

Manorial Records in 16th to 18th Century Research

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Manorial Records for Family and Local Historians

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The variable quality of pre-census English and Welsh family trees attests to the challenges faced in researching timeframes that do not benefit from the standardised and easily accessible datasets that cover the whole population since the mid-19th century. When researching earlier years, family historians must try to relate information from disparate and localized sources that generally provide sufficient information to spur interest but often insufficient information to build a well-evidenced understanding of who their earlier ancestors were and what sorts of lives they led. The Manorial Documents Register (MDR) project, led by The National Archives, has greatly contributed to the increasing accessibility of a vast set of documents termed manorial documents filled with names and unique information on individuals and communities spanning much of the past millenium.[1] Provided manorial documents have survived in or near the area of interest, they should be a core resource for any family historian researching the pre-census years in England and those parts of Wales administered under the manor system.

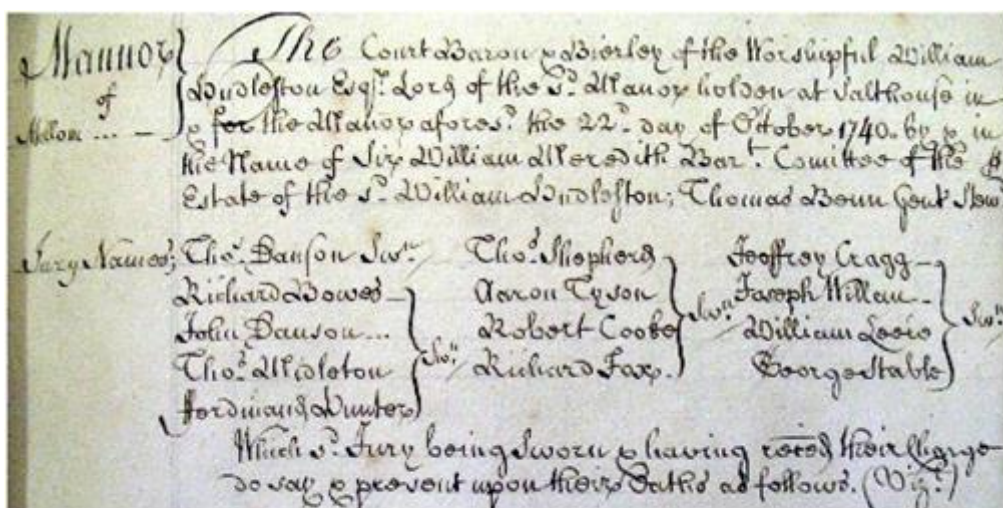


Figure 1. The Jury of Millom Court Baron, 22 Oct 1740 [2]

Accessibility and use

Family historians may be aware that 'the abundant records of manor courts represent the single most important source for the study of English local society in the Middle Ages'[3] but the usefulness of manorial records is by no means contained to either the Middle Ages nor to academic historians. Many thousands of these records have survived especially since the 13th century and continued to persist in some areas even to the abolishment of copyhold properties owned by manor lords and ladies in 1922.[4]

Many types of manorial records are written in English and even the manor court rolls changed from Latin to English in 1733 (and some even earlier). In addition, whether on the vast estate of an ecclesiastical manor lord or one of the many small manors of no more than a few hundred acres, there is considerable consistency in the procedures and record formats by which the business of the manor

was conducted and documented. This consistency, along with the fact that many of the records contain consolidated lists of people and properties, greatly facilitates locating the names of individuals and their residences in these records throughout the timeframe of interest to family historians.

Tenants	Tenements	Dates of Copies	Lives	Yearly Rents	Arrears
Henry Maitland Esq	Two plots in Close of St James, Exon called St James' Meadows		Henry Maitland	to - 14 - 0	Arrears 0.14.0
George Tanner Esq	Two plots in Close of St James, Exon	3 rd Aug 1747	George Tanner	4 - 0 - 0	Arrears 4.0.0
John Burdon	A Dwelling house in Exon	5 th July 1720	Elizabeth his Wife & Son	1 - 0 - 0	Arrears 1.0.0
Mary Burdon	The House lately called in Exon	11 th July 1729	Mary her Daughter & Elizabeth her Son	0 - 0 - 0	Arrears 0.0.0
Richard Driscoll	A plot called the Water Plot in Exon	1 st July 1730	Richard Driscoll & John his Son	0 - 15 - 0	Arrears 0.15.0
John Grant Esq	Two plots in Exon	30 th July 1741	Joseph Grant Esq & John his Son	0 - 0 - 0	Arrears 0.0.0
The Church	Two plots called St James' Meadows	18 th July 1742	John Maitland Esq & Henry Maitland Esq	0 - 14 - 0	Arrears

