



Manorial Records (to 1920s and Court Rolls c1200-1954)

The origin of the English manorial system is not precisely known, but it was well in evidence in 1086 when Domesday was compiled. It ended in 1922 by Act of Parliament when a system of land registration administered by local authorities was introduced. There may well be helpful 19th century information.

The "Lord of the Manor" held land, a manor, directly of the Crown. He reserved part of this land for his own use, called the "demesne", and the rest was rented out to tenants or used as "common land". A manor could vary in size from a few acres within a single parish to land in several parishes.

There were originally two types of tenant:

1. Villeins who mostly "paid" for their tenancy by "service" i.e. they worked for free on cultivating the lords demesne;
2. Freemen who paid a rent for the use of the land.

Villein tenure became known as "copyhold". When a tenancy changed hands, the details were written on a Court Roll and the Villein was given a copy of the entry, hence the term "copyhold". All transfers, or conveyances, of copyhold land had to pass through the Manorial Court, the "Court Baron" and the incoming tenant had to pay a fee to the Lord of the Manor (called a "fine"). If the tenancy was transferred to the heir of a deceased tenant, the fee was called a "heriot".

Therefore, to find a tenancy agreement you first need to identify which Manor held the land. You may already have found this referred to in a Will. Then you need to find the archive office which holds the records and arrange a visit.

The Manorial Documents Register at The National Archives contains information about the nature and location of surviving manorial documents.

<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/manor-search>

The following sections of the Manorial Documents Register can be searched online:

Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Cumberland, Derbyshire, Devon, Dorset, Essex, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Huntingdonshire, Isle of Wight, Lancashire, Middlesex, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, Shropshire, Somerset, Staffordshire, Suffolk, Surrey, Sussex, Warwickshire, Westmorland, Wiltshire, Worcestershire, the three Ridings of Yorkshire; WALES all counties)

In progress: Herefordshire, Kent, Northumberland.

Commissioned: Cheshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Oxfordshire, Rutland.

Non computerised: Cornwall, Durham.

The basic search is for when you already know the name of the manor.

Otherwise, using the advanced search, you can search by county, manor, parish (English counties only), type of document or by date (or a combination of the above). Be aware that a manor may have an alternative name.

You will be shown: the Scope (type of document and date), the Record Repository, the Record Office reference, and the National Register of Archives number if there is one.

Check the Research Guide.

the National Register of Archives. Their web site URL is

<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/manor-search>

The remainder of the Manorial Documents Register has been microfilmed and is available for consultation in the Map and Large Document Reading Room.

You need to arrange a visit to the relevant Record Repository.

You then need to search through the rolls of the Court Baron until you find the entry that you want. This can be a lengthy and daunting task, especially if the records are written in Medieval Latin! However, from 1733 onwards and also the earlier time of the Commonwealth, English was used.

First, find the death or burial date for the tenant concerned. Then check through the next Court Roll after that for the announcement of the death. This will confirm the type of tenant and will also give details of any other land held.

Next, check each subsequent Court Roll until you find the transfer of the tenancy to the widow, heir, or new tenant. Then check the Record Office catalogue to see whether the "copy" of the new tenancy exists; if it does, inspect that next as it often gives details of all previous tenancies for that particular piece of land and it can save hours of searching.

If the "copy" has not survived, go back through the Court Rolls until you find the entry when the tenancy was originally transferred to the person being researched. On the way, watch out for other references to the tenant (e.g. asking for permission to fell trees, being fined for not clearing ditches), so this may mitigate the tediousness of the search.

As many land transfers were to the heir of the deceased, try and find the death or burial of the deceased's father. Then check the Court Rolls from that date, as per the above. If a piece of land has been in a particular family for a long time, it is possible to find a whole history for land transfers in this way in a comparatively short period of time.

If you have not already found a Will check for that.

The Manorial documents may also include Land Enclosures, Rent Rolls.