

Chancery Records

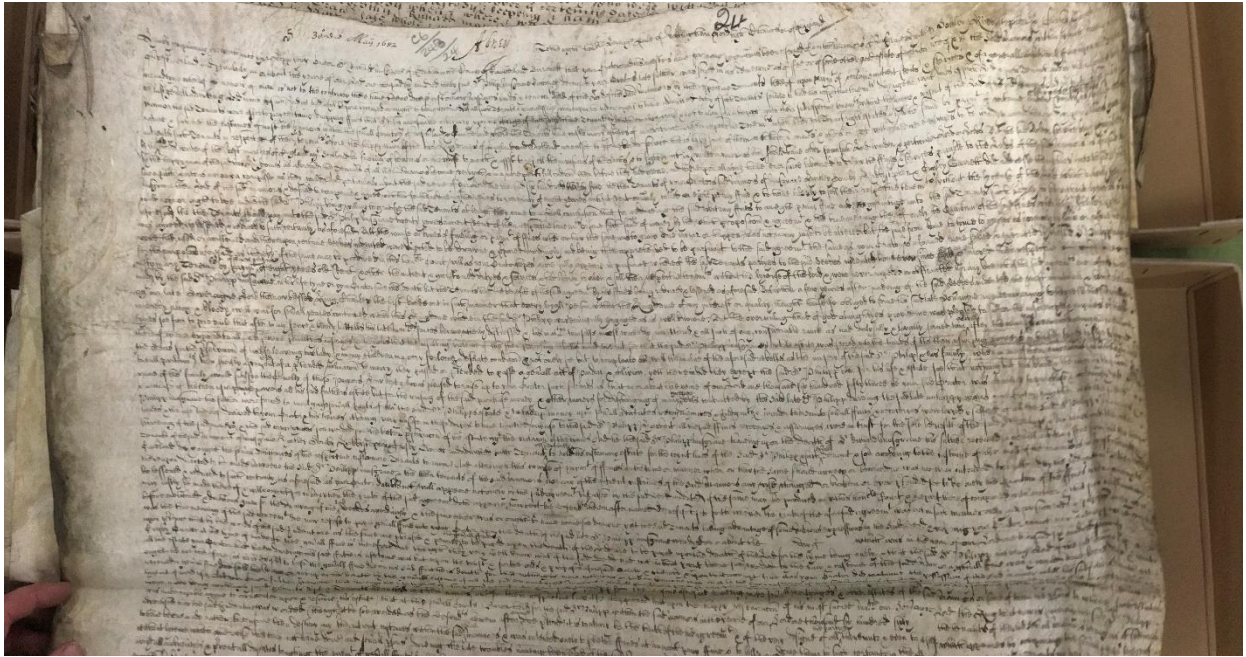
Joe Saunders

In England and Wales, the records of the Court of Chancery are incredibly useful for historians interested in all manner of subjects in England. From the thirteenth century onwards, Chancery provided the record-keeping function for the king's council (and later Parliament). Chancery records are, essentially, the records of civil cases and lawsuits brought by people against each other. They were distinct from the criminal courts, as there was no jury and no cross-examination even after the latter was introduced (but not properly used) in other courts in the eighteenth century.

Many Chancery records have survived. There are an estimated ten miles of documents in The National Archives at Kew, so the chances of finding something relevant to your area of research are reasonable.

Chancery records are incredibly detailed. They often contain information about several generations of a family and will always distinguish between different people of the same name. They can list long-since lost property deeds, marriage settlements, and wills. Accounts, lists of lands and values, as well as inventories of personal goods, are often included as evidence. The format of the documents themselves can help in establishing or confirming family details and personal histories, often with the complainant establishing the case grievance by going back through time. The documents reveal many details about land ownership, debts, merchants, and monetary values. Detailed inventories reveal fascinating glimpses into how people lived, the furniture they owned, the clothes they wore, and the food that they ate.

The documents do not just record the disputes of the wealthy gentry; collected within them are the personal details and testimonies of people from all positions in society, lending a valuable voice to people who were often excluded from documents of the period or the ability and means to tell their own story.



Musgrave v Bell [TNA, C 6/243/24, 1682]. Image copyright of The National Archives. Not to be reproduced without permission.

These records have been thankfully well-catalogued and are all held centrally. To conduct a search for Chancery records relevant to your place of study use The National Archives [Discovery](#) page with the 'Advanced search' function. Put 'C' in the reference box.

Catalogue description	
Short title: Musgrave v Bell. Plaintiffs: Sir Richard Musgrave baronet. Defendants: Jane...	
Reference:	C 6/243/24
Description:	Short title: Musgrave v Bell. Plaintiffs: Sir Richard Musgrave baronet. Defendants: Jane Bell, Edward Simson, Richard Granger, William Parkin, Thomas Atkinson, Thomas Denton and others. Subject: manor of Crosby Garrett, Westmorland. Document type: bill, answer.
Date:	1682
Held by:	The National Archives, Kew
Legal status:	Public Record(s)
Closure status:	Open Document, Open Description
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A catalogue description on [Discovery](#) for C 6/243/24 a Chancery case between Musgrave v Bell from a dispute over the manor of Crosby Garrett.

Despite their usefulness, however, these documents can also be difficult to grapple with. The nature of the cases – consisting, essentially, of just an accusation, the defendant's response, and perhaps a few periphery documents – means it may be difficult to draw out

an accurate story or confirm the details in any one person's testimony. Caution is advised when using these records for evidence or to confirm claims. Some palaeographical skills are required to decipher and read documents, although Chancery records tend to be more legible and in better condition than other documents of the period. The documents themselves may also be cumbersome, dirty, and heavy to handle, so assistance may be required in the retrieval and handling of documents. For many places, records are likely to survive for the sixteenth century onwards, though their nature of recording past generations makes them useful for research beyond the date of the case.

References and Resources:

Read this guide to further records of interest which also includes some of use in the early modern period see this [Medieval and early modern research guide](#) by The National Archives.

Susan Moore, *Tracing Your Ancestors Through the Equity Courts: A Guide for Family and Local Historians* (2017).

Nat Alcock, *Tracing History Through Title Deeds: A Guide for Family and Local Historians* (2017).