

KNEBORTH PARISH REGISTERS 1596 TO 1837

FOREWORD

It was in 1538 that Thomas Cromwell issued an order that records of every christening, wedding and burial should be kept in a book locked in a "sure coffer" with two locks. These were often made on loose sheets of paper and sixty years later these entries were ordered to be copied on parchment in books. In 1598, in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, each parish had to keep a register on parchment and within a month after Easter a transcripts of the entries had to be sent to the diocesan registry. In 1837 only the baptisms, marriages and burials performed according to the rites of the Established Church were entered locally and the official register of all births marriages and deaths became the concern of the civil authorities. For this reason the following copies of the Knebworth register do not go beyond 1837.

For those who wish to continue a study of the local populations the census returns from 1841 and 1861 are available and in 1972 the 1871 lists will be ready for study; that is one hundred years after recording.

The Knebworth registers are in fairly good condition. The first one is difficult to read and starts from 1596. A note in the book states that it was found "among some old waste papers in a private house" and after four years there is a break; but from 1606 the entries have been copied in another book; this one has been used. After 1702 the copies were made in excellent bold handwriting. In 1754 marriages were recorded in a separate book of printed forms; these were published from 1606 to 1812 in a book edited by W.P.W. Phillimore in 1909 entitled Hertfordshire Parish Registers, Marriages, Vol 2, and the spelling transcribed for this book have been used. Baptisms were entered in a book of printed forms from 1812 but the same order of recording is used through these lists. Between 1606 and 1752 the year starts from Lady day, March 25th.

Abbreviations used are the dates and the following:

d. = daughter, s. = son, W. = widow or widower, K. = Knebworth, P. = Parish of, b. = bachelor, S. = spinster, lic. = licence. Where the name is difficult to decipher a ? is used. There are additional notes at the end of the lists.

The registers are now in the County Record Office at the County Hall at Hertford and may be inspected there. With the exception of the first book these copies were made before the originals were sent to Hertford for safe keeping; the typing has not been checked with the originals. *(the spelling and apparent inconsistent notation has been checked in this copy against the original file from which the details are taken typed by Mr Richardson.)*

My thanks are due to the rector, the Rev. Philip Rumsey and the churchwardens for allowing me to copy the registers before they were sent to Hertford. I hope these lists may be of use to anyone wishing to make a search of the registers.

Frank A. Richardson, Dip. Hist. August 1917.

Parish of Knebworth in the County of Hertford

Found among some old waste papers in a private house (note on page one of the first book.)

A Booke or register conteyninge all Christeninges maryages and buryalls within the parish of Knebworth from the feast of St Mychaell Th'Archangell being the XXIX daye of September in the yeare of our Lorde God 1596 and in the yeare of the Raighn of our Soveren Ladie Quene Elizabeth XXXVII as followeth et et.

NOTES ON THE KNEBWORTH PARISH REGISTER

The name christening was used before 1612 but after that date the ceremony was called baptism. In the first four years of the records the names of the sureties were also given an illustrated in this sample. "Thomas Youge the sonne of Thomas Younge the younger, christenede the seconded daye of July, 1598 whose sureties were Roberte Hodgekins, parson, Richard Bigge the elder and the goodwyffe Camfielde, the wife of Jhon Camfielde of the Trij Howsen . ('Three Houses')

In recording baptisms the father's name was generally noted but not always the mother's. When illegitimate children were baptised the father's name was mentioned in very few instances. The father's status was included in later years and with the main industry being agriculture by far the greater number of men were either labourers or farmers, with the occasional servant, gamekeeper or carpenter. In several instances men from Langley were described as tradesmen but without indication of which trade they followed.

Until about 1800 christian names varied very little, William, Thomas, John, George, James and Richard were the most popular with an occasional Edward, Philip, Francis, Joseph or Henry for the men, and Elizabeth, Mary, Sarah, Ann and Jane were the favourites for the female sex, followed in popularity by Hannah, Frances, Rose, Alice, or Judith. Quite often a son or daughter was named after a parent and such entries as William the son of William or Sarah the daughter of Sarah occurred frequently.

By an act of 1666 no corpse could be buried in any "shirt, shift, sheet or shroud of any material but sheep's wool". The act was not repealed until 1814 but there are only two instances in the Knebworth registers where this is recorded and duly attested by witnesses; these were in 1678-9.

