



Getting Married in Church: Information for the Bride and Groom

Congratulations to you on your forthcoming marriage. We look forward to doing all we can to make the day both happy and meaningful, and to help you prepare for life together. This information is provided in an attempt to ensure that nothing is forgotten! Please take the time to read it through carefully. From years of experience we know how to avoid some of the basic mistakes that can happen, and this leaflet should help you to benefit from others' successes and failures. We have aimed to cover the questions we are most often asked, but if there is something else you want to know, please don't hesitate to ask. Either phone for a chat, or email us your question.

Getting Started

"Can We Get Married at St Peter's/St Cuthbert's/St James/St John's/All Saints?"

The first question we always ask any applicant is "Where do you live?" This is because you are only legally entitled to be married in the Church of England parish where one or other of you lives, or in a parish where you are an active, worshipping member of the congregation. We're not just being difficult and hiding behind "funny church rules" – it's the law of the land! The law may change in a few years time, but for now, although civil weddings can take place in a wide range of venues and this makes people think there is a free choice, different laws apply to church weddings.

Confusion is sometimes caused by the fact that civil and ecclesiastical parish boundaries are often different, even though many share the same name. What's more, there have been many changes of local government boundaries over the years, and Church of England parishes also change from time to time. So, you may think you live in the 'parish' named on your council tax bill, but that may not be the case. For example, the church parish of St Peter's Wolviston includes some of the civil parish of Wolviston, but not all of it. However, it also includes much of the civil parish of Newton Bewley, which doesn't have a church! All in all, our six church parishes cover ten civil parishes, so we always need to double check to stay legal.

Once we've worked out the correct parishes, if the church you want to be married in is not the local church of either of you, we may still be able to consider an application in some circumstances. However, you would need to go on the church electoral roll of that parish and this will mean that you are expected to attend church services fairly regularly for six months before going on the roll. (The church electoral roll isn't the same thing as the local government electoral roll – in effect it is the church membership list.)

At the moment you can only have a Church of England wedding in a parish church or some other place of worship – normally one licensed by the Bishop. It is not normally possible to have a church wedding in other venues, for instance in a hotel.

Second Marriages After Divorce

Increasingly, couples approach us – often in fear and trembling – where one of the partners has been previously married, and the divorced partner is still living. In the past we were only able to offer a service of blessing after a civil marriage, but at the discretion of the individual priest it may sometimes be possible to marry such a couple. The decision is always on a case-by-case basis, so if you are in that situation, we should meet as soon as possible for an in-depth discussion. (There is also a separate information sheet with more background info.)

Other Kinds of Service

As well as offering full weddings, we also offer two other types of related service:

1. A service of *Thanksgiving after Marriage* may be appropriate in some circumstances, e.g. where one of the partners has been married previously, where a couple have been married overseas, or where a civil ceremony has been held for some other reason. This type of service is available to anyone, wherever they live and should normally take place as soon as possible after the wedding itself. There are many familiar elements, but we are required to make sure that it isn't confused with a wedding. At present, the fees are identical to those for a wedding.

2. A service of *Renewal of Vows* is also available. It is generally used for couples who wish to reaffirm their marriage vows at or around the date of a major wedding anniversary, but may also be more appropriate than the *Thanksgiving after Marriage* if a considerable time has elapsed since the marriage ceremony took place. The ceremony is slightly simpler, and the fees are lower.

Making an Application

To streamline our administration we don't normally use paper application forms any longer. Normally we'll take the details over the phone and enter them into our administration database and print out a copy of the application for you to check. The information you give will be used to make the entries in the statutory registers and to prepare your marriage certificate, so it needs to be complete and accurate.

Just a few points about the application:

1. It is important that we have the address(es) that will be correct at the time of calling the banns, as well as your current contact details. Many couples move during their engagement, so it is important to advise us if any details change, especially if you are likely to be moving close to the wedding.
2. It may seem strange to ask for the occupations of your fathers, but it is a legally required entry on the certificate. Even if either of the fathers is retired, deceased or unable to work, their last known profession or occupation will be needed.
3. If one or both of you live in a different parish from the one where you are to be married, it is really important that we identify the correct church so that your banns can be read there. For local churches we can usually advise who to contact, but if you live away from Stockton it is best to check with the nearest Church of England church and they should be able to advise you which is your actual parish.
4. We will obviously do our best to meet your requested date and time, but there is sometimes a need to be flexible if there is a clash with another event. If you have several different options, please say so, but also let us know which you would prefer. Also, once the date and time have been agreed, if you feel you need to adjust them for any reason please let us know before taking any action.

N.B. A note of caution! Because of the pressure on venues for wedding parties, most couples understandably make enquiries, or even a provisional booking, before contacting us. Some venues will even tell you: "don't worry, there'll be no problem booking the church/vicar". Unfortunately, there are many pressures on churches and clergy too – not only weddings – so in rare cases we may have difficulty meeting your exact wishes. In particular, we are not normally able to accept bookings for weddings on Sundays due to the many other commitments. Weekday weddings, though less common, can normally be accommodated.

