

Tracing Your Non-Conformist Ancestors – A Talk by Liz Yule

Marking our final monthly meeting of 2025, we were delighted to host a return visit from the seasonally named Liz Yule, Director of Research at the Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies, Canterbury.

Liz began her talk about non-conformity with a thought-provoking slide charting the see-sawing of the dominant religion in England following the Reformation and the inevitable confusion for worshippers.

Having neatly set the scene with definitions of several key non-conformist groups, Liz then walked us through numerous key dates and associated legislation impacting religious persuasions. Spanning a period of some 300 years, these included the 1558 Act of Uniformity, that required all to attend Church every Sunday, the 1689 Act of Toleration, providing Protestant dissenters with some freedom to worship away from the Anglican church, and the Catholic Relief Acts of 1778 and 1829. Liz

ended this part of her absorbing talk with the surprising fact that in 1851, 87% of the Welsh population was classed as non-conformist.

Her attention next turned to the records created by non-conformists, pointing out that no formal registers are likely to be found before the beginning of the 18th century, with Catholic registers generally absent until the 19th century. In this section she highlighted the creation of the Protestant Dissenters Library at Dr. Williams' Library, London. Largely devoted to birth records of Baptists, Independents and Presbyterians, this collection amounts to some 87,000 records, some dating back to 1716.

Before concluding her talk with an interesting case study focused on her East Anglian LEMAN forebears, Liz also highlighted various 'clues' signposting non-conformist ancestors. Some of these were more obvious, including the descriptions of the deceased in burial registers as 'Papists', others were more obscure,

for example biblical forenames such as Abraham, Isaac or Ruth, not reflective of Protestant monarchs.

There followed an extremely lively question and answer session during which it was suggested to Liz that further research might reveal an ancestral connection with the Sir John Leman High School in Beccles. A couple of other attendees also referenced pictures in their possession of baptisms in local village ponds, again suggesting non-conformist beliefs.

Janis Kirby says "I had some ancestors who were non-conformist and some of them were baptised twice, the second time at the Middleton Chapel. The parents, William Woolnough and Sarah nee Bailey, are my 4xgt grandparents, and there is no evidence that they opted to have themselves baptised. Only the children appear to have been baptised twice."

Chris Broom

KEY DATES

1534 Act of Supremacy (Henry VIII became supreme head of the Church of England)
1553-1558 Return to Roman Catholicism under Queen Mary
1559 Act of Uniformity passed (every church had to use Book of Common Prayer)
1605 Gunpowder Plot
1642-1651 English Civil War
1649-1660 Commonwealth period (under Puritan government)
1660 Restoration of the Church of England and Monarchy
The Clarendon Code (anti-nonconformist legislation):
 1661 Corporation Act
 1662 Act of Uniformity
 1664 Conventicle Act
 1665 Five Mile Act
1672 Declaration of Indulgence (nonconformist meeting houses first licensed)
1673 Test Act (had to take Holy Communion to hold public office)

1689 Toleration Act (nonconformists have freedom of worship)
1753 Hardwicke's Marriage Act (all except Quakers and Jews had to marry in the Anglican church)
1778 Catholic Relief Act (Catholics could now own property and inherit land)
1791 Catholic Relief Act (chapels now permitted)
1828 repeal of Test Act (barriers to nonconformists holding public office removed)
1829 Catholic Emancipation Act (Catholics can now hold public office)
1837 General Registration (nonconformists can marry in their own chapels, if a Registrar is present)
1840 Nonconformist churches instructed to deposit registers with the Registrar General
1858 Another instruction to deposit registers with the Registrar General
1898 Do not need Registrar present to marry in nonconformist chapel