45</sup>

The essay that concludes the collection is from Jonathan Willis and it highlights what the churchwardens' accounts may reveal about the prevalence of church music during a period when it was once assumed by many that music had been lost to the congregations as a result of the Reformation.<sup>46</sup> This is shown to have been far from the case, and the whole study, like so many in the volume, reveals that we should read these accounts carefully for what may be read between the lines, and hear what many of the "auditors" at the time would have picked up at those annual meetings at Easter. The essay is based on a close examination of the accounts for ten City of London parishes during the Elizabethan period.

This is a brief overview of the collection, but it should be read as the sum of its parts and as a tantalising taster for what might be revealed when a full database of this material becomes available. More themes could have been chosen, other papers were given at the original conference—notably on London and the remarkable survival of rich churchwardens' accounts despite the Civil Wars and later Fire of London, and the growing interest in what such accounts reveal about "material culture".<sup>47</sup>

What the collection hopefully illustrates is the richness of the source material, a number of different historiographical approaches in using the records, and a tantalising range of "problems" associated with best use, possibly changing over time. Any discussion of churchwardens' accounts—a source that has been maintained over several hundreds of years—will need to consider changes and key turning points regarding the preparation and use of these accounts by contemporaries. Knowledge derived from a full database will contribute to debates about the Restoration and the maintenance of parish churches and chapels at different phases over a long *duree*. This will place in perspective the initiatives many associate with the Laudians in the 1630s, or with Restoration bishops in the 1680s, alongside the neglected eighteenth century, and the better-known Victorian

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<sup>45</sup> See J. Reeks, "Parish Religion in Somerset 1625-1662, with Particular Reference to the Churchwardens", (Bristol Ph.D. thesis 2014), as an exemplary exploration of the continuity of parish government by churchwardens in the 1640s and 1650s.

<sup>46</sup> J. Willis, "Music and Religious Identity in Elizabethan London as revealed through Churchwardens' Accounts", in this volume, pp.175-193; this essay has the merit of illustrating the debt we all owe to the Warwick Parish Studies Network for Jonathan kindly offered us this piece following an excellent paper that he gave at the Warwick Symposium of 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Don White. "An Archaeology of Archival Sources: Exploring the Material Dimensions of Parish Accounts discussing "material culture" while Vanessa Harding addressed "Plague, Fire and the Preservation of the Record", in 2010.

“improvements” associated with members of the Oxford movement in the nineteenth century.<sup>48</sup>

This collection might be deemed successful if it provokes thought about how we should discuss and clarify the very nature of these long-standing records: how should we best define “churchwardens’ accounts”? What would we reasonably expect them to cover? How might they have been compiled and used by contemporaries? At what key junctures did the nature of the record change over time? This has a bearing on debates over the nature of the “oral tradition”, the “annual general meetings” held each Easter, and later matters concerning the introduction of a “print culture” within dioceses.<sup>49</sup> It will also go some way to explaining why elements of this important series of parish records have sometimes become entangled with material relating to overseers of the poor, general vestry minutes later, and even the work of constables.<sup>50</sup> And although this material should technically be protected and never allowed to leave the country, references need to be made to where such accounts have been found in archive collections overseas.<sup>51</sup>