Reading Banns

The ancient practice of announcing your intention to wed through the calling of banns originally existed so that any legal objections could be voiced. Although technically they still provide that opportunity, there are two other reasons why we feel they are important. The first is that they are an important milestone for couples as they prepare, when they and their families make a special point of being in church to hear them read. The second is that they give an opportunity for the congregation of the church to meet and pray for couples.

Unless you are being married by license, banns must be read at the main service on three consecutive Sundays during the three-month period prior to your wedding. When we have received your application we will acknowledge the booking in writing, and contact you to agree dates for your banns to be read.

If one of you lives in a different parish, even if you don't consider yourself to be an Anglican, you need to contact that church to arrange for the banns to be read in the Anglican parish church there as well. This can mean that in some cases your banns are read in three different places – the two parishes where you live, and the parish where you will marry.

After reading 'away banns', each minister concerned will provide a certificate (for which there is a fixed fee) stating that the banns have been read without objection. We are legally obliged to see the certificate(s) before the wedding can take place. At the very latest you should bring the form(s) with you to the rehearsal, but you should preferably send them to us as soon as you have them.

Cancellations and Postponements

We realise that cancellations and postponements are sometimes inevitable as a result of family circumstances, illness, etc. and that this can be very distressing. However, please do try to remember to let us know as soon as you can if you need to change the arrangements. We will be holding the time slot open for you and may have to turn other couples away at popular times. As noted below, we don't currently charge a deposit to cover this eventuality, but may be forced to do so in the future.

Planning the Service

This is one of the most important parts of the preparation for your wedding day. It is important that the service is relaxed and welcoming, but equally important that it is well organised so that everyone's mind is at rest. These are just a few helpful pointers.

Orders of Service

We strongly recommend use of the new Common Worship service. It includes all the traditional elements, but also allows scope to personalise the service by choosing optional prayers. The minister taking the service will help you with these choices when you meet. The Common Worship marriage service also contains responses for the congregation, so you will need to discuss with the person taking your service what material needs to be produced for your guests. The bare minimum would normally be a printed copy of the hymns, but most people like to produce a more complete order of service and we certainly recommend including some of the prayers together with the hymns and headings to guide guests through the service.

Whichever approach you decide to take, we can help by providing a Microsoft Word template service on disk or via email, together with the words of the hymns. We can even print simple orders of service for you for a small charge – either on standard paper or on special paper provided by you. However, to avoid errors, please check the final text with the minister before going ahead with printing.

Readings

There is always at least one reading from the Bible at a wedding, but there can be two bible readings, as well as other kinds of readings or poems. Including this kind of material can be a good way to personalise the wedding and make it creative and interesting.

At the meeting where we talk about planning the service we will give you a list of suitable bible readings so that you can choose yourself, but if you prefer we can choose one on your behalf. If you want to have a non-Bible reading or poem, please let us have a copy in good time so that we can confirm that it is suitable. The final decision on non-Bible readings and other material rests with the minister taking the service.

Readings can be a good opportunity to involve a member of the family or a friend. If the person is used to speaking in public, that is helpful, but it is by no means essential. All that is required is a good speaking voice, and a little practice! Several of our churches have sound systems installed, which helps, but we always recommend that the reader comes along to the wedding rehearsal to get the feel of the building and have a trial run.

Music

It is usual to have two hymns and we strongly recommend that you choose very well known ones, so that the congregation will be able to join in with confidence. Again, we have produced a list of the most popular hymns chosen for weddings, but please ask if you need help in this area. We may suggest that you meet with the organist to discuss hymns, and we certainly prefer to know your choices a couple of weeks in advance, as well as any music you would like to have played at the beginning and end of the service.

Sadly, only St Peter's Bishopton has a true ring of bells (which can be rung for a fee), and Redmarshall has three bells. The single bell at most of our churches is often rung for wedding services, but there is no charge made. We normally arrange an organist to play, but a choir is only available by special arrangement. Some couples approach us asking for a friend to play the organ, and we can usually accommodate the request. Others arrange for friends to play or sing during the signing of the registers, and that is usually possible also. Recorded music can be used in some circumstances, but there can be copyright issues to overcome. Where songs other than hymns are requested, please provide a copy of the words for consideration by the minister.

Involving Other Ministers

Some couples have an ordained minister or lay reader in the family or as a close friend, and wish to have them take part in leading the service. We are always happy to involve them by discussion, though the marriage itself will normally be conducted by the parish clergy. Common roles for visiting clergy are to give the address or lead prayers, but please bear in mind that they may prefer to step out of their normal role and simply take their place in the congregation. In any case, before agreeing anything, please talk about it with us and we will be happy to contact the person to discuss ways in which he/she could be involved.

