

Manorial Records

A manor can be defined as, “a piece of landed property with tenants over whom the landlord exercised rights of jurisdiction in a private court” (P. D. A. Harvey).

The manorial system existed before Domesday and survived until 1922 when the Law of Property Act finally abolished the usual kind of manorial tenure, 'copyhold'. Under 'copyhold' tenure, the lord of the manor granted a house or land to a tenant; the tenant was expected to pay a money rent and / or to perform certain services, such as cultivating the lord's land. From the late 17th century onwards, the manorial system had already gone into sharp decline, as manors were broken up into parcels and sold off.

Manors could vary greatly in size. A single manor might include several parishes; paradoxically, one parish might contain several manors, or at least parts of them.

Be warned! Many middle-class country residences, estates and substantial farms were often described as 'manors'. Not all of these were technically manors.

The Manor Courts

Most of the business of the manor was carried out in its manor courts. In theory there were two distinct types of manor court: the **court baron** and **court leet**. However, in practice, these distinctions were often blurred.

The **court baron** was usually held every three weeks. This court made sure that the tenants upheld the customs of the manor (the terms under which a tenant held his house or land) and that they paid their dues and performed their contractual services to the lord of the manor.

The **court leet** (also known as the view of frankpledge) oversaw the working of the frankpledge, a system where a group of about ten households had responsibility for maintaining law and order within one another. This court, which had the power to imprison offenders, dealt with offences like assault and affray.

The proceedings of the manor courts were originally recorded on long sheets of parchment called membranes, which were rolled up for storage. A group of membranes covering several successive years was often stitched together at the head (top), which can make them cumbersome to read. From the first half of the 16th century, these court rolls began to be replaced by volumes, and by the early 17th century court books had become the standard medium for recording manor court proceedings.

The manor courts generated a number of other records. These include:

Presentments. These are lists of matters to be dealt with by the manor court. They were drawn up by the jury, sometimes before the court hearing. Each matter to be addressed is introduced by the set phrase, 'We present that ...'

Surrenders and admissions. Surrender and admission was the process by which transfers of copyhold land were made in the manorial courts. Tenants of copyhold land were not free to do as they wished with their land – they had to seek the lord's permission to buy, sell, inherit, sublet, exchange or mortgage their land. To change lands, the land would be surrendered into the hands of the lord and the next tenant admitted. This procedure was written down in the

court roll, and the tenant given a copy of the relevant entry as proof of his tenure. This is how the term 'copyhold' came to be used to describe land held by copy of the court roll.

Essoins. Documents listing the essoins, or excuses for non-attendance at court.

Estreats. Documents which list the fines (customary payments) and amercements (penalty payments) imposed by the manor court, which were collected by one of the manorial officials.

Court Procedures. Volumes and papers containing forms of oaths of officers, forms of keeping court, articles of enquiry to be used at all courts, and specimen documents.

Call Roll. A type of manor court attendance register

Other court records, such as lists of members of the manor court jury and manorial tenants, are more straightforward.

Other records

The administration of manors generated an enormous variety of records. Some of the main ones are:

Accounts. Manorial accounts kept by various officials, such as reeves, beadles and bailiffs. They are often described in the Latin as *compti*. Where the official is not identified, the documents are described as 'ministers' accounts'.

Survey. A survey is a written description of a manor consisting of descriptions of boundaries, customs and a rent roll. A special court called a court of survey was held, a jury empanelled and a list of questions or "articles of enquiry" drawn up.

Extent. A type of survey in which every item has a valuation attached to it. Extents take their form from the *extenta manerii*, and will always describe themselves as extents. They date mainly from the 1250s until about the 1350s. After this date, they are rare but may still be found.

Customal. An early type of survey which consists of a list of the manor's tenants, with the customs under which each held his house and lands.

Particular. A description of the manor often written by the steward.

Terrier. A description of a manor which follows a topographical arrangement.

Enfranchisements. Papers, files and deeds relating to enfranchisement of copyhold land, usually resulting from a series of permissive Acts of Parliament in the 19th century, and also to 20th century compulsory enfranchisement, though some are earlier.

Using manorial records

Manorial records are among the most rewarding documents to be found in family and estate collections. However, they can also be difficult to use. Court records were officially to be kept in Latin (often heavily abbreviated) until 1733, and the handwriting in early manorial records can be very difficult to decipher if you are not used to it. However, helpfully, all manorial records are quite formulaic, so once the handwriting has been deciphered, you can usually work out what the document is about by comparing it with the many published transcriptions and translations of manorial records from across the country. There are also a number of useful guides. They contain such useful information that they are well worth persisting with.

How to find Somerset manorial records

A database of all surviving Somerset manorial documents, wherever they are held, can be searched on the Manorial Documents Register at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/mdr. You can search by parish or by manor name, and can narrow down the search by type of document and date range.

Histories of Somerset manors can be read in the "Somerset Manor Histories" file in the searchroom. If the *Victoria County History of Somerset* has written a chapter on the parish you are researching, you can read the "manors" section on the British History website, www.british-history.ac.uk. (Volumes 1-9 of the *Victoria County History of Somerset* are available on this website; later volumes are not online).

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Further reading and online resources

The best introduction to the subject is P. D. A. Harvey, *Manorial Records* (British Records Association, 1999). D. Stuart, *Manorial Records: an introduction to their transcription and translation* (Phillimore, 1992) is a practical step-by-step guide to using medieval manorial records. Published transcriptions and translations of manor court records include R. Campbell (ed.), *Clevedon: medieval manor to Victorian resort* (Troubadour, 2009), and, further afield, P. D. A. Harvey (ed.), *Manorial Records of Cuxham, Oxfordshire, c. 1200-1359* (HMC, 1976), J. Amphlett (ed.), *Court rolls of the manor of Hales, 1272-1307* (Worcestershire Historical Society, 1910), and the court rolls of Conisbrough in Yorkshire (www.hrionline.ac.uk/conisbrough/).

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