

Calendar Changes – Julian to Gregorian

Today we are accustomed to a calendar beginning on 1st January and ending on 31st December. This is based on the earth's rotation around the sun. However, that system was not adopted in England and its colonies until 1752. Hence as family historians it is important to understand why there are year variations in many early records.

Back in 45 BC Julius Caesar ordered a calendar to be based on a solar year and to consist of 12 months totalling 365 days for 3 years and 1 year of 366 days. As a result, the beginning of the year was moved from March 1st to January 1st.

After the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century the new year was gradually changed to coincide with Christian festivals so that by the 7th century the beginning of the new year was Christmas Day.

By the 9th century some parts of southern Europe were beginning to observe the new year as March 25th. This coincided with the church holiday 9 months prior to Christmas to celebrate Angel Gabriel's revelation to Virgin Mary that she was to become the mother of Jesus. Thus, the last day of the year was March 24th. In many parish registers March 25th is marked as 'Lady Day'. However, this change was not adopted in England until late in the 12th century.

By 1582 the seasonal equinox was occurring too early, by about 10 days, meaning that some church holidays, such as Easter, were no longer falling in the right season. This was due to the overcompensation of the solar year causing the addition of an extra day every 128 years. So, in 1582 Pope Gregory XIII authorised the Gregorian or 'New Style calendar' to be implemented and most Roman Catholic countries adopted this. 10 days were dropped from the month of October and the formula for leap years was revised by making them only years divisible by 400 at the end of a century e.g. 1600, 2000.

Because Protestant countries including England did not recognise the authority of the Pope, they continued to use the 'Old Style calendar'. This meant that between 1582 and 1752 there were 2 calendars in use in Europe as well as 2 different starts to the new year in England. Although the 'Legal' new year was March 25th, January 1st was more commonly celebrated as New Year's Day and given as the first day of the year in almanacs.

Double dating was often used to describe dates between the new (Jan 1st) and the old (Mar 25th) to avoid confusion e.g. *March 4 1642/43*.

In 1750 following an act of parliament, England and colonies changed to the Gregorian calendar, as by then the difference between the calendars had increased to 11 days. To adjust these 3 changes needed to be made:

- Dec 31 1750 was followed by Jan 1 1750 (Dec was the 10th month and Jan the 11th in the 'Old Style' calendar)
- Mar 24 1750 was followed by Mar 25 1751 (Mar 25 being 1st day of 'Old Style')
- Dec 31 1751 was followed by Jan 1 1752 (changeover from Mar 25 to Jan 1 as New Year's Day)
- Sept 2 1752 was followed by Sept 14 1752 (drop 11 days to conform to 'New Style')