

Cardinal Points - The Principles

Marriages were (are) indexed in the following way. At the end of each quarter, the incumbent, or the parish clerk, would copy out the entries in the marriage register for that quarter and send these as a 'quarterly return' to the local Registrar's Office. The Registrar would then assemble these together for all the sub-districts and forward them to the GRO for indexing. At the GRO, clerks would place each set of quarterly returns into the appropriate 'volume' for the Registration District where the church belonged and construct the index. They were rigorous in their methods, but with some understandable quirks that you'd expect from a manual system. Note, by the way, that this means that the index is based on a copy and that this also applies to certificates issued by the GRO - only the marriage register has the original data.

The GRO clerks placed the churches in their volume in a regular sequence, (although this could change over time), and the marriages were always entered in chronological order. Each quarterly return for a church would always be entered beginning on a new right hand page within the volume, which means that the first marriage in the quarter for that church would always be on an odd-numbered page. Quarterly returns that were submitted late would have to go somewhere else and this accounts for page numbers with letters - 609c, 53a and so on.

Cracking the code is simple, but laborious (did you expect it to be easy..?). It's a matter of going to the County Record Office that covers most closely the Registration District (RD) that you're researching and, for each of the churches within the RD, taking the following steps. First, identify the earliest marriage in the quarter for a church and note down the names of the bride and groom. Then, do the same for the last marriage in the quarter. After that, use an online service, or FreeBMD (<http://freebmd.rootsweb.com/>), to find the page numbers where those 2 marriages have been indexed. These two page numbers, representing the first and last marriages in a quarter, are what have been termed the 'Cardinal Points' for that church.

The consequence of this is that if you're later presented with a GRO index reference in that same quarter for a page number which is *between* those Cardinal Points, then the marriage *must* have taken place in that church and the information can be taken from the church's marriage register. That means you don't have to spend £7.00 to obtain a copy certificate from the GRO or the local Register Office; instead, you simply have to look up the marriage register in the County Record Office.

Because I have a particular interest in the East End of London, this is what I have done for all the churches in the Registration Districts of Stepney, Mile End, St George in the East, Whitechapel, Shoreditch and some of Whitechapel for the years 1837 to 1911 (after which the spouse name is included in the index). I have a little more information, but it's patchy. My intention is to cover the East End, and I'm still hopeful that it may be possible to make this an 'official' project with the Guild of One-Name Studies, which could then become more significant. But I'm beginning to spread the word through giving talks and I hope that more of the FHS community will join in to speed up the process.

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February 2009