

[Marriage licences](#)


**VICAR GENERAL MARRIAGE LICENCE ALLEGATIONS INDEX 1694-1850**

**Record details**

**Publication Date**

2011-01-18

**Author**

Society of Genealogists

\*\* Please note that this is only an index, giving the surnames of both parties intending to get married (BUT NOT THE FORENAMES) and the date of the licence. You can order an image of the original marriage licence allegation itself by following the instructions in the 'Comment' box below \*\*

Using the Vicar-General and Faculty Office Marriage Licence Indexes

Marriage by licence has almost as long a history as the more usual practice of marriage after the calling of banns. Many different bodies had the right to issue marriage licences, the licence in theory being issued by the office which had jurisdiction over both parties. If the couple lived in different dioceses in the Province of Canterbury the licence should have been issued by the Archbishop of Canterbury's Vicar-General; if they lived in different Provinces or overseas, then the licence should have been issued by the Faculty Office. In practice, however, it would appear that people often went to a higher office than was strictly necessary.

Before a licence was granted someone had to appear at the issuing office and make a sworn statement - known as an Allegation - to the effect that there was no impediment to the marriage. The person making the Allegation, the Deponent, was usually the prospective groom. In many cases, however, the Deponent was the prospective bride, and sometimes, particularly in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, it could be some third party acting on their behalf.

Until 1823, there was also an obligation to enter into a Bond, which might under certain circumstances be forfeit.

After the Allegation had been completed, it was endorsed by an official known as a Surrogate, and the Marriage Licence issued. The licence was taken away by the Deponent and so in general the original licences have not survived in any quantity. The Allegations and Bonds, on the other hand, were retained by the issuing office, and as a consequence they have usually survived quite well. Those relating to the Vicar-General and Faculty Office licences are now held in the Library of Lambeth Palace (1). Those dating from the Restoration of 1660 survive almost in their entirety (2). The Library at Lambeth Palace also holds a few Faculty Office Allegations from the reign of Charles I, but there are considerable gaps in the series.

The Allegations are normally written on a single sheet of parchment or paper, and are occasionally accompanied by supporting documents such as a letter. The issuing office took these single sheets, sorted them (unfortunately only roughly) into date order and every six months or so they were bound together into books. More or less at the same time - possibly slightly before the final binding - Calendars were made giving the names of the two parties and the date when the Licence was issued. These Calendars are bound separately from the Allegations and the originals are also held at Lambeth Palace. There is one significant difference between the two sets of Calendars. Whereas the Faculty Office Calendars give the full names of both parties (albeit sometimes in abbreviated form), the Vicar-General Calendars give only surnames. Both series of Allegations and Calendars have also been microfilmed and the Society of Genealogists has copies of these films from the earliest times up to 1850.

About 100 years ago, indexes were made of the early years of the Vicar-General Allegations and the Faculty Office Calendars. These indexes were published by the Harleian Society and British Record Society respectively (3). The Society of Genealogists has now continued these indexes up to 1850, from 1694 in the case of the Vicar-General licences (a total of 356,000 names) and 1701 for the Faculty Office licences (321,000 names).

The main use of the indexes is to refer people to the appropriate Allegation. The general wording of the Allegations changed remarkably little over the roughly 150 year period covered by these new indexes, and is identical in both the Vicar-General and Faculty Office documents. As a consequence the amount of genealogical information contained in the Allegations is virtually the same whatever the date of the document. Every Allegation gives the full names of both parties, their parish of residence, their current marital status - eg spinster, widower - and the names of the church or churches where the marriage may take place. Additionally the age of both parties is usually given, although it is often omitted in the case of widowers and widows, and is frequently in the rather unhelpful form of "21 years and above". For minors the age is normally given in full. Rank - eg Esquire, Baronet - is usually shown where appropriate, but trade or profession is seldom given. Except for minors, parentage is not given.

In the case of a minor, a parent or guardian was required to attend the licensing office, and make a sworn statement that they were consenting to the marriage. This statement usually contained a lot of additional information, since it gave the name of the parent or guardian, his or her relationship to the minor, their place of residence, and quite frequently their trade or profession. This statement is normally on the same sheet as the Allegation itself.

New legislation came into force in September 1822 which required much more information from both parties to be included in the Allegation, particularly with respect to the ages of the two parties. This normally took the form of a certified copy of their baptismal entries, which showed not only the date and place of baptism but also such other information as was recorded in the baptismal registers. If for some reason baptismal data was not available a sworn statement of age had to be made by someone who knew the person well. Unfortunately for genealogists this system proved too cumbersome and was discontinued after only seven months. From March 1823 onwards the amount of information provided reverted to the level given before September 1822.

