

WHY THE FLEET MARRIAGES?

FLEET MARRIAGES OF HERTFORDSHIRE PEOPLE

Fleet Marriages of Hertfordshire People to 1754 by the late Jack Parker is the result of many years work researching clandestine marriages for which the area known as the Rules of the Fleet was notorious. The Fleet Prison, as such, was for debtors. Jack's study is restricted to those who are recorded as coming from Hertfordshire.

Many of the diaries and notebooks are now online but Jack managed to dig out a number of clandestine marriages that have been missed and, conversely, the online transcriptions have some additional entries also.

This index of the marriages of some 6,500 Hertfordshire people is intended to amass these records for family history researchers with ancestors in the county. This is yet another source for family historians to venture into.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Fleet Prison stood in Farringdon Street on the site now occupied by the Congregations Memorial Hall, and the area around it, known as the "Rules of the Fleet", was bounded by Farringdon Street, Ludgate Hill, the Old Bailey and Fleet Lane. This was a somewhat insalubrious and notorious area of narrow alleys, courts and passages. Here debtor prisoners who gave suitable security were able to live and, where practicable, to continue their former occupations.

Apparently, not all the Fleet clergy were actually debtors. For a long time it was thought that the first recorded marriage there was in 1613 but my research has produced a reference in the register of St. Bride's church on 8th April 1611 of the marriage of Valentyne Lane and Mary Foxe "in the Flete".

Up to the 1690s, the two main clandestine centres in London were Holy Trinity, Minories and St. James, Dukes Place. The Fleet was of little importance. However, the Marriage Duty Act of 1696, by penalising beneficed clergymen marrying couples without banns or licence, effectively reduced the number of marriages taking place in these churches, as well as irregular marriages at other parochial churches in London (Marriages of Hertfordshire people in these churches, as well as in other clandestine centres, are recorded in "Hertfordshire Strays").

However, clergymen operating in the Fleet, by a legal quirk, being unbeficed, could not be proceeded against effectively. As a result, the clandestine marriage business in the Fleet boomed.

The clergy were all said to be regularly ordained Church of England clerics, although there were doubts about one or two. As such, the marriages they conducted were fully legal. Until prevented by an Act of 1710, the marriages had taken place in the Fleet prison chapel or in chambers within the prison. Thereafter, the entire business moved into the rules, with chapels set up associated with

marriage houses which aimed to supply food and drink. Marriages were not confined to these places, however; they took place in taverns, coffee houses, private houses, chambers and shops — one couple from Hertfordshire were married in a coffin plate makers.

The Fleet parsons were prepared, for the appropriate fee, to go out into the country to marry couples; examples appear in this Index. Fees were generally charged on the basis of "what the traffic would bear" and it is evident from the registers that what was mainly taken into account was the quality of the couple's dress and their social status. In this connection, have a look at the remarks in the register for Daniel Dissell's marriage. The Fleet parsons seem to have run a 24-hour service, albeit often reluctantly.

While some of the Fleet marriages were for criminal or fraudulent purposes, which made the venue notorious, and, although the Fleet parsons and register-keepers were not averse for a fee to antedate marriages and certificates, the great majority of the estimated quarter of a million or so couples marrying there did so with the aim of making a normal lasting union.

Commentators of the time, like the media today, concentrated on wrongdoings. This was taken up by Victorian historians, such as Burn and others and, more recently, by Stone, all of whom have stressed the "seamy" side. It was not until Steel in 1968 that attention was drawn to the considerable number of marriages there for honest purposes. To quote him, records of clandestine centres generally "are among the most important for the genealogist", and "unfortunate indeed is the searcher unable to fill at least one of his 'blanks' from these records".

This index of the marriages of some 6,500 Hertfordshire people is intended to amass these records for family history researchers with ancestors in the county. Given the huge number of marriages in the Fleet, it is doubtful if the proportion of fraudulent or bigamous marriages was in fact much higher than elsewhere overall in the country.

THE RECORDS

The first register begins in 1674 but doubt has been thrown by Beric Lloyd and in the Endnotes to this Index on the validity of some of the very early ones. Most of the Fleet records are at the National Archives, Kew, in the class RG7; the piece numbers 1 to 273 and 833 are registers; 274 to 290 are indexes of names, often with no other information, while 291 to 832 are rough notebooks, all of pocket size and some in poor condition. Some of the registers have integral rough alphabetical indexes and a few are alphabetical transcripts of other registers. Also there are two registers at Kew under PROBI.8/50, while another register is among the Rawlinson MSS (B360) in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Most of them were in private hands until, in 1821, the government bought them for £260. Subsequently others

have been added. Some registers are copies of others and a number must have been lost or destroyed. Indeed, Lord Hardwicke is said to have torn one up in Court.

Some registers as bound by the National Archives contain odd pages of varying sizes from different registers. Some entries appear in a number of different registers; one Hertfordshire marriage appeared in six of them. Doubt has been cast on the validity of some of the registers with apparently earlier dates, which seem to be copies of entries in later ones with the dates altered.

In this Index, all the registers have been checked but not the notebooks, although a few Hertfordshire entries from those examined are included. Mark Herber has begun to transcribe Fleet registers. At the time of writing this index, two booklets covering four registers and one notebook have been published; the one or two entries from the notebook relating to Hertfordshire people are included in this Index.

OTHER DETAILS AVAILABLE

Unlike most contemporary parish registers, the Fleet registers give, in most instances, details of the groom's occupation and, occasionally, that of the bride, as well as, in a great many instances, the parties' marital status and home localities.

They covered also marriages conducted by the Fleet parsons outside the Fleet, including in the "rules" of the King's Bench Prison, the Southwark Mint, and some marriages from the Mayfair Chapel. Sometimes, too, additional information is noted. This has been recorded also in this Index. The start of the year in almost all the registers before 1753 is on the old 25th March basis. Thereafter, dating changed, apart from the odd lapse, to the calendar year.

Note: Having found a marriage, researchers are recommended to look for the relevant notebook, if it still exists, as there may be additional information.

FOR FURTHER READING

Brown, R.L. "The Rise and Fall of Fleet Marriages" in R.B. Outhwaite (ed.) *Marriage and Society*, Europa Publications, 1981.

Steel, D.J. *National Index of Parish Registers vol.1: Sources for Births, Marriages and Deaths before 1837*, Phillimore/Society of Genealogists, 1976.

Outhwaite, R.B. *Clandestine Marriage in England 1500-1850*, Cambridge UP, 1995.

Lloyd, Beric *The Fleet Forgeries*, 1987.

Benton, Tony *Irregular Marriage in London Before 1754*, Society of Genealogists, 1993.

Burn, J.S. *The Fleet Registers, (1833)*, and *The History of Fleet Marriage Registers, (1834)*, and *The History of the Parish Registers in England, (1862)*.

Stone, L. *Uncertain Unions*, Oxford UP, 1992.

Herber, Mark *Clandestine Marriages in the Chapel and Rules of the Fleet Prison Vols.1 & 2*, Francis Boutle, 1998 and 1999.