Spring 2015

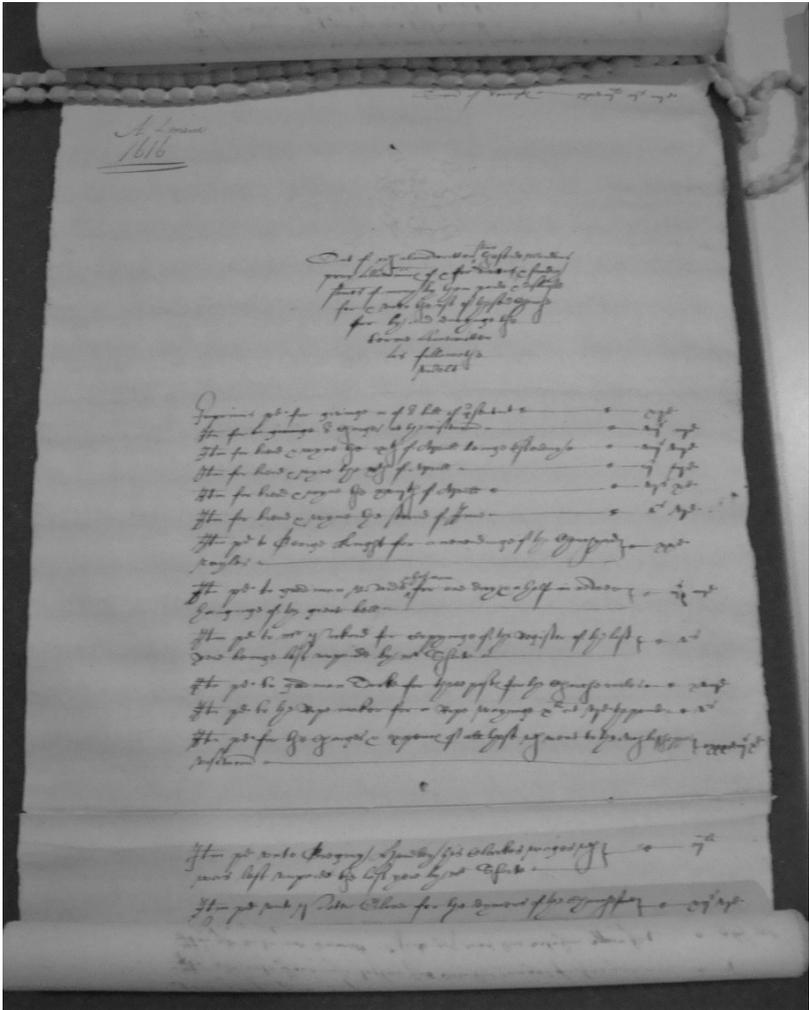
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<sup>48</sup> Fincham and Tyacke, *Altars Restored*; J. Gregory, *The Speculum of Archbishop Thomas Secker 1758-68*, Church of England Record Society, 1995; G. Tapsell, ed., *The Later Stuart Church, 1660-1714*, Manchester University Press, 2012; J. Spurr, *The Post-Reformation: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain 1603-1714*, Pearson Education, 2006; P. Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship, 1760-1857*, Cambridge University Press, 1994; T. Cooper, ed., *The Journal of William Dowling: Iconoclasm in East Anglia during the English Civil War*, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2001.

<sup>49</sup> See aspects of the debate between Burgess and Kūmin; note also current research of Frances Maguire, a PhD student, at the University of York on the introduction of printed forms/ and a print culture into ecclesiastical administration.

<sup>50</sup> Many documents headed and catalogued as churchwardens’ accounts prove to be those of the Overseer of the Poor and vice-versa. Possibly because in some parishes there was no distinction between the office of overseer and churchwarden causing both types of expenditure to appear within one account. Constables’ accounts are fairly rare for earlier periods and these can also be found within the accounts of the overseer or churchwardens. Many of these documents need to be scrutinised to establish their true identity.

<sup>51</sup> Huntingdon Library, California: documents within the Hastings Collection of private papers, HA Misc. Box 12(1) and Box 8 (2, 2a), catalogued as churchwardens’ accounts—these appear to be rough books containing the mixed expenditure of overseers, constables and churchwardens. A transcript of these is being undertaken by Hitchman. Contact with other libraries in USE suggests that this is a unique occurrence.



Tenterden, Kent, Churchwardens account roll for 1616.  
P364/5/2 held at Kent History and Library Centre. By kind permission of The Reverend Canon Lindsay J. Hammond, vicar of Tenterden

# BALANCING THE PARISH ACCOUNTS

VALERIE HITCHMAN

Across early modern England and Wales, and prior to the early nineteenth century there were somewhere in the region of 12,000 parishes of which c.3,350 have surviving churchwardens' accounts.<sup>1</sup> Few, if any, are complete. Some parishes have accounts surviving for intermittent years, for a single isolated short run of a few years; or several unconnected short runs; whilst others have uninterrupted accounts surviving for up to or beyond 50 years. This rich source of information, having been little used or ignored until recently, has now become a popular source for both professional and amateur historians.<sup>2</sup>

Individual parish accounts can help to build a picture of the parish providing both physical aspects of the parish and the social structure. When an approximate population size is compared with the parish income or expenditure the comparative wealth or poverty of that parish can also be estimated. Parish wealth as a whole, along with that of individual parishioners, can be ascertained through the church rates, which often form part of the churchwardens' accounts. Inventories within the accounts also help us to re-create how the church appeared internally with plate, books, and other objects listed, and can reveal changing religious practice. These accounts provide information on changes within specific geographic areas as well as nationally and thus help to build a picture of England and Wales through the changing political and religious events.