**Description**

It is hoped that virtually all the typographical errors in the transcripts have been corrected, but in spite of careful checking both of the Calendars and the Allegations, there remain a small number of cases, particularly from the early years, where the spelling of a name is uncertain. Upper case letters which are not always easily distinguished include H, K and St, I and J (which are written identically), T and F, B and R, and L and S. Of the lower case letters which are difficult to distinguish one from another, pride of place must go to "n" and "u" which often appear identical, - causing particular difficulty with names of French origin - with "in" and "m" not far behind. Also the very common vowels "a", "e" and "o" are often difficult to tell apart. This should be borne in mind when searching the indexes. If one is looking for, say, TARRANT, it may be worth looking under FARRANT as well.

The decision to index the Calendars rather than the Allegations, which was taken mainly on practical grounds, has meant that some of the errors made by the Calendarist in copying names from the Allegations will have been perpetuated in the indexes. The most frequent error occurs when the Deponent has been the prospective bride, since her name will appear first in the Allegation. The Calendarist has then made his entry in the form date, bride, groom instead of the more normal date, groom, bride. With the Faculty Office Calendars this error is usually immediately obvious since the full names are given and the order can be (and has been) corrected. With the Vicar-General Calendars, which give only surnames, such errors would not be picked up unless the Allegation had been consulted to check a reading. It is important to realise that in the case of the Vicar-General indexes the surnames of the bride and groom may on occasions be reversed. It should also be appreciated that in the early years many of the Deponents would have been only semi-literate and may have spoken with a strong regional accent. The Clerk will have written the names phonetically as he thought he heard them and the Deponent may not have been literate enough to correct him.

Questions which are frequently asked are who took out Vicar-General or Faculty Office Licences and why. The indexing project was unfortunately not designed to answer these questions but certain pointers can be given. A small pilot study was done on a 25 year period (1726-1750) for the Vicar-General Allegations, but it is not known how representative the results are for the whole of the period under study. In the sample, three quarters of the applicants lived in the City of London or in neighbouring parishes, both north and south of the Thames - that is, the Greater London of the day. A further 20% lived in the adjacent Home Counties and only 5% further

afield. About a quarter of the applicants were either widows or widowers, but only a comparatively small number (1% of the males and 8% of the females) admitted to being under 21. Nearly half (42%) of the applicants lived in the same parish as each other and only 15% lived in different dioceses.

It is not possible to say very much about the social profile of the applicants, but it is quite clear from the sheer volume of licences that they did not all come from the top social class. For instance in the 1740s just under 2000 licences a year were issued by the Vicar-General and Faculty Offices, and it has been estimated (4) that there were about 40,000 marriages a year in England at this time. Thus getting on for 5% of all English marriages at that time were by VG or FO licence, a figure which would increase markedly if one were to calculate it on the basis of Londoners alone.

There were doubtless many different reasons why people resorted to what was generally the more expensive option of marriage by Licence. One of these was speed - as important for people about to go abroad as for scoundrels attempting to carry off unwitting young heiresses. Another was confidentiality - this may explain the comparatively large number of widows and widowers as well as Clergy who chose to marry by licence. A further reason, before 1754, was the desire of many people to be married in a place which was not normally licensed for weddings, such as a chapel of one of the Inns of Court, or a church in whose parish neither party lived. These reasons combined may explain why nearly a quarter of the Allegations in the pilot study named St Benet Paul's Wharf as the church for the marriage, as this small city church was the nearest one to the Vicar-General and Faculty Offices.

It is hoped that these new indexes will help people looking for elusive marriages, particularly in the Greater London area. One should, however, end on a word of caution. Not everything contained in an Allegation is necessarily true. For instance, many minors may have declared themselves to be of full age, the church(es) for which the licence was issued may not in the event have been used for the marriage, and, indeed, the mere fact that a licence was issued does not necessarily mean that the parties ever got married at all

Nicholas Spence

#### References

- (1). See Barber, Melanie, Genealogists Magazine vol 20 no 4 (December 1980) pp 109-117
- (2). One book of Vicar-General Allegations, covering the 13 month period from 2 Jan 1663/4 to 13 Feb 1664/5 has been missing since at least the mid 19th century, so no records survive for this period
- (3). For Vicar General Allegations from 1660 to 30 June 1694 see Harl Soc vols 23 (1886), 30 (1890), 31 (1890), 33 (1892) and 34 (1892). For Faculty Office see Harl Soc vol 24 (1886) for a small number of entries for the mid 16th century and British Record Society vol 33 (1905) for Calendars from 1632 to 31 July 1714
- (4). Wrigley E A and R S Schofield, The Population History of England 1541-1871, Cambridge UP 1989, Appendix 2

Copies of the original documents can be obtained from the society from films in the lower library.

Vicar General and Faculty Office Marriage License Allegations - Marriage Allegations Cabinet (arranged by date)

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### Entry from Vicar General Marriage Licence Allegations index 1694-1850

Licence date	19 May 1772
Year	1772
Bride Surname	BALL
Groom Surname	HUGHES




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