Figure 2. Extract from Manor Priory of St James Quit Rents, 18th century [5]

Unsurprisingly given the localized nature of manorial records, their survival rates vary greatly. The key contribution of the MDR project is to provide an online index of all known manorial records in England and Wales, with titles, dates and locations.[6] Work has been completed on over 90% of counties and, for those counties not yet available online, the index can be accessed on microfilm at The National Archives. Other published and online help is also widely available, from books and articles about manors to numerous examples and descriptions of the types of records that might be found. Most manor documents may require a visit to record offices or library archives, however these archives may offer digitisation services to enable access to remote researchers. A fortunate few may find that the documents of their manor of interest have already been made publicly available.[7]

Especially rewarding are those documents that survive for a manor through a relatively continuous timeframe. For the genealogist, these series may provide the robust evidence for lineages over time so often lacking in pre-census trees derived from common names in parish registers. Many manorial records describe property transactions and the manor court rolls themselves are the legal record for many of these transactions, with land and tenement transfers often naming heirs. In addition, in agricultural communities where local migration was the norm for labourers, tenant farmers and young servants, the records may help to characterise movement and locate those elusive brick walls who strayed across parish or county boundaries. Similarly for growing towns and industrial areas, records over time may help to characterise the growth and locate ancestors drawn to economic centres.

A Suggested Approach for the 16th to 18th Centuries

Family historians new to research in this timeframe are encouraged to build some contextual understanding of manors, where terminology and types of land tenure may be unfamiliar. Introductory books and articles are widely available, some containing helpful starting glossaries.[8] The FamilySearch 1851 Jurisdictions map is useful for identifying parishes of interest including nearby

parishes that manors may overlap and early movement is most likely to have taken place.[9] Then parishes can be searched in the MDR to understand what manorial documents have survived in the area of interest. Further information on the manors identified in the Register or other sources may be found by searching for parishes in the rich British History Online resource[10], including much from the Victoria County Histories that are also available at county record offices or local studies libraries. Speaking to a local archivist could lead to research previously done on the manors of interest.

Another recommended preparation is to locate maps of the area of interest, as detailed and early as possible. Understanding property holdings not only helps to visualize the communities in which ancestors lived but can also contribute to understanding their socioeconomic status. 19th century tithe maps available from record offices and increasingly online can connect property names found in earlier manor records to acreage, land usage and tax assessments that can be compared to others in the community. The National Library of Scotland may offer 19th century Ordnance Survey maps online with detail at the farm level.[11] Manorial documents primarily focused on land, such as surveys, terriers, enclosures and copyhold enfranchisements, may also include detailed maps.



Figure 3. Map of Woking Manor, 1719 [12]

Equipped with a basic understanding of the place of interest, the search for individuals may be facilitated by working backward through time with first focus on documents that primarily contain lists of names and properties. In response to economic and agricultural pressures in the latter medieval period, manors began to seek more efficient means for managing their estates and to transition from copyhold to leasehold properties that could be rented at market value rather than being constrained by ancient manor custom. One result is the increasing availability of documents titled rentals, quit rents or other rent-related titles along with lists of heriots, reliefs and other payments to the manor lord or lady upon the transfer of property to a new tenant.[13] From these lists, copyholders, leaseholders and freeholders may be associated with particular properties and rents paid. There may also be coverage of other details such as property size and occupations. Especially where multiple lists survive in fairly continuous timeframes, the potential exists to identify family relationships through property holdings over time as well to gain a sense of the family's economic status and the development of the overall community.

WEST SIDE:		
	The widow Pool for house and land late Robinson's amended to William & Thomas Pike	5s 4d
	William Spearing for his house late Forty's amended to Robert Smith	2d
	Thomas Mundy and Thomas Bear for their house late ?Hiddin amended to Seymour Mundy & Francis Bear	2d
	Thomas Woodroffe for 2 acres of Shorn Land late ?Kemp	5d
	Edward Plaistead for his house amended to Francis Bear for house late Plaistead's	5s 6d
	James Shipton for his house late Cannons	4d
	Richard Garrard for house late Batts.....	4d
735	Giles ?? Fortune for his house late Fortune's	6d
	Thomas for house late New's amended to ethro Curr	8d
	- and for his house late Ryman's.....	4d
 for his Church Land amended to Thomas Viner	1s 10d
	Thomas Woodroffe a house amended to Viner.....	4d
732	Widow Farrendon for house late ? (illegible) amended to Benjamin Salisbury for house late Farringdon.....	6d

Figure 4. Transcribed extract from Hungerford Quit Rent Roll, 1774-1790 [14]

The most informative manorial documents are likely to be those that capture the manor court proceedings. With these documents, it is particularly important to work backward in time since pre-1733 court rolls are likely to be in Latin. By using the more recent rolls to become familiar with the predictable formats of these documents, names, places and standard phrases can be found more easily in the earlier ones. Although there were two main types of courts, Court Baron and Court Leet, in practice most manors combined the court documents of the 16th to 18th century into consolidated sets simply termed 'court rolls' and may have even conducted the two types of court within the same court sessions. However, the emphasis of each type of court is quite different and each holds unique information for those researching the 16th to 18th centuries.