In 1693 an entry in the burials reads "ye son Murdherd" no name is given and this could be a poor spelling or murdered. In 1741 two persons were murdered at Winter Green and were buried on October 14th. The man named Pilgrim was hung in chains on Rabley Heath for this offence. The Codicote parish register records that Richard son of Joseph Pilgrim was baptised on 2nd July 1707, married in 1729 and hanged on 22 of March 1741 for this murder of Mary and William Woodland of Knebworth. The variation in dates could be that he was hanged in the March following the October but included in the year from 25th of March in

each year. One other crime is noted when Robert and Henry Freeman were executed for highway robbery in 1755 and buried on 18th March.

If the entries are correct, William the son of William and Helen Handley was baptised and buried on the same day, 22nd May 1743; but this could be two generations with similar names or more likely the wrong entry.

A Foundling Hospital in Langley is noted between 1757 and 1760 when there were several child burials and the rector “gave ye fees” for the ceremonies. The Rev Peter Ellice was the rector and this hospital is only mentioned for a few years.

Infant mortality was fairly high in some years, such as in 1750 to 1752; in these three years there were twenty seven burials and fifteen of these were of infants. The ages or definition of infants was not always used. Epidemics seem to have avoided Knebworth; in 1665 the year of the Great Plague in London, there were only five burials here when, according to Daniel Defoe, 121 persons died at St Albans and 160 at Ware. The years of higher local death rates do not seem to coincide with epidemics elsewhere.

A note in the register for 1712 reads as follows: “N.B. William son of Jno Heywood and Alice Trussle his granddaughter, were baptised; his wife Heywood and his daughter Trussle churched and he himself buried, all in the same hour by William Lytton, rector”. This sounds a little confusing, but Mr WG. Gerish sorted this out as follows: Gerish Collection, Herts County Record Office.)

	John Heywood buried.	
	▼	
Heywood, wife of William, Churched	= William Heywood, son of John Baptised	
	▼	
Husband not specified	= Trussle, daughter of William and his wife, churched	
	▼	
	Alice Trussle, baptised	

Mr Gerish thought that there might have been some difficulty over the burial of John Heywood owing to his not having been baptised to cause his son to undergo this sacrament so late in life; and that he had taken “he himself buried” to refer to John, as one cannot believe that William would be baptised and buried “all in the same hour”.

Two millers are noted, Edward Christmas buried in 1743 and Edward Dollins in 1758. There was a water mill on the River Mimram at Rye End, just north of Kimpton Mill about this time and these men probably managed this mill.

There is one mention of a mother's age when her child was born, in 1798. Mary Butterfield was aged fifty-two and the baby's age was also given as one month when she was baptised.

In some parishes it is possible to estimate the population by multiplying the births, marriages or deaths by certain multipliers; but this is not possible for Knebworth. Other parishes understandably were included in the lists. From Nup End in Codicote parish, Burleigh Farm in Letchworth and Langley in Hitchin parish, persons came to Knebworth church for ceremonies and registration. In some years there were nearly as many from outside the parish as from inside and one must suspect that in early years, when the abode of the person concerned is not noted, that quite a number of persons came from outside and only the occasional one was recorded. It is certain that many children baptised here did not remain in the village as they grew up. In the first hundred years of the period only three quarters of the number baptised were buried here and the proportion diminished until from 1800 to 1837 the baptisms were more than twice the number of the burials. There was obviously not enough employment locally and many had to go to the towns or elsewhere to earn a living or to marry. The birth rate increased in the 18th and 19 centuries. The average number of baptisms per year in the 17th century was 5.3, in the 18th it was 8.0, and in the early 19th century it was 10.5. Judging by the number of burials the population did not increase in that proportion.

The population was by no means a static one: many family names appear only a few times in the registers but other names such as Deards, Emmens, Skeggs, Sibley, Lumbis, Webster, Kimpton, Mardall, Camfield and a few others appear time and time again. There were thus some families who remained in the village for generations, while others came in for one or two generations only.

There is little doubt that a much more detailed study of these lists and figures could show more information: but perhaps enough has been written here to note a few peculiarities in the recording of normal happenings and to indicate the general trend of events in the village before Somerset House became the official registry.

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