Parish Registers Update

First, we need to understand the history. Parish registers were formally introduced in England on 5th September 1538 following the split with Rome, when Thomas Cromwell, minister to Henry VIII, issued an injunction requiring the registers of baptisms, marriages and burials to be kept. Before this, a few Roman Catholic religious houses and some parish priests had kept informal notes on the baptisms, marriages and burials of the prominent local families. This injunction was addressed to the rector or vicar of every parish in England. However, this order had nothing to do with religious doctrine or the papacy and rather indicated the desire of the central government to have full knowledge of the population of the country. Many parishes ignored this order as it was commonly thought that it presaged a further tax.

By a Constitution of Convocation in the year 1597, transcripts of the Parish registers, were ordered to be forwarded to the Bishop of the Diocese, and in 1831, official inquiries were made of all the clergy, as to the exact date, condition and number of parish registers in their custody and their replies were published in 1883. According to the Parish Register Abstract of 1883 there were;

- 40 registers beginning prior to 1538
- 772 “ “ in 1538 – it’s now believed to be only 656
- 1822 “ “ in 1538 – 1558
- 2448 “ “ in 1558 – 1603
- 969 “ “ in 1603 – 1650
- 2757 “ “ in 1650 – 1700
- 1476 “ “ in 1700 – 1750

Also between 600 & 700 of later dates.

By far the most remarkable of early clergy registers is that of Tipton, Staffordshire, this register actually begins on the 20th December 1513 with a baptism, the second earliest register is Altham, Lancashire with the best illegibility dated 1518.

So, with the above history on the start of some registers, we now have an indication of how far back we may get with our research of parish registers and remember times in history like ‘The Great Plague of London’, where the Bills of Mortality stated 68,596 deaths in 1665 and approx. 460,000 fled into the country, but to what counties....

Most of the major websites have Parish records acquired by partnerships with a number of local archives, and which also come from country-wide collections, such as FamilySearch’s IGI, Phillimore Marriage Records or Boyd’s Marriage Index and many of the websites have data drawn from antiquarian volumes of parish transcriptions, often covering just one parish or one church and originally published more than a century ago.
The Society of Genealogists has quantities of valuable parish data drawn from just such volumes and you can easily check their coverage here but you may have to sign-in: www.sog.archiveps.co.uk/bin/recordslist.php

Another good place to look is: www.ukbmd.org.uk – Ian Hartas is a long-time genealogist and author of this website and to explore for parish records, click on ‘PARISH REGISTER’ on the left side of the home page. Choose your county and some links begin with ‘Parish Registers of....’ which may lead you to the archive.org website with old printed books from Parish Register Society transcriptions and are free to research.

Also, look at the following good free website: www.freereg.org.uk for parish records, and to find out what may be also available, check out: www.genuki.org.uk and the British Isles county pages on the website: www.familysearch.org/Wiki/en/Main_Page