

Genealogy - May Report

The May meeting looked at 'Irregular Marriages'.

Runaway marriages to Gretna Green are a recurring occurrence in novels of the Regency or early Victorian period. Cross the Border into Scotland and exchange marriage vows in front of two witnesses and, hey presto, you were legally married, even in England. Until Lord Hardwicke's marriage act of 1753 similar marriages could take place in England; the only difference was that the marriage had to take place in the presence of an Anglican clergyman. Mind you, if the other requirements of Canon Law (church law) were not met then the clergyman was likely to be stripped of his living and could well end up in debtor's prison. That is why the surroundings of The Fleet prison and the King's Bench prison were a good place to find clergymen willing to perform such a service – they had nothing left to lose.

Such marriages were called 'Irregular' or 'clandestine' marriages. They were popular because they were quick – no banns – and cheaper than obtaining a licence. Also they did not require parental consent and were not publicised – a boon to apprentices marrying before their articles would allow. In the first half of the 18th century half the marriages in London were irregular marriages at The Fleet, The Kings Bench, the Mint or May Fair Chapel.

In the nature of the events complete records of these marriages are not available but a large number of records for both Gretna Green and The Fleet Prison can be searched on-line at Ancestry.

In June the members will assist each other with their family trees. The meeting will again be by Zoom, as usual on the first Thursday of the month, June 3rd, at 2pm. Details will be circulated to Genealogy group members nearer the time.

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