

Churchwardens' Accounts

Who are Churchwardens and what do they do?

Churchwardens are lay officials who have been in charge of the routine running and maintenance of parish churches in perpetuity. Commonly known as fabric wardens before the sixteenth century, they were elected to their positions by other members of the laity (a body of people not in orders as opposed to the clergy). They usually served a single term (tenenable) and were chosen by a variety of methods – in many parishes a rector's or vicar's warden was partnered by a people's warden. The primary job of wardens was to procure and disburse funds for the maintenance of the parish church and other parish buildings. However, being in charge of looking after money and the church fabric were not their only responsibilities. Before the Elizabethan poor laws they were also the parish officials primarily responsible for offering aid and assistance to the poor and to destitute travelers. The accounts that have been created over the years contain information that cannot be found elsewhere, about a wide variety of topics.

What are churchwarden accounts?

The records account for income and expenditure (in the charge and discharge format favoured by medieval accountants, or in the later and more familiar credit and debit format of double-entry book keeping). Entries related to maintenance and repairs are revealing because they offer suggestions as to what the interior of a church may have looked like hundreds of years ago, long before plans or photographs are available. The accounts also track bequests of money made to individual churches, as well as bequests to the church and to parish charities, and make note of the incomes and expenses of elected officials. Occasionally, vestry minutes and elections are included and although these tend, in this part of the country, to be brief, formulaic and often vague, they are still worthy of investigation.

How are the accounts useful to research?

The church has been central to English society for hundreds of years and the accounts are, indeed, a useful source of information in relation to thinking about social, local and even family history. Because churches have always offered work opportunities for those seeking either permanent or temporary employment the accounts sometimes provide personal information pertaining

to the workers themselves, i.e. names and places of abode. Though most of the references are to clerical and church lay officials, the accounts also tell what sort of jobs have been undertaken by members of the public and who was hired to do them. In this manner, they also reveal particulars about an array of professions: book binders, sculptors, joiners, organ repairers, painters, etc.

England is especially lucky in that we have more existing churchwardens' accounts than anywhere else in Europe for the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries. Accounts such as these present the modern researcher with an insight into epochs of great change. For example, those belonging to the sixteenth century are especially important as they provide evidence of physical changes that took place within parish churches during the Reformation; changes which drastically altered the liturgical arrangements and ornamentation of churches, which resulted in the transformation of the practice of worship. Often a researcher will find an assortment of notes, personal remarks and even commentaries that, when combined, make an excellent source with respect to understanding the ins and outs of ecclesiastical, parish, local, social, political and cultural history.

Where are churchwardens' accounts found at the Borthwick?

Churchwardens' accounts are found amongst parish records as they make up yet another facet of a church's history. The number of churchwardens' accounts held by the Borthwick Institute is sizeable; the range of dates, multifarious. In fact, there are a few surviving medieval account rolls for the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries, namely for York, St Martin, Coney Street [PR Y/MCS 16-17] and York, St Margaret, Walmgate [PR Y/MARG 35-36]. Included in the latter are accounts assembled by the fabric wardens of the guild of St Anne. These are comparable to records found elsewhere in Yorkshire, namely Hedon (St Augustine, 1371; St James, 1350; and St Nicholas, 1379) and Ripon (1354), as well as those found in Somerset, the only other county in England that has a small number of pre-fourteenth-century wardens' accounts (Bridgewater, 1318; Bath, 1349; and Glastonbury, St John, 1366). There are also some extant accounts dated from the sixteenth century, including two from before the Reformation found in the parish records for Sheriff Hutton [PR SH 13] and York, St Michael, Spurriergate [PR Y/MS 2-4]. The number of records is, again, commensurate with the handful of those found in throughout the country, e.g. London and Bristol. Though the number of churchwardens' accounts was on the increase by the seventeenth century, the majority that exist are for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Equally, there are some that concern the twentieth century, right up to the 1980s.