In each parish there were usually two churchwardens who served for a term of two years, although examples of wardens serving for a single year are not unknown. Occasionally, a warden can also be found serving for many years. During their term of office the churchwardens were responsible

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<sup>1</sup> Using data from the Clergy of the Church of England Database [www.theclergydatabase.org.uk](http://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk).

<sup>2</sup> A project to list all surviving churchwardens' accounts with details of each individual year of survival will give more accurate figures of survival in due course. The survival rate for each historic period along with many other computations will also be available through this project.

for managing the finances of the parish church; collecting the church rate, paying for repairs to the church building, furnishings and fittings, providing communion bread and wine and many miscellaneous items. At the end of each year, which usually ran from Lady Day to Lady Day (25<sup>th</sup> March), the churchwardens would present their accounts to the parish for approval.<sup>3</sup> These accounts are hand written and, although slightly formulaic, they are also very individual and give clear insights into the parish and its affairs.

So, how can these accounts be used and what can they tell us? Let us look at what a “typical” or “average” set of churchwardens’ accounts for an “average” parish would contain and some uses for that information.

There is, as you know, no such thing as an average parish; yet please bear with me in my attempt to find this mythical early modern parish.<sup>4</sup> The Hearth Tax returns and the Compton census have been used to find the population, and the expenditure detailed in almost 3,500 annual accounts from 397 parishes across southeast England has been analysed.<sup>5</sup> These are all the currently known and available surviving accounts within Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Essex, Kent, Middlesex and Surrey. No parishes from the Cities of London or Westminster have been included in this analysis; the higher percentage of survival, size, and

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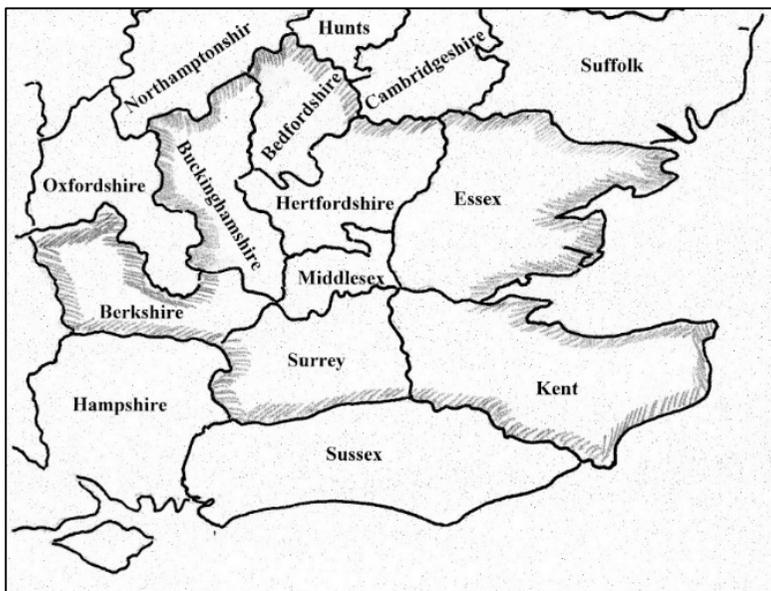
<sup>3</sup> Although two churchwardens were appointed in most parishes, the appointment of three or four churchwardens can be found in some of the larger parishes. Also, Michaelmas (29<sup>th</sup> September) along with other dates are occasionally found as the accounting date.

<sup>4</sup> Based on data from seventeenth-century churchwardens’ accounts. See C. Burgess, “Pre-Reformation Churchwardens’ Accounts and Parish Government: Lessons from London and Bristol”, *English Historical Review*, 117, 2002, pp. 306-332; B. Kümin, “Late Medieval Churchwardens’ Accounts and Parish Government: Looking Beyond London and Bristol”, *English Historical Review*, 119, 2004, pp. 87-99; C. Burgess, “The Broader Church? A Rejoinder to ‘Looking Beyond’”, *English Historical Review*, 119, 2004, pp. 100-116; R. Hutton, “Seasonal Festivity in Late Medieval England: Some Further Reflections”, *English Historical Review*, 120, 2005, pp. 66-79. The debate regarding this is summarised very clearly by Jonathan Willis in this volume, pp.175-193.

