England is divided into 40 administrative counties which traditionally were each comprised of various numbers of ecclesiastical parishes. Each parish had its own church that administered to both the spiritual and the secular needs of the community.

In 1538, Thomas Cromwell, chief minister of Henry VIII, issued *The Second Henrician Injunctions* that mandated every parish to maintain registers in which to record all baptisms, marriages and burials. These documents are central to ancestral research in England but it is not always practical for researchers to inspect or study the original registers or the many additional documents that originated in the parishes. Some of the people offering assistance in sourcing and reviewing the parish information are those involved in the Online Parish Clerk (OPC) program.

There is no formal structure to this unique program. Each county that participates organizes its own network of OPCs. Interested individuals volunteer to oversee a parish. A coordinator assists them in setting up their areas and organizing their data in whatever way suits them best. A major stipulation is that OPCs will share their knowledge with others free of charge. They must also be accessible through email contact.

The tasks of OPCs are primarily to compile reference material for their adopted parish or parishes in the form of transcripts, extracts, abstracts, indexes and copies of original records. Data is collected from as many sources as possible, emphasizing both local history and genealogy. Many OPCs maintain websites where data may be stored for browsing or source references may be listed.

Although OPCs are not officially associated with parish councils, ministers or congregations, these groups are often helpful in sourcing information about past residents and constructing histories of the various parishes. A close contact with incumbents, parish clerks and churchwardens is always desirable.

The OPC concept originated in 2000 with three genealogists who had been researching their families in the southwestern County of Cornwall. After discussions about organizational matters, they began their project in 2001. A comprehensive description of the OPC program, and the objectives envisioned and drafted by those early volunteers, can be found on the Cornwall OPC website. A summary of the program was also presented in a recent article in Family Tree (Stockdill, 2012, pp. 38-41).

Over the past decade the scheme has spread to a number of other counties as shown in the following table and on Figure 1. The table summarizes the OPCs active as of March 2012.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Total Parishes</th>
<th>Parishes w/ an OPC</th>
<th>Number of OPCs</th>
<th>% of Parishes w/ OPCs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cornwall</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devon</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorset</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essex</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somerset</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sussex</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warwick</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiltshire</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In most counties individual OPCs take care of parishes. In a few counties, a coordinator collects transcriptions and other material for the entire county from many volunteers (individually referred to as OPCs). Among these are Kent, Lancashire and Hampshire. Both Kent and Lancashire groups seek donations to help support the costs of data acquisition, although that practice does not conform to the objectives of the OPC program.
It is not uncommon for an OPC to handle more than one parish. Families often crossed parish boundaries for work or other reasons; so, naturally, researchers may need to study material in adjacent parishes for information about their ancestors. Many OPCs, like this writer, live outside of the UK while researching their British roots.

OPCs must consider copyright restrictions, data protection and privacy issues in disseminating information and, to the best of their ability, avoid any misuse of data such as publishing private information or providing data about living people.

**Becoming an OPC**

I am the OPC for four Devon parishes in the southwest part of the county: Cornwood, Harford, Plympton St. Mary and Plympton St. Maurice. They are located just to the east of the City of Plymouth (Figure 2). My own family research demonstrated that many generations of my ancestors had resided in Cornwood Parish, since at least the early 1600s. In the course of that work I collected copies of all of the registers for baptisms, marriages and burials, all of the census records for the area and many other forms of information about people, places and events. Believing that my data would also be helpful to other family historians, I decided, in 2003, to adopt, first, Cornwood Parish and, subsequently, the others, and become an OPC for the region.

I maintain websites for each of my parishes through which family researchers can contact me (Figure 3). The sites are kept up-to-date with the latest information that has been collected or transcriptions that have been completed. I also send out news items to a list of researchers that have contacted me over the years. Because I have copies of all of the registers I can access the data right at my desk, at any time, and quickly answer many of the initial questions from family researchers.
Information Sources for the OPC
Parish Registers

Parish registers are obviously one of the more important sources of information about people. They contain the basic data on individuals – births, marriages and deaths (BMD) – over long periods of time. Not all registers are complete and not all individuals who were born in the various parishes were baptized, married or buried there, but the registers do provide an excellent initial source to search for ancestors.

The registers often include a substantial amount of information about the parish, besides names and dates, as shown on the example in Figure 4. On this page from the Plympton St. Mary Parish baptism register can be found entries for labourers, a shop-keeper (butcher), a nobleman (the Earl of Morley) and an unwed mother – a real cross-section of the community. Other examples from the registers are shown below.

Because OPCs have generally spent a great deal of time examining and transcribing records, we will usually have a broad view of the community and of the individuals and families that lived in the parishes. We are thus able to pass along very helpful advice to people trying to build their own family trees or learn about the areas in which their ancestors lived.

Bishop’s Transcripts

Bishop’s Transcripts are sometimes available and are particularly important when parish registers have not been preserved. These documents are copies of the registers made by the various incumbents and sent to the diocese offices on a regular basis. They have not been saved for all parishes but, where available, they can add to the library of data. Since they occasionally contain additional information not recorded in the registers, they should be reviewed whenever they can be found.