Other records related to churchwarden accounts

Wardens have not only had to look for ways to acquire funds that would bolster the revenue of parish estate (the primary source of the parish's income), but they have had to find money to fund the preservation of the church and the parish in general. Consequently, there is an assortment of other materials related to the jobs undertaken by churchwardens to be found in the parish records. These include papers concerning churchyards (extensions and deeds), the construction of new churches, church rates, the restoration of existing buildings and fabric papers and even a few visitors' books dating from the late-nineteenth century. Please see C.C. Webb's *A Guide to Parish Records in the Borthwick Institute for Historical Research* for further references to these records.

Helping/Finding Aids

Some of the records are in Latin up to 1731, though most are written (phonetically) in the vernacular. Similarly, the wording and technical terms used in regards to building techniques/materials and vestments in the wardens' accounts can sometimes be difficult and hard to decipher. The most useful sources of reference are the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *The English Dialect Dictionary*, *A Middle English Dictionary* by H. Bradley and the *Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Terms* by J.S. Purvis.

Further Reading on Churchwardens' Accounts

Cox, J.C. *Churchwardens' Accounts from the Fourteenth Century to the close of the Seventeenth Century*. (London, 1913).

Duffy, Eamon. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (Yale, 1992).

----- *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (Yale, 2001).

Hoskin, Philippa. 'Some late fourteenth-century gild and fabric wardens' accounts from the church of St Margaret's, Walmgate, York'. *The Church in Medieval York: Records Edited in Honour of Professor Barrie Dobson*. David M. Smith (ed). (York, 1999): 75-86.

Hutton, Ronald. *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400-1700*. (New York, 1994).

Kumin, Beat. *The Shaping of a Community: The Rise and Reformation of the English Parish c. 1400-1560*. (Aldershot, 1996).

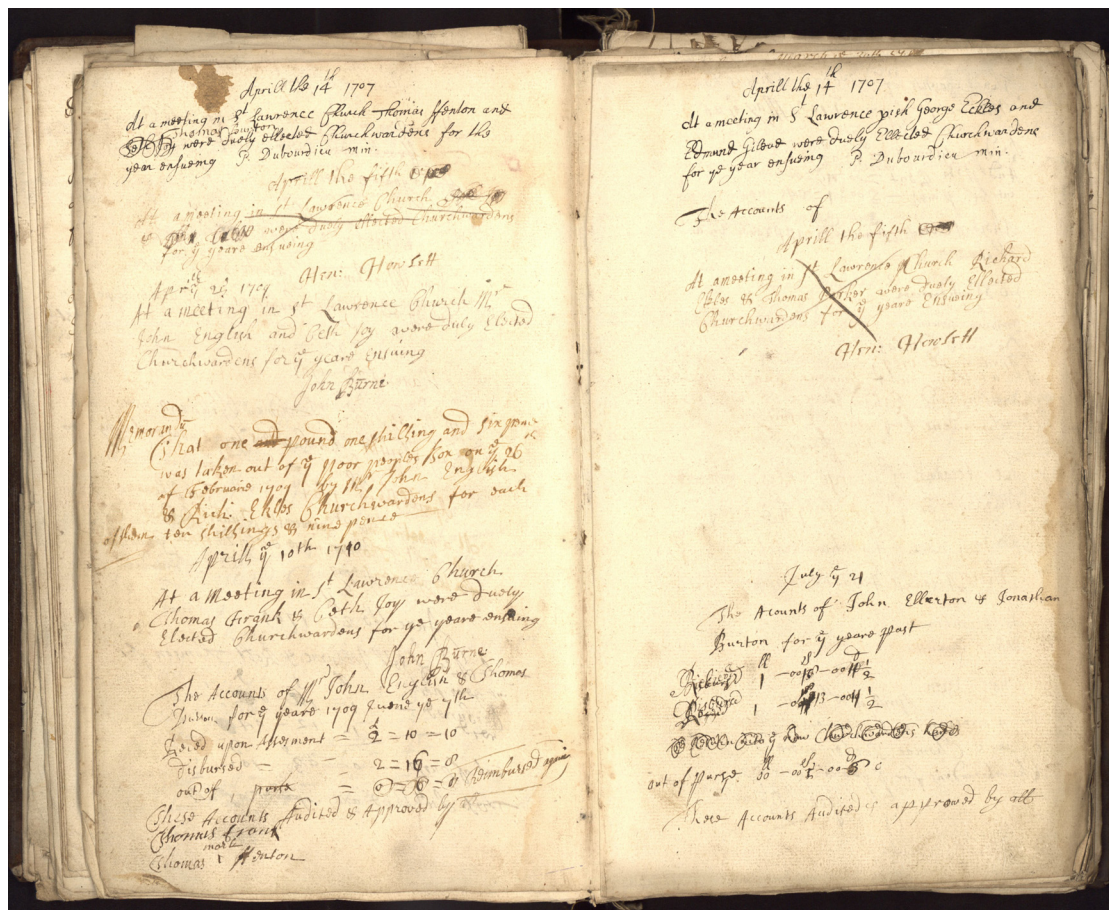
Webb, C. (ed.). *The Churchwardens' Accounts of St Michael, Spurriergate, York 1518-48*. 2 vols. (York, 1997).

