

Sacrament certificates in National Archives piece CHES4/3

The Test Act of 1672 and subsequent laws that re-enacted and amended its provisions introduced mechanisms to prevent Nonconformists and Roman Catholics from holding public office. One of the provisions was that “persons who bear any offices or places of trust” under the Crown had to receive the sacrament of communion according to the rites of the Church of England. To prove that he had done so, each communicant had to return a certificate into court, signed by the minister who had officiated, one or more churchwardens of the parish, and two witnesses.

If the communion service occurred in Cheshire, the certificate might be returned into one of at least three different courts: the Exchequer of Chester, the Chester City Quarter Sessions or the Cheshire County Quarter Sessions. Those for the Exchequer of Chester form class CHES4 in the National Archives, the earliest dating from 1673. The certificates for the City Quarter Sessions are at Cheshire Archives and Local Studies (CALS), where they form class Z/QRR, and again they date from 1673; some others have been filed on the Quarter Sessions Files (Z/QSF). The Cheshire County Quarter Sessions certificates are also at CALS. Until 1741, they were kept with the Quarter Sessions files (QSF), but from that date they were filed separately, and now form class QDR/2A. Sacrament certificates are widely available among the Quarter Sessions records of County Record Offices around the country.

There were no restrictions on where someone had to take communion, so Cheshire men might be recorded among the records of other counties. One of the certificates recorded in this index relates to a man from Betley in Staffordshire, taking communion at Wistaston in Cheshire. Anyone taking communion within 30 miles of London could return their certificate to one of the central courts – originally King’s Bench or Chancery, with the Exchequer and Common Pleas being added to the list by fresh legislation in 1702. But London-based communicants could also return their certificates into the local Quarter Sessions and there are large numbers among the City of London Quarter Sessions records at London Metropolitan Archives. The legislation was not repealed until 1828.

The 190 certificates indexed here have been chosen because they date from the period immediately after the 1715 rebellion and form part of National Archives piece CHES4/3. In due course, it is hoped that the index will be extended to include a wider range of dates and the certificates from other courts. It is not clear how individuals chose which court to return their certificates into, and this sample from the Exchequer of Chester includes examples from all over Cheshire, including the City of Chester.

Almost all the certificates are vellum, with a very small proportion being paper. They vary considerably in size, the smallest being about 12cm x 16cm and the larger ones about 41cm x 22cm. As well as the name of the communicant, they record the identity of the minister who celebrated communion, either one or two churchwardens who were present, and two witnesses. In a very small proportion, one of the witnesses is the same person as one of the churchwardens (with the same name and identical signature). All the certificates bear the original signatures or marks of the minister, churchwarden[s] and witnesses, but with only one or two exceptions, they are not signed by the person being certified as an Anglican communicant.

The form of words in the certificates is highly consistent, with almost all substantively the same as the example transcribed below. A small number do not include the names of the minister and churchwarden[s] in the text, but merely begin “We the minister and churchwarden[s] of the parish....”. A couple do not contain the text of the declaration by the witnesses, but they are nevertheless signed by two witnesses. One does not name the minister of the parish because he

was himself the subject of the certificate. There is a single example for which there are three witnesses in addition to the minister and churchwardens.

Almost all of the certificates record an instance of a single individual receiving communion, but in one case the certificate covers two people taking communion on the same occasion (at Nantwich on Christmas Day 1722). In a number of cases, there are separate certificates for several people taking communion at the same time. The witnesses for these tend to be the communicants of the other certificates. For example, John Nussey, Thomas Palmer and Thomas Nevett were all certified at Witton in September 1717 and for each certificate, the other two men acted as witnesses. The events the certificates record were not evenly distributed throughout the year. There is not a single instance of communion being certified in August and just one in June. One third of all instances were in December, with many taking place on Christmas Day or the Sunday of Christmas week.

In many cases, it is plain what position the subject held that required him to certify that he had taken communion – army officers, clergymen, the Head Constables of one of the county's Hundreds, the Mayor of the Borough of Over, excise officers, and tide surveyors, for example. In a good proportion of others, (39% in total), the men are described as knights, gentlemen or esquires. In 18% of cases, however, there is either no indication of the communicant's status or he is described as a yeoman or an ordinary tradesman of some kind, such as Francis Bostock, a tanner from Withington in Macclesfield. No doubt there were good reasons why these men needed to certify that they were in communion with the Church of England but there is nothing in the certificates to indicate what these reasons were. Even after the Act of Toleration of 1689 Nonconformists continued to find that the sacrament test played a role in politics and local government, notably in town corporations. However, town politicians sometimes found ways round the need to have a certificate. Wills or other probate documents were registered at Chester for many of the subjects of the certificates indexed here, and these are available at Chester Archives and Local Studies or via findmypast.co.uk

Spelling of surnames

There are many cases where the spelling of the surname is inconsistent between the text and the signature. In these instances, the spelling given in the index is the one that is clearest and easiest to read in the records. Where they are equally clear, the signature has been favoured.

Dates

Dates are given New Style – i.e. any date between 1 January and 24 March is recorded as being in the year following the one it was reckoned to be in at the time. For example, the date recorded at the time as being 6 February 1722 is given here as 6 February 1723.

Transcription

The text below gives a transcription of an example certificate, an image of which is available on the website. Thanks are due to the National Archives for permission to publish the image.

Com' Cestr'

Wee Joseph Allen Minister of the parish and parish Church of Neither Peover in the County of Chester and Peter Jackson & Ralph Ridgway Church Wardens of the same parish and parish Church doe hereby certifie that Thomas Powdrell of Neither Peover aforesaid gent upon the Lords day comonly called Sunday the twentieth day of January instant Imediately after divine service and Sermon did in the parish Church aforesaid receive the Sacram't of the Lords Supper according to the Usage of the Church of England In Witnesse whereof we have hereunto subscribed our names the Twentieth day of January An'o D'ni 1716

[Signed] Joseph Allen Minister at Lower Peover

[Signed] Peter Jackson)

[Signed] Ralph Ridgway) Wardens

George Percivall of Over Tabley in the County of Chester yeom' and John Rye of Neither Peover in the said County Shoemaker doe severally make oath that they know the above named Thomas Powdrell now p'sent here in Court and that they saw the said Thomas Powdrell receive the Sacrament of the Lords Supper at the day time and place above in that behalfe certified and that they saw the said Joseph Allen Peter Jackson and Ralph Ridgway subscribe the above written certificate and that all other matters and things therein menc'oned and Expressed are true as they verily believe

Jur'

[Signed] George Percevall

[Signed] John Roye