

What are Banns?

Calling Banns is one of the more ancient forms of preliminaries which make a marriage ceremony legal.

Other methods in use currently are:

- a certificate from the Local Authority Registrar (not needed for Church of England marriages)
- a common licence from an accredited church representative called a surrogate
- a special licence from the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The calling of Banns, which used to be referred to as “askings” as in “this is the first, second or third time of asking” requires the names and some of the details of the couple to be called out and their intention to marry publicly declared at a principal act of worship on three consecutive Sundays in a three month period prior to the wedding date. The banns must be read out in all the churches involved. So, if the couple live in the same parish, just one church is involved. If the couple live in different parishes, the banns must be called in both parish church. If they live in two parishes but are on the Electoral Roll of a third parish, then the banns must be called there too.

The purpose of the banns is to make the intentions of the marrying couple public so that those who might know of an impediment to their marriage may make their objections. This may seem an extraordinarily inefficient method of disseminating news, but the Local Authority method is similarly odd- just a notice posted in the Town Hall where only those who know would be likely to visit and check!

The impediments to marriage are:

1. insufficient age (16 is the minimum and requires parental consent until 18)
2. previous marriages as yet undissolved- bigamy is a serious offence!
3. consanguinity, or persons planning to marry with a member of their own family in a close relationship forbidden by law. This rule has been partially relaxed over the years.

So, if the banns are called in all the appropriate churches and certificates issued to confirm that no impediment was alleged, the wedding may go ahead unhindered. If impediment is alleged, the clergy will need to enquire into the circumstances before deciding if the allegation is substantial and within the legal framework. If there is serious evidence of an impediment, the marriage must be delayed until an enquiry is held to clarify the whole matter.

Clergy of the Church of England, the established Church, are automatically official Registrars in their own right and act as such at the wedding, in addition to their role as a priest.

Clergy of other churches are not automatically registrars. In those churches, either the clergy apply to be appointed as a Registrar or another person is appointed to be the legal presence at the wedding and complete the registration.

The status of Registrar only permits clergy to conduct weddings in church buildings, not secular buildings or those places deemed fit for marriage by the Registrar such as hotel wedding rooms.