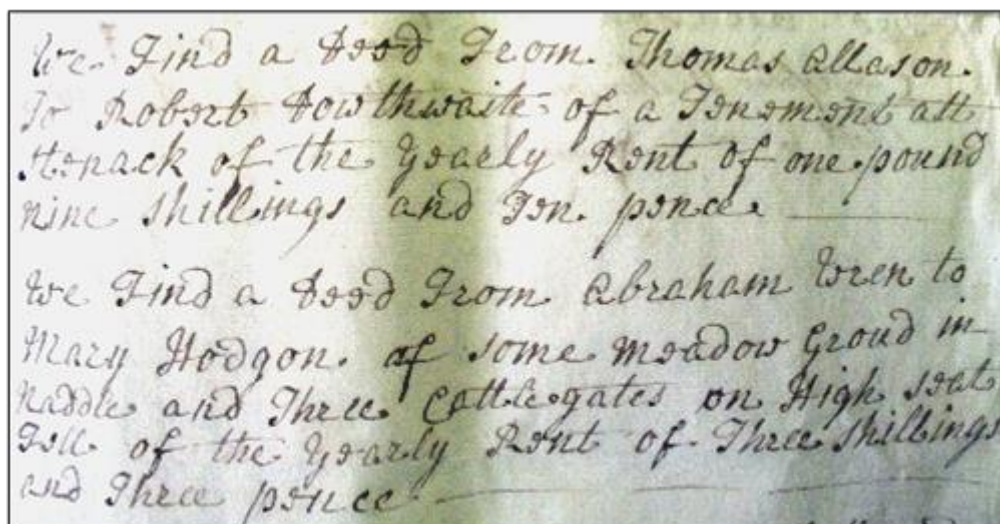


Figure 5. Admittances to and Surrenders from Copyhold Tenancies in Wythburn Court Roll, 1765 [15]

Court Barons were concerned with land and other properties held by the manor lord or lady. Like other manorial records, these court rolls follow a fairly predictable format and are a treasure trove of information for family historians. The Court Baron rolls are likely to identify lords and ladies, court officers and copyholders, along with admissions and surrenders of copyhold property and named heirs. The property transfers indicate timeframes when tenants died or moved into or out of the

manor and the rolls may also contain further information such as spouses, mortgages and even residences outside the manor. These rolls are also likely to be full of socioeconomic information, including property names and descriptions that can be corresponded to the maps previously described, property values and possibly occupations and titles. Broader indicators of daily life can be gained from the information on the manor's customs, including services and payments due to the lord or lady and activity undertaken jointly with others in the community or for which the whole community held responsibility.

Court Baron records, with their focus on the management and administration of the holdings of the manor lords and ladies, are undoubtedly biased toward the copyhold or customary tenants who resided on the manors, predominantly adult males. However, they may also provide good coverage of freeholders since freeholders may have been required to attend manor courts perhaps even serving as jurors, acting as surety for defendants and presenting or defending themselves in cases between individuals. Freeholders may have also had obligations such as recognising the lord or lady through acts of homage and fealty.

Of Sir Thomas Wyes (3d) of the honourable Order of the Bath, knight, the heirs of Sir William Kirckham (3d), knight, Sir Shilston Callmadie (3d), knight, John Moore (3d), esquire, and John Dynham, esquire, free tenants which owed suit then and made default. (1627)
They present the death of William Hutton, one of the free tenants of this manor, and Charles Hutton, clerk, to be the next heir and tenant. (1684)
They present the death of Hillary Hill, one of the conventional tenants of this manor, and William Hill to be the next tenant, who is sworn at this court. (1684)
They present that Arthur Doidge, a conventional tenant of this manor, has alienated the tenement called Vouldson to a certain Francis Northy junior, and the same Francis Northy to be the next tenant, who is sworn at this court. (1684)

Figure 6. Translated extracts from Bratton Manor Court Rolls, 1627 & 1684 [16]

Some manors were authorised to conduct Court Leets where the view of frankpledge was held, a responsibility that in early modern times translated to identifying all freeholders, copyholders and leaseholders with their properties and rents paid. Court Leets were also concerned with possible transgressions against the good behaviour of the community. Such transgressions offer the possibility of anyone in the manor appearing in the rolls, whether rich or poor, young or old, male or female, church or chapel-goer, tenant or squatter. Brewers and those violating statutes on food and drink are likely to be identified in abundance and crimes such as petty theft, breaking the peace and even immoral houses may appear.[17]

In larger towns and economic centres still conducting manor courts, there may be significant information on burgesses and officers responsible for regulating the town's commerce as well as information on the businesses of the townspeople, although borough records will need to be consulted for incorporated towns.

