

Manors and Estates

What is a Manor?

A manor may be defined as a landed estate run as a single administrative unit containing sections of land held by various tenants, primarily in the Middle Ages. The term was also used at a later date to describe the residence of someone in the middle ranks of the landowning classes, a property of, say, the size of a large farmhouse today.

The Development of the Manor

From the Norman Conquest, the manor developed as an economic unit supplying its owner, usually a knight rewarded with land by the crown, with sufficient income to live on. By the early 12th century, this was commonly divided into two parts: the lord's 'demesne', under his immediate control, and tenanted land, whose residents provided the services needed to cultivate the 'demesne'. These tenants usually held their land freely, or as villeins owing the lord a mixture of services and money rent. In the 13th century the practice of 'commutation', the payment of money in lieu of services, had become widespread. By the 15th century, the lord of the manor commonly exercised rights of jurisdiction over his tenants in his private court, the 'court baron'. However, although demesne farming continued in some places until the early 20th century with continuing strong ties between lord and tenant, the growth of the influence of the parish in local government under the Tudors and the break-up of many manors eroded the system throughout the post-medieval period.

Important elements in the running of a manor were its officials. These might include a steward, the lord's chief administrator, and reeves and bailiffs, both responsible for farm management. Another major element was manorial custom: particular rights and practices which became part of the law of a local manor after a certain period of existence, often 20 years. These customs included widespread practices such as the payment of a 'heriot' or 'best beast', claimed by the lord on the death of a tenant, or 'tallage', a fine on a tenant's goods and chattels, and local rights such as the right to draw water from a certain well or to use a piece of land for common pasturage.

A Note on Landholding

Manorial tenants usually held their land in one of three ways: copyhold, whereby the land was held 'at the will of the lord according to the custom of the manor', recorded by copy of the entry in the court roll of the manorial court; freehold, by which the land was held freely for life; and leasehold, whereby the land was held for a fixed number of years only.

Suggested Further Reading:

- The Manor and Manorial Records, Nathaniel J Hone (190)
- Manorial Records, P D A Harvey, British Records Association, Archives and the User, no.5 (198)
- Manorial Records, Denis Stuart (199)
- The Evolution of the English Manorial System, J W Molyneux-Child (1987)
- Life on the English Manor: A Study of Peasant Conditions 1150-1400, H S Bennett (1987)
- My Ancestors were Manorial Tenants: How can I find out more about them?, Peter B Bark, Society of Genealogists (1990)

Manorial Records

Accounts:

The accounts of manorial officials are known as 'compoti' and mostly concern agricultural matters. The reeve, for example, was required to appear each Michaelmas before the lord's auditors, and accounts were put together from details of his own receipts and expenditure as farm manager.

Court Rolls:

From the 15th century the 'court baron' met each spring and autumn to judge disputes between the lord and his tenants, and matters varying from trespass and failure to render dues, to villeins' applications for their daughters to marry and the recording of events such as markets and fairs and transfers of property; prior to this, it had been held more frequently. The lord of the manor also held 'courts leet' which generally oversaw the so-called 'tithings' of tenants into groups collectively responsible for each other's actions and misdemeanours. Court rolls were written in Latin until 1733, and their heavily abbreviated nature can make interpretation difficult.

Estreat rolls:

These contain extracts from court rolls, of all money, including fines and heriots, owed to the lord by his tenants.

Inquisitions Post Mortem:

These record the possessions and rights of the lord of the manor following his death.

Custumals:

From the 11th to the 14th centuries these often recorded presentations of various manorial customs, but were basically records of rents and services owed by tenants. They were replaced from around the 13th century by 'extents'.

Terriers:

These were descriptions of the lands owned by the manor, arranged topographically.

Surveys or Extents:

These recorded the various landholdings of the manor, with their tenants, rents and, most importantly, a description of how the land was legally held (the conditions of its lease, for example). Surveys sometimes also gave brief descriptions and some were accompanied by a map of the area surveyed.

Rent Rolls and Rentals:

These were tabulated lists of tenants with the amount of their rent in cash or produce. During the Middle Ages, rentals and custumals contained virtually the same information, though later rentals contain primarily financial information including lists of rent arrears.

