



Devon Family History Society
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LITTLEHAM EXMOUTH PAROCIAL CHURCH RATES

1821

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Every ecclesiastical parish appointed annually various unpaid officers who were responsible for different areas of administration within the parish. Two of these officers were the churchwardens. In some parishes they were chosen, one by the incumbent and the other by the parishioners, while in other parishes the more well-to-do inhabitants took on the duties on a rota basis. Generally speaking, churchwardens were men, although women could take their turn if they were widows who rented or owned property. Churchwardens were responsible for the upkeep of the parish church and everything connected with it, ranging from major building repairs to washing the surplices. In order to pay for all this, they imposed rates, known as church rates, on the residents of the parish. The rates were based on the value of the property each parishioner owned or rented; paupers were exempt. An account book was kept by the churchwardens to record income and expenditure, and this was handed over to the next pair of wardens at the end of each year of office.

The rate books indexed here were kept by the churchwardens in the parish of Littleham, in Exmouth; the series dates from 1819 to 1827. Littleham parish covered the area from Budleigh Salterton in the east, to Exmouth docks and the Exe estuary in the west, and included the southern part of the town of Exmouth, with the parish boundary running along the Parade and through the Strand. The wardens were responsible not only for the parish church of St Margaret in Littleham village, but also for the chapel of ease of Holy Trinity in the town. The rate was fixed at sixpence in the pound and these handwritten books record the rateable value of each property and the amount of rate payable. Usually the rate was imposed once a year, but if the churchwardens had an unusually heavy expenditure for any reason, they could obtain permission to impose the rate a second time. The rates for Littleham record the property name, the owner's name and the occupier's name in that order, but are set out alphabetically by owner. First the rural properties are listed and then the properties in town. The occupiers may have sublet parts of their property to other people but the names of these subtenants will not show up here because they were not liable for the payment of rates. However, it is possible to use the rate books to trace family members who were above the level of paupers in the social scale and to find out where they lived. This is particularly useful at this period when there are no census returns to identify addresses and very few people were entitled to vote, so cannot be traced through electoral registers. In short, rate books are yet another little-used source which can help to provide additional information about families and which make family history research so much more interesting.