

# CITY OF CANTERBURY CONSOLIDATED PROBATE INDEX

*David Wright, MA, PhD, FSA, FSG, FHS*

This article is based on the gradual construction of a consolidated probate index for the city of Canterbury and its seventeen parishes and various extra-parochial places both within and without the walls which comprise the modern conurbation. The cathedral city of England's oldest diocese (which comprised the eastern two-thirds of the ancient county) lay some fifty-five miles from London and was directly accessible from the capital along the Roman Watling Street. Three separate probate courts had jurisdiction over the city and diocese: overriding all others was the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, latterly housed at Doctor's Commons, St Benet Paul's Wharf, in the City of London. By the mid-1700s it was widely (but by no means exclusively) used by the rich and many other people desirous of the prestige and security which its name conferred. Additionally, between c.1653 and 1659 the hiatus of the Civil War meant that it had acted as the sole probate court throughout the land and consequently attracted countless thousands of testators to the unique service that it then offered, an interesting fact easily revealed by the comparative sizes of the annual calendars for those years on the shelves at TNA, Kew. Now that all its one million and more wills are digitised, interesting analyses may be made, but it is a matter of continuing regret and frustration that the TNA still shows no interest in digitising the administrations, a hugely valuable resource which in total approaches nationally perhaps between one-third and half a million entries. Their absence also inevitably affects some of the tentative statistics which follow.

The index currently includes these entries for the City of Canterbury:

- PCC wills 1383-1858;

- PCC administrations 1559-1660 and 1853-1858;
- Archdeaconry Court of Canterbury wills and administrations 1731-1858;
- Consistory Court of Canterbury wills and administrations 1720-1858

## **The Prerogative Court of Canterbury**

Between 1383 and 1858 the wills of 1700 Canterbury residents (including a few further grants or aliases) were proved in the PCC, the earliest that for John Henrys, a surgeon, in 1419, and indeed this is the only entry in the first century of the court's existence. There are two more in the late 1400s before business increases to between about five and ten entries for each decade of the Tudor period. Nearly all are for men and most of these are described as being simply of the city, but a small proportion do give a parish or other street location; rather more give marital status or occupation of which there is a preponderance of clergy, church prelates and aldermen, and one fishmonger.

The advent of the Stuart period shows a gentle rise in Canterbury entries but hardly any more women. More and more testators now reveal their occupation or status including deans and archbishops, aldermen and knights, lawyers and registrars, soldiers and sailors, and many tradesmen including members of Canterbury's silkweaving industry. Increasing social dislocation shows a marked rise in entries from 1651 as the PCC moved towards its status as sole probate office for the entire country: now there are around a dozen entries annually, nearer twenty by the mid-1650s, and still around a half giving occupation or status and precise parish of residence. The decade 1650-1659 has 125 entries of which one fifth are women, a few married, but mostly widows.

The Restoration of 1660 sees an immediate and marked drop in entries to levels barely comparable with those of the 1630s and 1640s, and indeed between 1664 and 1719 there are twenty years with no entries at all. It is not until the 1720s that numbers rise and then noticeably in the 1730s to 52 entries for that decade. Another marked jump to 92 entries in the 1760s is followed by 108 in the 1780s and between 109 and 139 in every decade thereafter, those for the 1800s and 1810s being the highest by a substantial margin. Women exceed men for the first time in the 1770s and again in the 1820s and 1830s. Parish or area of residence rather than just 'city of Canterbury' continue to be stated, but this never becomes anywhere near complete, testators presumably thinking that to name an exact parish either within or without the walls was unnecessary.

In searching the PCC online indexes it will soon be noticed that marital status, occupation, precise street address or parish are not always given but often do appear in the first few lines of the will itself. Searching under "Canterbury" also brings up extraneous entries for people of that surname or for locations in London and elsewhere including this word in a street address – perhaps too much information is better than too little?

Between the opening year of 1559 and 1660 there are 147 Canterbury administrations compared with 214 wills. About half give exact parish and a very few the marital status but there are almost no occupations save for a few clergy. The usual valuable annotations are also given to former and further grants.

No genealogist worth his salt will ignore the act book entry (even if a will has been found), for here sometimes the most valuable details may be found concerning a married or remarried daughter or widow, an uncle, grandparent or cousin taking out the grant, or the names of relatives into whose care underage or orphaned children are to be placed. Occasionally the parish may differ from the one at the time of making a will and so indicate a final end-of-life move, more often by way of retirement into the city but sometimes a removal to the country or another town, perhaps to be nearer other relatives. The act books do occasionally state this specifically.

