



Some tips on reading Manorial documents

The first thing that becomes apparent in the court rolls and early court books is that they are written in Latin (not classical Latin). This in itself might deter many family history researchers and no doubt is the principal reason why this source has been so neglected in the past. However, during the Commonwealth period 1649-1660 and after 1733, these records were written in English and it is useful as a first step to spend some time examining these periods to come acquainted with the fairly standard phraseology used. The style and format of the English is identical to that of the Latin and very quickly, you will be able to determine just where the important parts of the text lie and which parts of legal jargon can be ignored.

The heading for each court roll gives the name of the Lord of the Manor, the type of Court and the date of the hearing. The words **Essoins**, or **Default of Tenants** usually appear here as a marginal entry. Then comes the list of jurymen known as the **Homage**, usually drawn from local farmers duly sworn in to act as adjudicators over the business of the day. A list of complaints follow, criminal offences for the Court Leet and common law offences for the Court Baron, the latter recording such punishments as the pillory, the stocks or fines. These offences which to us would seem trivial can be most informative to the family historian.

Finally, comes the important business of the court, the record of changes in occupation of land. For the genealogist, it is this part that becomes most rewarding. In an extreme example, if a family held a particular piece of land, no matter how small, over several centuries, and the manorial records are extant, then it should be possible to find enough information to construct a pedigree provable beyond doubt.

When a tenant died, his death was reported to the next court sitting. Up to three **proclamations** were then made at three successive sittings, each asking for the heir to come forward to take up the inheritance. If none came, the property reverted to the Lord. Sometimes, the heir would learn of his inheritance much later in which event the Lord would normally re-grant the property. The majority passed property to the eldest son only – the law of primogeniture, but other customs such as **gavel kind**, shared the property equally. **Borough English**, found more frequently in eastern parts of the country, gave property to the youngest son. Imagine the turmoil in large families never knowing whether you need to choose a career or whether you will remain the youngest son and heir to the family land.

Records of changes in land occupation and ownership were not limited to heirs taking up their bequests. A simple sale of land from A to B will be recorded as a **Surrender** from A and an Admission to the land by B. Sometimes to raise money, or for reasons of convenience, copyholders mortgaged their property. Court records show this transaction as a **Conditional Surrender** and when the mortgage was re-paid, the mortgagor had to **acknowledge satisfaction** of the debt. At times, the mortgagee was unable to meet the deadline agreed and the mortgagor then applied to the Lord for himself to be admitted to the property as the new owner.

When a new tenant applied to the court to be admitted, the court steward had to satisfy himself that the applicant had good title. The steward would then refer to the entry in the court record to show his entitlement and would often make a marginal note against that entry to show the name of the new heir and date of admission for ease of future reference.

By now you should begin to see that only certain parts of the Latin text need concern you in your quest for information. At one end of the later court books, but invariably never in the court rolls, there should be an index of admissions to property, usually in date of admission order. These should be checked and page references noted. Most books and rolls do have marginal entries against the text where the record of admission of the new tenant is recorded. In the absence of an index this can save many wasteful hours. The use of Latin may prove a stumbling block at first but should not be regarded as an insurmountable barrier. Perhaps some of the greatest difficulties are caused by the use of abbreviations.

The first heading is a simple one, merely identifying whether the proceedings were for the court leet (**Curia Leta**) or for the court baron (**Curia Baron**) both usually abbreviated to **Cur.Leta** or **Cur.Baron**. Remember that in later court books you are unlikely to find entries for the court leet as by this time, the lord's judicial function had become almost meaningless. The lists of presentments that followed may be prefaced by **PRESENTATUM EST QUOD** (It is presented that) or **COMPERTUM EST QUOD** (It is found that), both usually abbreviated to **PRES. EST Qd** and **COMP EST Qd** or simply by the preface **ITEM**. At times the presentments will refer initially to the happenings of an earlier court and then the first words will be **CUM AD CUR** (Whereas at a court...) shortly after this, the first name should appear indicating who has done what. Where a tenant has died it is presented that at a previous court he surrendered (**SURSUMREDDIT** – abbreviated to **S'redd**) the property. The phraseology used always refers to the surrender being in the hands of the lord (**IN MANUM DOMINI – Man Dni**), by the hands of (**PER MANUM – Per man**) the steward, to the use of (**AD OPUS**) the last will and testament (**ULTIME VOLUNTATIS-Ult Vol**) of the said (**Sd**) deceased date... of which the terms are as follows (**Viz:**). Often the section mentioning AD OPUS is given in bold because stewards knew they would need to refer quickly to entries in the future.

The recital of the relevant extract of the will follows, always in English, and so easy to identify. The applicant then begs the favour of the lord to be admitted to the property which is then identified, piece by piece by reference to the names of adjoining landowners. The deceased often acquired property from more than one source and on more than one occasion so the list of such holdings can often take up several pages of text. The important section to discover is the end of this listing for at that point, the source and date of acquisition of the property will usually be given. These checkpoints are usually prefaced with the words **QUE PREMISSA** (which premises) but the use of so many variant abbreviations for these words makes it difficult to spot the entry. QUE may be written in full or simply as 'Q'. Premissa is always abbreviated and may consist of a number of letters or flourishes following the 'p' for example **Q'P'sa**.

Then follows a description of how the deceased acquired the property, usually 'taking up to himself and his heirs' (**SIBI ET HERES**) either on the death of (**POST MORTEM**) someone else, or if he purchased the property, by the surrender (**EX SURSEMREDDIT**) of the named vendor. The date when all this happened should then be given but unfortunately this is not always done, particularly in the earlier text, but where it is, then the family historian will derive his or her greatest satisfaction having been provided with the clue to search for the next generation.

With the case of a straightforward sale and purchase of land, the purchasers name is sometimes found in the earlier part of the text or after the full description of the lands being sold. The key words to look for here are again the **AD OPUS** (to the use of) often written in bold letters for ease of finding, followed by the name of the purchaser.

Those of you used to reading older wills may have come across the term **NEPOS** which may be interpreted as nephew or grandson. This is just as likely to be a problem in the will extracts found in the manorial records, even though the extract will be in English. When in Latin this may be the only written interpretation of the deceased's intentions and researchers must use other sources to determine the correct relationship.

By the nineteenth century, the manorial land was held by a mere handful of tenants, much of the original land having been gradually enfranchised. Tenants were actually invited to enfranchise their land on payment of the necessary fees to the lord of the manor.

At first glance, the older the document, the more difficult the Latin text seems to be decipherable. In reality, there are few variations in presentation and format throughout the centuries, with a little patience, perseverance, and practice, the beginner will soon become quite adept enough to determine the most salient points of any court extract.

More help in understanding manorial documents with an excellent glossary, is the web site Cumbrian Manorial Records <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/manorialrecords/>

For the serious researcher of family history in manorial documents, you might like to consider these two excellent books which may be available at the library however, they are available to purchase from Amazon.co.uk

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Palgrave-Moore, Patrick. 1985. *How to Locate and Use Manorial Records*. Norwich: Elvery Dowers Publications

Gooder, Eileen A. 1978. 2nd edition. *Latin for Local History, An introduction*. Harlow, Essex: Longman Group UK Ltd