In Cornwood Parish, for example, all of the parish records, including BMD registers, tax rolls, militia records and other lists, were destroyed in a fire at the churchwarden’s house in 1685; so data before that time is very limited. The few Bishop’s Transcripts available for this parish are the only BMD data in existence for the years before 1685. They are not always complete for all years and
most pages are in poor condition, as shown on Figure 5, but they are still very valuable to anyone interested in the parish residents from early time periods.

Census Records

Census records are important sources of information about families and their places of residence, primarily for the mid-1800s and early 1900s. While some earlier census data may be available, for most parishes the detailed records start with the census taken in 1841. Information now can be found for all censuses to 1911. An example of the information contained on the 1851 England Census is shown on Figure 6.

It was interesting to note on this summary that visitors staying with the family included a young man who later married one of the daughters of John and Ann and a young girl who was actually their granddaughter. The only negative bit of data is that their surname was spelled wrong, not an uncommon occurrence!

Some drawbacks of using online indexes or reviewing films in FamilySearch Centres is that one may not know exactly where an individual resided at various times and a wide search of multiple records may be necessary to find them. Because many OPCs have the films of censuses taken in their particular parishes, they can do quick lookups. They are also able to readily relate the census records to the BMD data and construct histories for past parish residents.

Tithe Apportionments and Maps

The Tithe Commutation Act of 1836 replaced the ancient system of payment of tithes in kind with monetary payments called the "corn rent" calculated on the basis of a national, seven-year average price for wheat, barley and oats. Lands throughout England and Wales were evaluated to determine the amounts to be paid and maps were produced showing all...
of the parcels subject to the tithes. Associated with each map was an apportionment, in the form of a table, with an entry for each parcel of land. For each entry, the owner, tenant, area name or description, state of cultivation and rent charge payable was listed, as well as the name of the tithe owner.

The tithe apportionments and maps are a great source of data about parish residents, both landowners and occupiers, for the early 1800s. They show where families actually lived around 1840 and whether they were landowners or renters. Many OPCs have obtained copies of the maps and apportionments and display them on their websites or are able to look up information on them. Figure 7 shows a portion of the tithe apportionment for Cornwood Parish and part of the relevant map.

Maps, Photos and Other references

All genealogists love maps and OPCs are no different. OPCs try to collect all types from all time periods. Inspection of maps over the decades can show the development of infrastructure and habitation. Photos of all kinds, both old and new, help to get a sense of what the parishes look like now and how they looked in the past.

OPCs look for all manner of reference lists from related publications and websites, especially those which are name-rich – directories, land tax assessments, account books, apprenticeship lists, historical information about the parishes and major churches and personal papers, such as wills and property lease or sale agreements (Figure 8).

Examples of Information Gleaned from the Registers

Prior to the introduction of civil registration of births in 1837, the only records related to birth were baptisms by the Church of England officials. These are found in parish baptism registers. In the cases where the registers have not survived, there will be no information as to birth.

Many of the old baptism records showed just the infant’s name and that of the parents, sometimes only the father’s name. In later, 19th century records more information was included about relationships. In the 1789 baptism entry for Betsey Triscott, (Figure 9), only the parents’ names are shown. Information about their local residence or occupation must be obtained from other sources.

The information on George Wakeham’s 1813 baptism entry (Figure 10) predates the first census so having information about his father’s occupation (hind) and employer (William Langmead, Esquire) adds to the family narrative. Also noted were the facts that he was born August 19,
1813, privately baptized on September 6, 1813 and received into the Church on August 4, 1814.

Not all baptisms were children. In the case of the 1901 baptism of Ellen Eliza Chapman (Figure 11), a married woman, there would likely be a registered birth certificate available. Her parents’ names, Joshua Smith Fenn and Harriet Matilda Fenn, were recorded in the entry. A quick check of the 1901 England Census determined her birth place as Plymouth and her age as 31. From that information, birth and marriage records could be found for her. Further checks of relevant censuses would show whether she had siblings, what her parents did for a living and where they had lived.

Sometimes the marriage of the parents just missed the baptism but both entries were in the registers. These entries (Figures 12 and 13) for the 1801 baptism of Anne Moore and the marriage of her parents, were probably recorded within hours of each other but it seems very unfortunate for a child to be recorded for posterity this way!

Burial records generally have not shown relationships in the same way as baptisms; so it is a treat to find a vicar or clerk who recorded any extra informa-
tion for the deceased concerning parentage, spouses, individual status or cause of death. In some cases, however, researchers may be left to wonder what happened when many people, particularly children, died close together in time and geographic area. This kind of information suggests that some research might be warranted to find out if there had been a spread of disease.

In the instances shown on Figure 14 there was no cause of death given for the large number of deaths of children in Plympton St Mary Parish in 1769 and 1770. In the neighbouring parish of Cornwood, there were also many deaths during the same period, many of them children and infants as well (Figure 15). So, again, it might be inferred that there was an epidemic across the whole region. In this register, though, the vicar recorded the causes of death of a large number of this group of children as smallpox. Possibly that is what killed the children in Plympton St. Mary too. Often it helps to look in neighbouring areas for information that might answer a question.