## **Occupations and marital status**

Of the grand total of 4,286 entries only just under 300 reveal neither of these. However, if, for example, a grant was taken out on a woman's or man's estate by one of the children, it has been assumed that the entry relates to either a widow or widower and the entry marked 'widow?' or 'widower?' In total, there are twice as many widows as spinsters and slightly fewer married men. Bachelors, married women and widowers occur far less frequently.

The range and variety of occupations is predictably extensive. The large numbers of English (and foreign) clergy include four archbishops, six deans and six archdeacons. Rather more military and naval men (serving or retired) ended up in Canterbury than might have been expected. Of 27 aldermen some were also in trade and, conversely, a good many former tradesmen are now elevated to gentleman. There are 44 members of the city's silkweaving fraternity, brothers and sisters of the various almshouses, and numerous one-off entries including armourer, bellfounder, Greenland merchant, heraldic painter, marriage registrar, master of the free school, mayor's mace-bearer, parchment maker, and postman.

### **All three courts 1750-1800**

The PCC has 513 entries (wills only), the Archdeaconry and Consistory Courts 559 and 182 wills and administrations respectively, each with twice as many wills as admons. Gentlemen, bachelors and widowers are nearly five times more frequent in the local courts; married women around twice, widows more evenly balanced, spinsters more frequent in the PCC. The one astonishing figure is for married men who are eight times more frequent locally than in the PCC. Of the legal and professional classes there is little difference, of artisans and shopkeepers twice as many locally. The clergy went almost exclusively to the PCC.

### **All three courts 1801-1858**

The PCC has 677 entries, the Archdeaconry 840, the Consistory 196 in more or less unvarying proportions as above. There are now some noticeable changes in

where grants were taken out. Gentlemen, widowers and spinsters are about equal between the PCC and local courts; bachelors and married men between five and six times more frequent locally; married women and widows twice as frequent locally. Legal professional and medical classes are unchanged but artisans and shopkeepers have doubled locally.

### Entries by individual parishes

Canterbury's population in 1801 was 9,642. As a sample, between 1796-1805 the PCC proved 125 Canterbury wills, the Archdeaconry Court 74 wills and administrations, the Consistory Court 24. The total averaged out is around 22 grants annually for this decade, around a quarter of one per cent of the population.

What can be deduced by comparing parish sizes, their populations and the total grants for each? Comparisons of population per acre in 1801 vary enormously from between one quarter (St Martin) to 130 (St Andrew) but are quite unrelated to entry totals. Several inner city parishes were very small indeed: All Saints, St Alphege, St Andrew, St Margaret, St Mary Bredman and St Mary Magdalene were each between four and ten acres but in fact St Alphege, just outside the cathedral precincts, affluent and densely populated, has the most entries (212) of all. Christ Church Cathedral Precinct, a little larger in size but with a third of the population, comes a close second with 204 grants. Next come the four outliers of Holy Cross, St Dunstan, St Martin and St Paul with between 142 and 155 entries although their acreages are in the proportion of 1:3:6:10 and their populations 9:7:1:13. Three more parishes have over 100 entries, St George, St Mildred and St Mary Northgate, the last-mentioned vastly bigger than the other two and with about double the population. St Peter, St Margaret and St Andrew are almost

equal in entry totals (68-74), the first-mentioned by a good margin the largest in extent even if the three populations are not greatly dissimilar. The remaining parishes and extra-parochial areas have no more than around 40 entries apiece and are all no larger than five acres except for the enormous St Mary Bredin at 756 acres but with a population hardly greater than its neighbours a fraction of the size, doubtless explained by its extending south into the countryside.

### Estate values

These are shown in the two local court act books from 1824. Most entries range between £20 and about £1,000, a smallish proportion between £3,000 and £9,000, and just eighteen estates are valued at over £10,000, mostly for gentlemen. Of these, a third are in towns, and the largest of £35,000 for John Rigden of the Faversham brewing family in 1829.

The foregoing are provisional observations from a work in progress, pending the extending of the index and, more especially, access to the remaining PCC administrations. It would be interesting to learn whether similar studies have been undertaken elsewhere and to establish whether these findings for Canterbury are out of the ordinary, or predictable and more or less in line with other locations.

The index is freely available to search at [drdavidwright.co.uk](http://drdavidwright.co.uk)

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**David Wright, MA, PhD, FSA, FSG, FHS**

Email: [davideastkent@gmail.com](mailto:davideastkent@gmail.com)

David Wright is Principal at the Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies, Canterbury, which this year is celebrating its Diamond Jubilee. [www.drdavidwright.co.uk](http://www.drdavidwright.co.uk)

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www.archivesearch.ca

## CANADIAN RESEARCH

Melissa J. Ellis PG Cert.



archivesearch@gmail.com

Professional Researcher with unique "outside the box" genealogical problem solving, specializing in probate records and all aspects of migration across Canada.