

Buried in Woollen

The Statutory Requirements for Burial in Wool, 1666–1814, and their Value to the Local Historian

This briefing paper sets out the legal requirements of the Burying in Woollen Acts, the procedure parishes were obliged to follow, and the value of the resulting affidavit endorsements to genealogical and parish research — as encountered directly in the Group's transcription of the St Bartholomew's burial affidavit register (1675–1812).

1. Origin and Purpose of the Acts

The requirement to bury the dead in wool rather than linen was introduced by the first 'Act for Burying in Woollen' in 1666 (18 & 19 Cha. II, c. 4), and strengthened by further Acts in 1678 (30 Cha. II, c. 3) and 1680 (32 Cha. II, c. 1). Collectively these are known as the Burying in Woollen Acts 1666–80. The motive was economic rather than religious or sanitary. England's domestic wool trade was in decline during the seventeenth century, threatened by imported linen used for shrouds and grave-clothes. Parliament's stated aim was "the encouragement of the woollen manufactures of this kingdom, and prevention of the exportation of the moneys thereof for the buying and importing of linen." By compelling every burial in the kingdom to use wool, the Acts created a permanent, universal market for the domestic cloth trade — benefiting clothiers, sheep farmers and landowners alike.

2. The Requirements of the Act

2.1 The shroud and coffin

The 1678 Act, which gave the legislation its lasting and enforceable form, specified that no corpse — other than a victim of plague — was to be buried in any shirt, shift, sheet or shroud made or mixed with flax, hemp, silk, hair, gold or silver, or in anything other than pure sheep's wool. Coffins, too, were not to be lined or faced with any material but wool. The prohibition was absolute: even a small admixture of a forbidden fibre was a breach of the Act.

2.2 The plague exemption

A specific proviso exempted plague victims from the requirement, in recognition of the contemporary (if medically mistaken) belief that wool retained infection for years unless thoroughly aired. Victims of plague could lawfully be buried in linen without penalty.

2.3 The sworn affidavit

Compliance had to be proved, not merely asserted. Within eight days of the burial, an affidavit had to be sworn by two credible persons — typically a relative of the deceased and one other witness — confirming that the burial had been carried out strictly in accordance with the Act. The oath was sworn before a Justice of the Peace, the Mayor or other head officer of a town, or, failing those, before a clergyman (other than the minister who had conducted the burial itself). The completed affidavit was then delivered to the officiating parson, who was required to note its receipt in the parish register.

2.4 The penalty for default

Failure to produce a valid affidavit within the eight-day window rendered the estate of the deceased — or, in the case of paupers, the parish officers responsible for the burial — liable to a fine of £5, levied by distress and sale of goods if necessary. The fine was earmarked for the relief of the parish poor, generally to help fund a workhouse or stock of work. The clergyman who neglected to record a missing affidavit, or to notify the churchwardens of the default, was himself liable to penalty.

2.5 The destitute, and parish notation

Where a family was too poor to provide even a woollen shroud, this was often noted in the register against the burial, commonly as “naked” — meaning the body was buried without a shroud at all, which did not breach the Act since no forbidden fabric had been used.

3. How Compliance Appears in Parish Registers

Where a parish kept the affidavit record within the burial register itself — as St Bartholomew’s did — the clerk typically marked each entry with a brief note once the sworn affidavit had been received. The terminology varies between parishes and across the period, but the most common forms are:

Register notation	Meaning
Affidavit / Aff. / A.	A valid affidavit of burial in wool was sworn and delivered within the eight-day period.
Att. & Cert. (or similar)	Attested and certified — the affidavit was sworn and the clergyman has certified its receipt in the register.
Naked	The deceased was too poor for any shroud; no breach of the Act, since no forbidden fabric was used.
No affidavit / blank	No affidavit was produced within the period — the estate or parish officers were technically liable to the £5 fine, though enforcement in practice was inconsistent, especially after about 1700.
Plague / dyed of ye plague	Burial exempted from the wool requirement under the proviso for plague victims.

Separately printed and signed affidavit forms also survive in some county and diocesan archives, though many were simply placed loose in the parish chest and have since been lost. Where the parish register entry is the only surviving evidence, it remains the primary source.

4. Decline and Repeal

Enforcement of the Act was always patchy, and observance fell away markedly through the eighteenth century as the woollen industry’s economic importance was overtaken by cotton and other textiles during the early Industrial Revolution. By the 1770s the requirement was widely ignored in many parishes, although affidavit endorsements continued to appear sporadically in some registers — including St Bartholomew’s — right up to the final years before

repeal. The 1666 Act was formally repealed by the Statute Law Revision Act 1863, the underlying requirement having already been abolished by statute in 1814.

5. Value to the Local and Family Historian

- **Dating precision:** the eight-day rule means an affidavit note can sometimes help narrow an otherwise ambiguous burial date.
- **Evidence of relationships:** the witness named in a surviving affidavit is very often a close relative of the deceased, offering a usable genealogical link where no other record survives.
- **Indicator of poverty:** a “naked” burial is a direct, datable marker of a family’s economic circumstances at the time of death.
- **Evidence of local administration:** patterns of compliance and lapse across a register reflect the diligence (or otherwise) of successive incumbents and parish officers, and can be cross-referenced against other parish records of the period.
- **Plague identification:** an explicit plague exemption noted against a burial is itself a rare and valuable piece of local epidemiological evidence.

Sources

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