Occasionally burial entries will be annotated with a cause of death or unusual circumstance which might lead one to look for other records. In the case of the 1826 death of Samuel Tall (Figure 16), information that an inquest was held was noted in the burial register. A search of local newspaper archives revealed a report (in this case, in Trewman’s Flying Post, dated Tuesday, February 23, 1826) that said, "On Monday se’n night at Plympton St Mary, Samuel Tall was accidentally killed while at work at Cartsford Quarry, by a large mass of stone falling on him. He was at the time in the act of holding out his hand to receive his wages, when the stone fell upon him and caused his death, without in the least injuring the person standing close to him. Verdict – Accidental Death.”

Figure 17 – Portion of a spreadsheet listing baptisms in Cornwood, sorted by surname

Role of the OPC

Helping to construct family histories is one of the most important roles of OPCs and we do it for and with the help of many other individuals. With our large base of data and familiarity with the people and the communities, we provide a valuable service to other family researchers.

Transcribing church and other records is often a major part of the work undertaken by OPCs. For my four parishes, with the help of several dedicated volunteers, we have transcribed, to date, over 6,400 pages of baptisms, marriages and burials comprising over 67,000 individual entries, as far back as 1603 and right up to near-present day. Another 1,200 pages of census records have been done between 1841 and 1911 with over 26,000 entries. We did this because we found many of the commercial sites and other indexes had significant errors, especially with individuals’ names. It is very gratifying that many people whom I have helped have come back to assist in transcribing.

After transcription, all information is transferred to spreadsheets, including any notes written alongside or in the margins. Data can then be sorted in whatever form is desired. The example included here (Figure 17) is sorted by surname but also recorded are the dates of
baptism and birth – day, month and year – full names, residences, occupations, the locality in which they lived and any notes on the entries. Through sorting the lists by surname, it is possible to reconstruct individual families and pass those summaries along to descendants requesting the data.

Some of the notes in BMD registers are very telling as to the individuals, as well as to social and political history, and are rarely included in published indexes. For example, the two notes concerning Ms. Jane Adams on the spreadsheet are instructive. She had two children out of wedlock within a couple of years, in 1808 and 1810. In both cases the Vicar made a note that she was only being permitted to deliver her children in Cornwood Parish under the understanding that Plympton St. Mary Parish would “consider the bastards theirs.” Obviously there was a concern as to who would be responsible for their care if Ms. Adams became destitute. Prior to passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, individual parishes were responsible for poor relief and they took care to ensure that only their own legitimate families were listed for any support. Local county and regional governments took over welfare responsibilities after 1834.

Also evident on the list are entire family groupings such as for the children of John and Elizabeth Alger family. This sort of compilation is very useful to family historians searching for connections of parents and siblings.

Conclusions

While we are moving rapidly into an era that utilizes the Internet and a vast array of technical assistance in collecting, organizing and storing information, future research and the construction of family trees is still primarily based on information from the past. Volunteers like OPCs, and others occupying similar roles, can and will be sources for much of that data.

So why do we do it? Basically we are involved for the enjoyment of solving puzzles and assisting other family historians. We often get kind and encouraging comments from people we have helped that help us feel it is all worthwhile. One of my favourites was from a researcher who said to me: “It was only about one month ago that I discovered my ancestor in Cornwood, and Poof! There you were!” That pretty much says it all!

Acknowledgments

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References


County OPC Programs:
- UK Online Parish Clerks website – www.onlineparishclerks.org.uk/
- Cornwall County website – www.cornwall-opc.org/
- Devon County website – http://genuki.cs.ncl.ac.uk/DEV/OPCproject.html
- Dorset County website – www.opcdorset.org/
- Essex County website – www.essex-opc.org.uk
- Hampshire County website – www.knighroots.co.uk/parishes.htm
- Kent County website – www.kent-opc.org/
- Lancashire County website – www.lan-opc.org.uk/
- Somerset County website – www.wsom-opc.org.uk/
- Sussex County website – www.sussex-opc.org/
- Warwick County website – www.hunimex.com/warwick/opc/opc.html
- Wiltshire County website - www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~engwopcp/index.html

Wayne Shepheard’s OPC websites:
- Cornwood Parish – www.cornwood-opc.com
- Plympton St. Mary Parish – www.plymptonstmary-opc.com
- Plympton St. Maurice Parish – www.plymptonstmaurice-opc.com

Wayne Shepheard is a retired geologist and now spends most of his time in genealogical pursuits, continuing research on his own family in North America and the United Kingdom records. He became an Online Parish Clerk (OPC) in 2003 for Cornwood, Harford, Plympton St. Mary and Plympton St. Maurice parishes. Wayne is also involved with the Alberta Family Histories Society and serves as Editor of Chinook, their quarterly journal. He also assists others in sourcing information about their ancestors through his genealogical consulting business, Family History Facilitated. www.familyhistoryfacilitated.ca