



Local History: 2

CHURCH OF IRELAND VESTRY RECORDS



The vestry was an assembly of parishioners which met to discuss parochial business and took its name from its meeting place - the vestry or room in the church in which the priest's vestments were kept. The vestry could raise funds for local services such as poor relief, parish constables and road repair. The select vestry was a small committee which could levy taxes for religious purposes - the maintenance of the church and the payment of parish officers such as the sexton and the parish clerk.

The money which the churchwardens spent on behalf of the parish was raised largely from the parish cess, a local tax on householders, and from a lesser extent from the sale of seats in the parish church. The applotment, or assessment, of the parish cess, which appears periodically in the churchwardens' account books or the vestry minute books, is a valuable record of the local community. Following the abolition of the penal laws, membership of the general vestry was open to all householders in the parish irrespective of their religion although its proceedings were effectively controlled by the Protestant minority since all officers had to be members of the Church of Ireland.

The records of the transactions of the vestries, essentially vestry minutes and churchwardens' accounts, provide an important and much under-used resource for the local communities and their inhabitants. They complement the basic information which can be obtained from registers of baptisms, marriages and burials by providing additional details of the activities and circumstances of the residents of the parish. They often record, for example, the names of the poor and widowed who were supported by the parish and the names of the overseers of the poor and of the roads. Inevitably, vestry records are richest for the cities and large towns; vestry records for rural parishes tend to be less rewarding.

Many of the vestry minute books only cover the last 100-150 years. There are, however, exceptions such as the Parish of Shankill in Lurgan, whose minutes go back to 1672 (**PRONI Ref MIC1/18**) and the vestry minute books for Christ Church Cathedral, Lisburn, which date back to 1675 (**PRONI Ref MIC1/4**). In order to identify which records exist for a particular area and for what dates you should consult the *Guide to Church Records* available in PRONI and online. The Guide

lists, alphabetically by parish, all the churches within that parish and for each church it gives details of the records copied or deposited in PRONI.

Opening Hours

Mon-Wed and Fri 9:00am-4:45pm
Thurs 10:00am-8:45pm
*(Please check in advance for
late evening opening)*

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