How to Locate Manorial Documents

Any manorial records held by the North Devon Record Office can be located by looking at the subject or places indexes (under 'manors') in the public searchroom or by searching the Discovery website at www.discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/.

The Manorial Documents Register

This register is currently held by the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU and was set up in 1926 to record the

nature and location of documents affected by the Law of Property Act 1922. This act both abolished copyhold tenure and reserved to all those so enfranchised a statutory right of access to the original court rolls of the manor concerned; these and related manorial documents are subject to statutory protection.

The Manorial Documents Register contains details of surviving manorial documents and a complementary index of parishes, arranged by county, showing the manors situated in each. It may be consulted in the Commission's searchroom, and there is also a searchable database for some areas of the country on the Commission's website at www.hmc.gov.uk.

What is an Estate?

Any owned land could be termed an 'estate', but the term is used most commonly for more substantial landholdings. These could be owned by families, churches, charities, borough corporations, and schools and colleges (amongst others). Estates, by their very definition, will include manors, and their records will therefore include several of those categories already described above.

Estate Records

The records of an estate will include surveys and rentals, terriers, accounts, and documents concerning litigation over land. Inventories, marriage settlements, wills and other probate records are likely to contain additional information on land or buildings as well as on the parties concerned in the purchase or leasing of property.

Sale Catalogues and Particulars:

These can take various forms, from single sheets to small 'volumes' containing photographs, plans and often extensive maps of the properties for sale. These, together with wills and inventories, can offer detailed information on the main houses and buildings of an estate as well as on land owned.

Title Deeds and Leases:

Broadly speaking, title deeds are legal documents conveying ownership of real estate (i.e. property) or personal estate (i.e. rights or privileges), whereas leases deal with the occupation of property. Both types of document name those parties conferring and receiving land etc., various other interested parties, the land or living conveyed with relevant details such as boundaries and accompanying rights, and the names of witnesses. The content of title deeds and leases may take many forms, varying in legal complexity; the following two publications are therefore essential reading:

- *Title Deeds*, A A Dibben, (The Historical Association, Helps for Students of History no.72 196)
- *Old Title Deeds*, N W Alcock (1986)

How to Locate Estate Records

Any estate records held by the North Devon Record Office can be located through the place index (under 'estates', 'manors', 'sale catalogues', or 'title deeds'; it is also worth trying the sections on 'charities', 'ecclesiastical', or 'local government' where the estate is run by a charity or trust, church, or local council). The subject index will also have relevant entries (see the North Devon Record Office's list of 'Subject Index: Headings', available in the public searchroom). It is also worth checking the North Devon Record Office's 'List of Collections',

which lists the office's major estate, parish, charity and local authority holdings, and the National Archive's Discovery website. Estate records relating to north Devon not held by the North Devon Record Office or Devon Heritage Centre, Great Moor House, Bittern Road, Sowton, Exeter may be located by consulting the National Register of Archives, at the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts at the National Archives, Kew.

North Devon Record Office estate holdings include various branches of the Chichester family (refs. 50/11, 1308, 1478, B459), Pine-Coffin of Portledge (ref. 63/4), Hogg of Fremington (ref. 1774), Incedon-Webber of Braunton (ref. 3704), Bideford Bridge Trust (refs. 4274, B68, BBT), Pilton Feoffees (ref. 1239), land agents Sumner (refs. 2239, B194) and solicitors Chanter Burrington and Foster (refs. 48/25, 1142), Crosse and Wyatt (ref. 2309) and Pitts Tucker (ref. B170). The records of the Rolle/Clinton and Fortescue estates, which had their main seats in north Devon, but which owned substantial amounts of property elsewhere, are held by the Devon Heritage Centre, Great Moor House, Bittern Road, Sowton, Exeter 01392 384253. Partial lists of the records of these estates are, however, available in the North Devon Record Office.

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Library and Record Office
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Barnstaple
EX31 1EL

Tel: 01271 318792

Email: northdevon@swheritage.org.uk

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

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