

Manors and their records

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Manorial documents 'contain a wealth of information about how people lived, worked, organised their communities and resolved disputes for over 700 years.'¹

Manors were established across much of England by the time of Domesday Book in 1086. The system was later imposed onto other parts of the British Isles which came under Norman rule. There was no set form to the manor which were imperfect and untidy units of administration. Small manors were greater in number than larger ones. In the former Danelaw, to the north and east of England, the correspondence between the manor and the township, parish, or village was rare.

A manor was a territorial unit that was held through feudal tenure by a landlord, not necessarily a noble, who was in turn a tenant of the Crown or of a mesne lord who held the land from the Crown. In the medieval period the manor was an economic unit formed of the demesne which the lord farmed himself, usually by paying wages, through labour services and boon work from other tenants. The rest of the land was farmed by the lord's tenants or given over to common pasture or waste. Villeins occupied their lands in return for agreed services to the lord while freemen paid a fixed and often nominal money rent. Individuals could commonly occupy lands through both forms of tenure.

¹ Mark Forrest with Helen Watt, *Manors and Manorial Documents After 1500: a guide for local and family historians in England and Wales* (2022), 7.



A selection of court rolls from the Arundell collection (reference AR/) dating from the 14th century. By kind permission of [Kresen Kernow](#).

Practice varied regionally and even neighbouring manors differed in their customs. Following the Black Death of the mid-1300s the system of labour services decayed rapidly and was replaced by tenure based on money rents. Villein tenure evolved first into copyhold and then leasehold tenure. Manors became less important as economic units during the early modern period but retained their legal functions.

Lords of the manor had the right to hold a court for their tenants. The courts were presided over by the lord's steward. They dealt with the lord's financial interests in the manor, appointed officers such as the constable, judged pleas brought by individuals and laid pains or fixed penalties for petty offences. Decisions were imposed not by the lord or his steward but by the jury who were selected from the chief tenants of the manor. Whether or not freeholders appeared was subject to local practice.

Early manorial courts used oral procedures. Though some written forms survive from around 1200, records of manorial courts did not start until the mid-thirteenth century as landlords copied the practice of the king's courts. The business of the manor was recorded in court rolls and books which were the formal records of the court. The range of activities recorded in medieval court rolls is wide and so much of the adult population was noted, making them useful for genealogical research. Women, servants and the poor are less likely to be recorded, however.

Manorial records include court rolls but may also include a wealth of related material including rentals, surveys, maps, lists of residents, accounts, customals, perambulations of boundaries and notes compiled by the steward. These sources show petty crime, landholding, topography, and genealogy, enabling the historian to research rich pictures of people and communities.

While manorial records are used extensively by medieval historians most surviving documents are from after the Reformation. However, by the early modern period the power of many manorial courts had declined, and some had disappeared. The manor continued to be a part of everyday life into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mainly supervising remaining common lands.

Except for the Commonwealth period of 1650-59 court records were normally written in Latin up to 1733. Many supporting documents including steward's papers, surveys, rent rolls, rentals, presentments, perambulations, accounts, and customals were written in English from the beginning of the sixteenth century. Welsh was rarely used.

Manorial Documents Register

The [Manorial Documents Register \(MDR\)](#) is the official index to English and Welsh manorial records. It provides brief descriptions of documents and their locations in public and private hands.

Manorial documents recorded in the MDR are defined by the [Manorial Documents Rules](#) as 'court rolls, surveys, maps, terriers, documents and books of every description relating to the boundaries, franchises, wastes, customs or courts of a manor'. Title deeds are not included in the MDR.

Read more about [manorial documents](#) and the legislation that explains why we maintain the MDR on behalf of the Master of the Rolls.

We have now [completed our programme](#) to update the MDR and make it available online. You can search the register using the form below, or browse our [alphabetical list of manors](#).

Find out how to [update the MDR](#) or [contact us](#) with your enquiry.

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Search by Manor

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[Manorial Documents Register \(nationalarchives.gov.uk\)](https://nationalarchives.gov.uk)

Manorial documents are some of the most common records held in English and Welsh archives. As with the varied practice of manors, no two sets of manorial records are the same. Some manors have long runs of documents from the thirteenth century to the twentieth though others, especially smaller manors, have been lost or destroyed. Surviving manor court rolls are normally in local record offices or in national collections. You can find which documents exist and where they are held through [Manorial Documents Register \(nationalarchives.gov.uk\)](https://nationalarchives.gov.uk), an online catalogue of the extant manorial records in public and private archives in England and Wales.

References and Resources:

Information for this post was taken from the excellent David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 118, 296 and Mark Forrest with Helen Watt, *Manors and Manorial Documents After 1500: a guide for local and family historians in England and Wales* (2022), 7-8.

There is brilliant site to help researchers in Cumbria find and use manorial documents which contains generally useful information including images of different types of manorial documents: [Cumbrian Manorial Records - Homepage \(lancaster.ac.uk\)](https://lancaster.ac.uk)

Books:

P. D. A. Harvey, *Manorial Records* (1984)

Denis Stuart, *Manorial Records: An Introduction of their Transcription and Translation* (1992)

Mary Ellis, *Using Manorial Records* (1994)

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M. Bailey, *The English Manor c.1200-c.1500* (2002)

Helen Watt, *Welsh Manors and their records* (2000)