

Coroners' Records in Devon

Introduction

Coroners' records relating to reported deaths are closed to public access and inspection for 75 years, but this is subject to the proviso that the coroner for the district where the inquest was held may give special written authority to any person to inspect the records of his/her court, and can provide information from these records.

Applications for access to information in records **less than 75 years old**, must therefore be made through the coroner of the court which has deposited the records at the Devon Heritage Centre or the Plymouth and West Devon Record Office. Devon Heritage Centre holds records under the jurisdiction of H.M. Coroner for Exeter and Greater Devon District, which now includes North, West and East Devon.

Devon Heritage Centre also holds records under the jurisdiction of H.M. Coroner for Torbay and South Devon District, who is appointed for Torbay Unitary Authority.

South West Devon District is now serviced together with Plymouth, by the Coroner appointed for Plymouth Unitary Authority. Plymouth and West Devon Record Office holds records which were under the jurisdiction of H.M. Coroner for Plymouth.

Most Devon coroners' records prior to the Second World War have not survived, although there are a few exceptions. In many cases, the only surviving record of an inquest is found in local newspapers.

The only large series of coroners' files which Devon Heritage Centre holds for dates before 1944, is for inquests held in the city of Exeter.

City of Exeter

Coroners' inquest reports for the city of Exeter survive in the Exeter City Archives collection at the Devon Heritage Centre for the following years:

- 1702-1789, 1798
- November 1825-May 1860
- January 1862-April 1927

Lists of the surviving inquest reports for the years given above can be found under **Indexes to Coroners' Records**, on the Research Guides page of the Devon Archives and Local Studies website.

The lists of names and dates are also found in paper format on the searchroom catalogue shelves.

These only relate to deaths which occurred in the city of Exeter, and the collection of files before 1798, in particular, has many gaps.

These reports are all open to the public as they are over 75 years old. Some inquest records may be very brief, while others also have further correspondence and depositions attached.

Dartmoor Prison Convicts' Inquests (ref. 6772A)

This collection of very specific inquest papers were deposited in 2006 with the North Tawton Town Council collection, as part of the records of Fulford and Son, solicitors.

There are few surviving documents about prisoners held in the gaol at Princetown, in Lydford parish on Dartmoor, because riots at the prison in the 1930s caused the destruction of many of the records which were kept there. These papers relate to inquests held on deceased convicts and were deposited in the Devon Record Office in 2006 as part of the records of Fulford and Son, solicitors which had been held by North Tawton Town Council. Robert Fulford and his son, George Langdon Fulford, had offices in Okehampton but lived at Hatherleigh Street, North Tawton. In July 1869, Robert was appointed deputy coroner for Okehampton by Henry Adoniah Vallack, who was not able to carry out his duties as coroner due to ill-health. Henry Vallack died in 1877, and in January 1878 a meeting of the free-holders was called in Okehampton to elect a new coroner. Robert Fulford successfully campaigned for the appointment. This method of choosing a coroner was usual until 1888 when the Local Government Act made local authorities responsible for appointing coroners. At that time, before the 1887 Coroners' Act redefined the role of the coroner, Robert Fulford's duties were to sit, with a jury, on cases of sudden or unexplained death and determine the name of the deceased and how, when and where that person died. He was not expected to apportion blame. Robert continued as coroner for Okehampton district until his death on 26th September 1886. William Burd was elected coroner in his place and in November that same year, he appointed George Langdon Fulford to be his deputy.

The papers date from Robert Fulford's time as coroner. A few inquest papers have survived for the deaths of local people, but the majority of the papers are for convicts who died at Dartmoor prison, which came under the jurisdiction of the coroner for Okehampton district. The prisoners were known as convicts because they had been sentenced to penal servitude, meaning a term of imprisonment with hard labour.

Records of inquests survive from August 1869 to September 1886, although the years 1871 and 1872 are missing. The files for 1878 to 1886 are the most complete. In most cases, there is a document giving particulars of the convict including his marital status, trade, date and place of conviction, his crime and sentence, previous convictions, previous places of confinement and the name and address of the next-of-kin. If the convict died in the prison hospital after an illness, there is also a document called a 'Bed-head diet ticket' listing the food and drink given to him while he was sick, and if he died through an accident or in a failed attempt to escape, there are witness statements. Sometimes there is a copy of the 'Inquisition' which is a printed form completed after the inquest to record the verdict and which was signed by the members of the jury and the coroner.