For both Court Barons and Court Leets, various information from the courts may also be found in separate manorial documents, possibly as convenient lists of admissions and surrenders, presentments listing the cases brought before the court, call books listing those required at the court, estreat rolls and bailiffs' lists of moneys due to the court, freeholder and copyholder lists and other summary information. Where gaps occur in the rolls, these summary documents along with the minutes of the stewards responsible for the courts may help to bridge the missing periods.

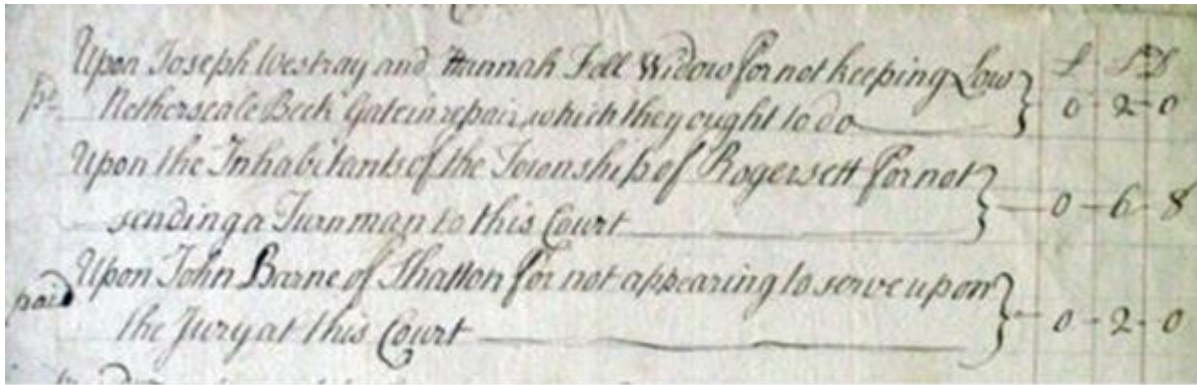


Figure 7. Extract from Estrate of the Manor Court of Derwentfells, 1759 [18]

Once the manorial name lists and court rolls have been investigated, returning to the detailed narratives in records focused on properties such as surveys, terriers, enclosures and copyhold enfranchisements may identify additional individuals and fill in further details for socioeconomic analysis. If available, Courts of Survey records and the circa 1649 Parliamentary Surveys may provide exhaustive scrutiny of every piece of land and tenants of all types in the manor. For manors held by larger landowners, estate surveys and documents may consolidate information on multiple manors. Also, a large body of manorial documents not previously mentioned, account rolls logged on an annual or recurring basis, may also contain names and will be of value to those trying to better understand the administration, development and economics of the manor.

Cottages

Henry Read and Edward Read his sonne about Eight and twenty years since built two Cottages upon this West grounds upon Stamford Hill and Clayhill Adjoyning to Ovells Close (on the South part) being part of the Demesne lands belonging to Ebisham Court ffarme but by what rent or Services wee know not.

Edward Belgrave about Thirty yeares since erected a Cottage on the West grounds Adjoyning to Stamford Pond on the North part but by what rent or Services wee know not.

Figure 8. Extract from the Survey of the Manor of Epsom, 1680 [19]

Enriching the Picture

As a whole, manorial documents can help to build a rich understanding of individuals, their families and their lives. These documents have the potential to contribute much unique information compared to other sources of this timeframe yet any family researcher of the 16th to 18th century will need to use them in combination with other available resources for maximum benefit. The National Archives Discovery catalogue as well as record office and local studies catalogues will undoubtedly surface further documents of interest, searching for the parish name and the term 'manor' or more specific terms. In addition, Cambridge and Oxford held many manors whose histories abound in their archives and Lambeth Palace Library is a key repository for ecclesiastical manors.

Non-manorial records are plentiful in this timeframe as well, where parish registers and wills can build upon the family connections evidenced in the manorial documents, deeds and other property records may be available to further detail the parties and agreements in land transactions, lay and church tax lists may itemize additional people and properties, and court cases may cover a variety of subjects from larger land transactions to more serious criminal offences. Using the many available resources in combination, opportunities abound for researchers to assemble well-evidenced stories of their ancestors throughout these centuries.

Endnotes

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