



## Understanding Manorial Records

The manorial system was established throughout England by the time of Domesday Book. It developed from a fusion of the Saxon system of agricultural estates and a feudal system of military tenures (introduced to England by the Normans) by which each man owed faith (or fealty) and military service to his lord.

There were between 25,000 and 65,000 manors in England (compared to about 12,000 parishes). Manors varied greatly in size. A parish might include one, two or more manors, but some manors extended over more than one parish. A manor might consist of little more than a farm with some tenants' cottages, but it might be a substantial estate that included one or more villages and hamlets, extensive farmland, common land and forests.

The Lord of the manor appointed a steward as his agent to manage one or more of his manors and preside over his manorial courts, and the responsibility for running the manor was divided between officials known as the steward (or seneschal), bailiff, reeve, hayward and constable. The bailiff assisted the steward in managing the estate and ensuring that tenants undertook their labour obligations and paid their rents, the reeve arranged the tenants' duties for the lord, summoned tenants to court and collected the fines. The hayward supervised the repair of the manor's fences and looked after any common stock of animals and the constable maintained the peace, expelled vagrants from the manor and ensured that vermin, such as crows, were controlled.

The rights and obligations of tenants were often set out in documents such as the **manorial court rolls** and tenants could not simply transfer their land to their heirs or to third parties, since any transactions relating to customary land were subject to the lord's consent, dealt with by a surrender or admission in the manorial court. If a tenant died, his death might be recorded in the court rolls. New tenants (whether heirs or third parties) were given a copy of the court roll entry to prove their title to the land. The rolls usually note the relationship (if any) between the old and new tenant and perhaps their ages. Surviving court rolls may therefore note a number of generations of a family holding a property, whether a large farm, a cottage or a small plot of land.

Finally, the Domesday Book is the oldest survey of land, owners and occupiers in Britain, and most of the survey deals with the use and value of land. It's in Latin and you are most unlikely to trace your ancestry to persons named unless you find a link with nobility.

### Citation:

Herber, Mark. 2005. *Ancestral Trails: The Complete Guide to British Genealogy and Family History*. 2nd ed. Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd., in association with the Society of Genealogists, London