Index to Dartmoor Prison Convicts' Inquests

The Devon Family History Society indexed this series of inquest papers in collaboration with the former Devon Record Office, as part of the Small Projects scheme. The index was initially published in two booklets, and later on CD-Rom as part of the Small Projects index "Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar-man, Thief". Both booklets and CD-Rom are available for use in the Devon Heritage Services searchroom, and at the Devon Family History Society's Tree House Research Centre in King Street, Exeter, and can be purchased through the Devon Family History Society online shop. The Devon Family History Society can also search the index for you if requested by email or post. However, the index is now also included on the Find My Past genealogical subscription website. See the Devon Family History Society website at <http://www.devonfhs.org.uk/> .

Although photocopies or digital copies of the original Dartmoor Prison Convicts' inquests may be obtained on application to the Devon Heritage Centre, the legibility of photocopies may not be very good, as blue paper was used to record the proceedings of these inquests.

Okehampton District (ref. 7615B)

We hold a series of Okehampton District Police Reports to Coroners deposited as part of Stones, Solicitors of Okehampton collection in 2009.

These cover the years 1937 - 1954, with two reports dated 1955, and one dated 1956. As of 2018, reports dated after 1942 are still closed to public access and inspection, but as time goes on, more will become available as they reach 75 years old.

A list of the names and dates of files for the years which are currently open for public access is found under **Indexes to Coroners' Records**, on the Research Guides page of the Devon Archives and Local Studies website. The list of names and dates are also found in paper format on the searchroom catalogue shelves.

The collection also includes certificate counterfoils for the years 1938-1956, correspondence with Home Office, etc., c. 1882-1913, and appointments of Deputy Coroners, 1907-1919.

Exeter District

Devon Heritage Centre **does not** have any of the following:

- Exeter inquest files between May 1927 and 1969
- Registers of deaths reported to the Coroner for Exeter District before 1953

This means that we have no record at all for Exeter inquests held between May 1927 and 1952.

We do hold registers of reported deaths for Exeter District from 1953 to 1974, in deposit 3762, and registers after that year, in later deposits.

We have inquest reports and files for Exeter District from 1970 onwards only.

The above records are all less than 75 years old and are closed to public access without the written authority of H.M. Coroner for Exeter and Greater Devon: see the webpage at <https://new.devon.gov.uk/registrationservice/deaths/the-coroner> for contact details.

East Devon District

Devon Heritage Centre **does not** have any coroner's records for East Devon prior to 1953.

We do hold the following:

- Registers of deaths reported to the Coroner in East Devon, 1953-1974.
- Inquest reports and files from 1970 for East Devon.

These are all less than 75 years old and are closed to public access without the written authority of H.M. Coroner for Exeter and Greater Devon. See the website listed above for contact details.

Mid Devon

Devon Heritage Centre holds the following:

- Registers of deaths reported to the Coroner for Tiverton Borough, 1866-1969.
- Registers of deaths reported to the Coroner for Crediton District, 1953-1962.

Coroners' records relating to reported deaths are closed to public access and inspection for 75 years, so any of these registers with entries less than 75 years old are closed to public access without the written authority of H.M. Coroner for Exeter and Greater Devon. See the website listed above for contact details.

North and West Devon District

Devon Heritage Centre holds the following:

- Bundles of papers and reports for Tavistock District Coroner dating from 1935-1959.
- Coroners' records for North Devon dating from 1944. As far as we are aware, no files from before this date were preserved in North Devon.
- Coroners' records, Barnstaple, dating from 1959, deposited as part of Chanter, Burrington and Foster of Barnstaple, solicitors' collection (ref: 1142B add/7/1-12) and now held at Devon Heritage Centre..

Applications for access to information in coroners' records for North and West Devon less than 75 years old must now be made through H.M. Coroner for Exeter and Greater Devon. See the website listed above for contact details.

Torbay and South Devon District

We do not hold any coroners' files for Torbay dated earlier than 1949. As far as we are aware, no files from before this date were preserved in Torbay.

Applications for access to information in coroners' records for Torbay and South Devon less than 75 years old must be made through H.M. Coroner for Torbay and South Devon.

Email: h.m.coroner@torbay.gov.uk

Tel: 01803 380705

Devon Heritage Centre
Great Moor House
Bittern Road
Exeter
EX2 7NL

01392 888700

devonarchives@swheritage.org.uk

Website: www.swheritage.org.uk/devon-archives

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Registered office: Somerset Heritage Centre, Brunel Way, Norton Fitzwarren, Taunton, Somerset TA2 6SF

Company number: 09053532 Charity Number: 1158791 VAT Registration Number: 197221592