A useful website called the Warwick Network for Parish Research, created by Warwick University History Department, is based on the study of British and European parishes, 1300-1800, and is a great source for a wide range of works: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/researchcentres/parishnetwork/>

EXAMPLE OF A CHURCHWARDENS' ACCOUNT

ST LAWRENCE, YORK

APRIL 14, 1707



[PR Y/L 23]

1. At a meeting in S^t Lawrence Church Thomas Ffenton and
2. xxxxx Thomas Burton were duely elected Churchwardens for th
3. year ensuing P. Dubourdieu min.

4. Aprill the fifth
5. At a meeting in S^t Lawrence Church xxxxxxx
6. xxxxxxx wer duely elected churchwardens
7. for y^e year ensuing
8. Hen. Howlett

9. April, 25 1709
10. At a meeting in S^t Lawrence Church M^r
11. John English and Peth Joy were duely Elected
12. Churchwardens for y^e year ensuing

13. John Burne
14. Memorandum
15. That one xxx pound one shilling and six pence
16. was taken out of y^e poor peoples box on y^e 26th
17. of Februarie 1709 by M^r John English
18. & Rich. Elkes Churchwardens for each
19. of them ten shillings & nine pence

20. Aprill y^e 10th 1710
21. At a Meeting in S^t Lawrence Church
22. Thomas Frank & Peth Joy were duely
23. elected Churchwardens for ye year ensuing
- 24.. John Burne

25. The Accounts of M^r John English & Thomas
26. Burrton for y^e year 1709 Juene ye 7th
27. Re'ied upon Assesment = 2d = 10 = 10
28. disbursed = = 2 = 16 = 8
29. out of, ~~purse~~ = = 0 = 06 = 0 reimbursed again
30. These Accounts Audited & Approved by all
31. Thomas Frank
32. Thomas x^{mark} Ffenton

1. At a meeting in S^t Lawrence p[ar]ish George Eckles and
2. Edmund Gilend were duely Ellected Churchwardens
3. for ye year ensuing
4. P. Dubourdieu min.

5. ~~The Accounts of~~
6. ~~Aprill the fifth~~
7. ~~At a meeting in S^t Lawrence p. church Richard~~
8. ~~Eckles & Thomas Barker wre duely Ellected~~
9. ~~Churchwardens for y^e year Ensuing~~
10. Hen. Howlett

11. July y^e 21
12. The Accounts of John Ellerton & Jonathan
13. Burton for y^e year past
14. Received 1^{ll} = ⁰⁰18^s = ⁰⁰10 1/2^d
15. Disbursed 1 = 0xxx13 = 0014 1/2
16. xxx
17. out of purse 00^{ll} 00x^s =⁰⁰6^d c

18. These Accounts Audited & approved by all

