

Coroner's Records

Today, coroners are independent judicial officers who are responsible for enquiring into the medical causes of sudden and unexpected, unnatural, violent or suspicious deaths. The office was formally established in 1194, when its duties were more those of a medieval tax gatherer and included the investigation of almost any aspect of medieval life that had the potential benefit of revenue for the Crown. Sudden death in the community has always been considered important and was investigated by the coroner, although for financial rather than judicial reasons. For example, suicides were investigated, on the grounds that the goods and chattels of people found guilty of the crime would then be forfeit to the crown. Or accidental deaths, such as being run over by a cart, were investigated as the cart could then be confiscated. All coroners investigated cases of violent death, fires and the finding of hidden treasure, and coroners in counties with a coastline investigated shipwrecks.

Not all deaths are reported to a coroner. It is usually done if the death has happened in suspicious or unforeseen circumstances, such as:

- by violence or accident
- in prison or police custody
- from an industrial disease, such as pneumonicosis
- during an operation or under anaesthetic, or
- if the deceased had not been seen by a doctor in the previous 14 days

If a death is reported, the coroner gathers all the relevant information surrounding the death to make a decision about the cause. If there are questions about the causes of death, the coroner may arrange for a post-mortem examination. If this shows that the death was not due to natural causes, the coroner will then hold an inquest.

The purpose of an inquest is to find out the cause of death, and to provide the particulars needed for its registration. It is not the coroner's responsibility to establish who is to blame for the death. The four main questions to be answered at an inquest are: who was the deceased and how, when and where did they meet their death?

Inquests are very often reported in local newspapers or the national press if the inquest is one of public interest.

Somerset Coroners' Records

With the exception of Carhampton Hundred and the Boroughs of Langport and Bridgwater (see below), Somerset has hardly any coroners' records before the 1920s. At this time the county was divided into three divisions, North, West and South East, each with its own coroner. Before the 1960s, very few files were kept. In 1974, because of Local Government reorganisation, the Northern Division was abolished and there are now the two divisions of East and West. If you know or suspect that an inquest was held, it is always worth checking the local newspaper for a report.

East Somerset (ref: C\CR\SE)

- Account books, 1929 to 1965 (C\CR\SE/1)
- Registers of deaths, 1955 to 1989 (C\CR\SE/1)
- List of cases destroyed, 1929 to 1971 (C\CR\SE/1)
- Inquests and natural causes, 1929 to 2010 (C\CR\SE/2-289)

West Somerset (ref: C\CR\W)

- Account books, 1935 to 1964 (C\CR\W/2-3)
- Inquest lists, 1971 to 1983 (C\CR\W/1)
- Inquests and natural causes, 1931 to 2008 (C\CR\W/4-260)

North Somerset (ref: C\CR\N)

- Correspondence, 1934 to 1947 (C\CR\N/1)
- Annual reports, 1932 to 1937 (C\CR\N/2)
- Daily records, 1928 to 1970 (C\CR\N/6-8, 24-28)
- Registers of deaths reported, 1953 to 1972 (C\CR\N/8, 22-23, 29)
- Inquests, 1946 to 1954, 1968 to 1973 (C\CR\N/40-43)

Miscellaneous (ref: C\CR\MISC/1)

- Appointments, fees, salaries and returns, 1889 to 1930 (C\CR\MISC/1)

Carhampton Hundred

- Coroner's roll, 1315 to 1321 (Published in *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries* Vol. 31, p.322) (DD\L/P/31/1)

Bridgwater Borough (ref: D\B\BW)

- Inquests, 1717 to 1751 (D\B\BW/1917/1-72)

Langport Borough (ref: D\B\LA)

- Inquests, 1669 to 1867, incomplete series (D\B\LA/32/1-77)
- Inquests, 1868 to 1886 (D\B\LA/97)

Other material

- Daily record including inquests in Bishops Lydeard police district, 1880 to 1926 (DD\ASC/6/1/1)
- Daily record including inquests in Ilminster police district, 1880 to 1904 (DD\ASC/6/1/7)
- Coroner's records including inquests, South East division, 1929 to 1930 (DD\LC/26/1)
- Coroner's accounts, South East division, 1872 to 1896 (DD\LC/32/1-2)
- Transcripts of depositions in inquests, South East division, 1895 (DD\S\TA/1)
- Transcripts of depositions in inquests, Bishops Lydeard, Dunster and Skilgate, 1838 to 1839 (DD\XJF/15)
- Details of inquests on infants under 12 months, no places given, 1844 to 1849 (Q\C/4/7-9)

Access by the public

All files are closed for 75 years with the exception of Treasure Trove files, which are closed for 50 years. You need to obtain permission from the relevant Coroner to consult a file less than 75 years old. Most coroners will then supply you with information directly, rather than giving permission for you to see a file at the Heritage Centre.

- For the North Somerset division records, contact: Avon Coroner, The Courthouse, Old Weston Road, Flax Bourton, BS48 1UI, (0117) 9529685.

- For the South East division records, contact: East Somerset Coroner, Argyle House, Bath Street, Frome, BA11 1DP, (01761) 411030.
- For West Somerset division records, contact: West Somerset Coroner, Clarke Willmott Solicitors, Blackbrook Gate, Blackbrook Park Avenue, Taunton, TA1 2PG, (01823) 445372
- North Somerset division records after 1971 and Bristol City records from 1936 are held at the Bristol Record Office, B Bond Warehouse, Smeaton Road, Bristol, BS1 6XN, (0117) 922 4224, email bro@bristol.gov.uk, website www.bristol.gov.uk/archives.
- Inquests for the Bath area 1776 to 1835, 1929 to 1950, 1960 to 1962, 1968 to late 1980s, are held at the Bath and North East Somerset Record Office, Guildhall, High Street, Bath, BA1 5AW, (01225) 477421, email archives@bathnes.gov.uk, website www.batharchives.co.uk.

Further reading

- Burton, J.D.K., Chambers, D.R., and Gill, P.S. (1985) *Coroners' Enquiries*
- Gross, C. (1896) "Select Cases from the Coroners rolls 1265-1413 with a brief account of the office of Coroner" in *Selden Society*, vol. 9
- Hunnisett, R.F. (1961) *The Medieval Coroner*
- Thurston, G. (1958) *The Coroners' Practice*
- A series of historical novels on "Crownor John" of Exeter (late 12th century) by Bernard Knight, a former Home Office Pathologist and Professor of Forensic Pathology at the University of Wales, are good for details of an early coroner's responsibilities.

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