



Devon Family History Society
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CULLMPTON BASTARDY ORDERS BOOK

1821-1827

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For over two hundred years, from the passing of the Poor Laws in the 16th century to 1834 and the Poor Law Amendment Act, the care of the poor was the responsibility of the parish to which they belonged. Every year, each parish appointed two overseers of the poor who collected in rates from their fellow parishioners and used the money to provide food and clothing for the poor and needy of their parish and nursing care for the sick. An unmarried woman who became pregnant and had no financial support from family and friends was forced to ask for help from the overseers of the parish where she lived. A woman in this predicament was a heavy drain on parish resources since the parish would have to pay for the costs of the delivery, for someone to care for her immediately after the birth and for the maintenance of her child until it could be apprenticed at the age of seven or eight. The obvious solution was to make the child's father pay as much as he could afford to relieve the parish of the financial burden.

Once it was obvious that an unmarried woman was pregnant and likely to become chargeable to the parish, she would be questioned before a justice of the peace about her condition and asked to name the father of her child. Her statement, made under oath, was written down on a printed form and this document is known as a bastardy examination before birth. Next the justice issued a warrant for the apprehension of the putative father, who had to enter into a recognizance with sureties for his appearance at the next sessions or give securities to indemnify the parish. After the birth of the child, two justices had to examine the mother concerning the birth of her child and to confirm the name of the child's father. This document is known as a bastardy examination after birth. Following this, the justices would make an order for the father to reimburse the overseers for their expenses during the mother's lying-in and to pay a sum of money weekly to the parish for the maintenance of the child during its infancy. The mother was also ordered to pay a weekly sum if she did not nurse the child herself. All these documents were on sale in stationers' shops as printed forms ready to be filled in, and they were probably bought in bulk by the overseers. However, the survival rate of bastardy records varies from parish to parish and it is rare to find a complete set for any one child.

This volume is a collection of bastardy orders for the parish of Cullompton. Normally, orders were kept with all the other poor law records as a bundle of papers in the parish chest, but these were collected and filed by the clerk to the justices and this has

ensured their survival. They name both the mother and the father of the illegitimate child, and state the amounts of money the parents are required to pay. The child's name is not mentioned, although the order states whether it is male or female. For family historians the orders are particularly useful as they may be the only surviving records to identify the father of an illegitimate child. This collection covers the period from November 1821 to February 1827.