<sup>5</sup> A. Whiteman, ed., *The Compton Census of 1676: a Critical Edition*, London: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 1986; L. M. Marshall, *The Rural Population of Bedfordshire, 1671-1921*, Bedfordshire Record Society, 1934; *Essex Hearth Tax Returns: Michaelmas 1670*, British Record Society, 2012; *Kent Hearth Tax Assessment Lady Day 1664*, British Record Society, 2001; *Surrey Hearth Tax, 1664: Being an Alphabetical List of Entries in the Record*, Frome; London, 1940; T. P. Mitchell, *Sussex Hearth Tax Assessments, 1662: Bramber Rape*, Luton: T. P. Mitchell, 1996.

wealth of these parishes would adversely affect the averages.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1: The counties of Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Middlesex\* and Surrey have been used for this essay<sup>7</sup>



\* not including the Cities of London and Westminster.

These 397 parishes with surviving seventeenth-century accounts represent 21% of the c.1890 parishes within the geographic area of this

<sup>6</sup> Had it been possible to base the “average” on the whole of England and Wales, then the London and Westminster parishes would have been included. The accounts of the Overseers of the Poor, Surveyor of the Roads, and Parish Constables have not been included, although these are very useful in building a picture of the parish. For this essay the information they contain is not relevant. Also, their survival does not always correspond with those of the churchwardens’ accounts.

<sup>7</sup> The Cities of London and Westminster have not been used. For an in depth study of the 30 mile ratio of London and Westminster, including both London and Westminster, see V. Hitchman, *Omnia Bene or Ruinosa? The Condition of the Parish Churches in and around London and Westminster c1603-1677*, VDM Verlag, 2009.

study.<sup>8</sup> The survival rate of this critical source is considerably higher than the estimated national average survival rate for such parish sources.<sup>9</sup> This pattern is probably due to several factors, amongst which are the higher density of population, the relative wealth, and, possibly, the supposed higher levels of education in southeast England.

This average parish contained 141 dwellings, with a population of 384 adults and an annual expenditure of £12.9s.2d. This expenditure can be divided under seven headings; **parish administration** (visitation expenses, vestry meetings, etc.); **bells** (repair, maintenance, replacement, and ringing); **church structure** (repairs, maintenance and the rebuilding of church structure); **church interior** (pews, pulpit, altar, linen and painting, etc.); **communion bread and wine**; **churchyard** (clearing rubbish, covering graves, planting and cutting trees, fences, walls and gates), and **miscellaneous** items that cannot be placed under any of the above headings (perambulation, destruction of vermin, repairs to church houses, etc.).

This chart is useful in that it clearly shows how and on what the parishes, or more accurately the churchwardens, were spending the church rate and other income; the way that expenditure was spread across the various categories of essential and non-essential items. That the

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<sup>8</sup> The true number of parishes is difficult to ascertain due to chapels of ease becoming full parishes, communities abandoning a church or moving away from an area, new parishes being created and those amalgamated with others. The number given is all those identified as having existed at some time prior to 1700 using the Clergy of the Church of England database [www.cced.org.uk](http://www.cced.org.uk) and the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, a survey of the finances of the Church in England and Wales and English controlled parts of Ireland made in 1535 on the orders of Henry VIII.

<sup>9</sup> A. Foster, "Churchwardens' Accounts of Early Modern England and Wales: some Problems to Note, but Much to be Gained, in K. L. French, G. G. Gibbs, and B. A. Kümin, eds., *The Parish in English Life, 1400-1600*, Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 77, estimated 8% survival during the Early Modern period, based on the whole of England and Wales: the survival rate in other parts of England and Wales may well be recalculated upwards in due course. Other sources for survival are J. C. Cox, *Churchwardens' Accounts: From the Fourteenth Century to the Close of the Seventeenth Century*, Methuen, 1913, lists 322 parishes nationally and just under 3% of parishes; R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England 1400-1700*, Oxford University Press, 1994, Appendix A, 226-262, lists 993 parishes nationally and just over 8% of parishes. The initial research for the Churchwardens' accounts' database suggests that approximately 14% of parishes nationally have surviving accounts for the Early Modern period. These figures will probably be revised as the identification of new documents and the elimination of some documents wrongly catalogued takes place in due course.