Other Practicalities

Flowers

We will be very happy to help or advise you on flowers suitable for the church in question. It is particularly important to discuss this with us before committing with a florist as there may be another wedding on the same day and you may need to liaise with another couple. In most cases, the floral displays are left in church after the wedding, so if you wish to take parts of the display away it is important for us to know so that those responsible for normal church flowers can plan accordingly.

Photography

A photographic record of the whole day is very precious to most couples, and we try to make this possible without the photography intruding into the ceremony. The principle is that there should be no potential distractions for the couple or the minister, and the congregation should remain free to participate fully. For that reason we discourage any use of cameras by members of the congregation during the ceremony or the signing: still or video, conventional or digital, with or without flash.

The official photographer will normally take one or two shots from a discreet position at the very beginning of the ceremony, but the majority are taken after the service has finished and the registers have been signed. At this point, the ushers can play an important role by making sure that amateur photographers don't cause difficulties for the official photographer.

Video

Some people like to have a video of their wedding day. However, for a couple of reasons we strongly recommend against videoing the ceremony itself, or any portion when music is being played. Firstly, in most of the churches it is quite intrusive and even more distracting for the couple and the minister than still photography. Secondly, the legal position regarding the use of recording equipment during a church service means that license fees are applicable, and significant restrictions apply – whether you hire a professional, or simply ask a friend to use a camcorder. The law is the same for short clips on a digital camera or a mobile phone as for a full professional recording.

If you do wish to make a video recording, there will be an additional administration fee and there may be a supplementary fee for the organist. You will need to complete forms relating to copyright, and ensure that the video operator abides by the guidelines we provide, including any specific directions from the minister on the day of the wedding. Please ask for further information and clarification if needed.

Final Preparations

Rehearsal

The minister taking your service will contact you to arrange a mutually convenient time to go through the service with you in church. This will be not more than a couple of weeks before the ceremony, and usually just a few days before. It is helpful, though not essential, if the chief bridesmaid, the best man, and whoever is giving the bride away can be present; as well as the bride and groom of course! At the rehearsal we will run through the whole service, double check the register entries for correctness, and talk through the practicalities.

Fees

Most of the fees are made up of statutory sums that are set nationally and reviewed each year. The total also includes fees for the organist and a fee for the Church Council who have the task of keeping the church building in good repair. It also covers the reading of banns, and provision of a wedding certificate.

Because the statutory fees change annually, we revise our parish fees each year at the beginning of January and we'll let you know the exact amounts as your wedding approaches. In the meantime, we will provide you with a copy of the current fees as a guide. The whole amount should preferably be paid as a crossed cheque made payable to the PCC of the church where you will be married. This should preferably be sent in advance so that it can be banked before the wedding, but it must be received no later than the night of the rehearsal.

We do not currently take a deposit for weddings, but this may change in the future. In particular we may consider a refundable deposit against the cost of clearing inappropriate confetti (see below), and/or a non-refundable deposit to cover the cost of administration in the case of cancellations.

On the Day

The service normally lasts about three quarters of an hour unless there are special musical items or additional readings. However, we do not book weddings closer than two hours apart. This is to take all pressure off both you and the minister, and to allow time to enjoy the occasion.

Ushers

We recommend having two or more ushers to assist at the wedding. We will have people on hand to assist, but they are unlikely to know your guests so they provide background help. One usher would normally take responsibility for directing guests inside the church, and the other would normally assist outside – helping with parking, providing umbrellas if needed and so on.

Car Parking

Car parking is always challenging in villages like ours, and it is important that we maintain a clear way through for normal traffic, emergency vehicles and, in some cases, buses! As mentioned, we normally suggest that one of the ushers assists in making sure that the available space is well used and no blockages are caused.

Witnesses

Two people need to be chosen to act as witnesses to the marriage. This will commonly be the best man and chief bridesmaid. However, there is no hard and fast rule and it may be an opportunity to give a role to another person who is close to you. We do need to know their full names as we will need to make a pencil note of them in the margin of the registers if the signatures are not easily readable. This enables us to provide an accurate copy of your marriage certificate if you request one in the future.

Confetti

Guests are welcome to throw confetti, but we do ask that it is only used at the gate of the church. Confetti among the graves can be distressing for families and is hard to clear. Only paper or other natural confetti may be used. Metallised plastic confetti is not permitted, and it would be helpful if you could include a note on your invitations and order of service to advise your guests. The wording should say something like: "Bio-degradable confetti only, please". Some couples even choose to provide confetti to avoid the problem completely.

A Final Word

We look forward to welcoming you to our services, not only for the reading of the banns, but also in order that you can get to know the church and us. That way you will feel more at ease on your wedding day and will be able to enjoy it to the full. Most importantly we hope that your involvement with our churches will help you grow in your understanding of what it means to be a Christian, and that this will be an important part of your preparation for both the service and your life together.

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