

Manor Court Records

The Manor Court was the lowest level of court, held at local level and usually presided over by the Lord of the Manor's steward. There were normally two types of court. The View of Frankpledge with Court Leet and the Court Baron. The former met twice a year, usually at Easter and Michaelmas (25th September). Originally its purpose was for the tithingmen, responsible for ten families, to report upon the keeping of the peace and any infractions of public order. The Court Leet dealt with such infractions and some of those usually dealt with by the Royal Courts, but its use declined and later became subsumed by the Court Baron. This court normally met every three weeks or every month. It dealt with the customs and internal business of the manor, especially regarding the transference and inheritance of land.

After the Norman Conquest the manor of Wootton and Boreshill was administered by Abingdon Abbey and its monks until the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in 1538/9. The manor then passed into the hands of the Hyde family, in particular Richard and his wife Elizabeth, whose names appear on the extant Court Rolls.

These records date from the reign of Elizabeth 1st, one from 1577 and then others from 1587 to 1599. Significant historical events during the period include the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1587, the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the performance and publication of plays by William Shakespeare.

The Richards who appear on the Rolls are Simon, who died in 1591, his widow Amy and his son Thomas. Other men (or their widows), the farmers of Wootton, appear consistently as tenants or jury members throughout the period, including the names of Bowell, Broughton, Mayo and Orpwood who are also mentioned in the various Richards' wills. By this time those who worked the land were granted possession by the lord for a lease or rent or by sale. The old Feudal System, whereby a serf or worker rendered services or produce to the lord in return for a strip of arable land having been largely replaced, not least by the drastic reduction in population brought about by the Black Death plague in the fourteenth century. It became more economical for the lord to obtain revenue by leasing the available land. In this way the cultivators of the land acquired more fields to add to their holdings. Originally there would have been multiple strips and fields in the manor, each with identifiable names. Some of those names are retained on these Rolls. Some remain by the time of the enclosures of 1799, but generally over 200 years they have been incorporated into larger pieces, often named after tenants or freeholders.

The Rolls give an insight into the agricultural life of the manor and its management. Ditches, hedges and gates had to be maintained; animals had to be controlled; boundaries had to be kept; disputes had to be settled. Even the yeoman stalwarts of the manor were occasionally at fault : widow Amy Richards on one occasion. Wootton also had its own delinquent : Osmund Adkins attracted fines for fighting, throwing waste in the stream and ignoring the rules for grazing animals.

The Court Roll of 1599 is a good example of the format and proceedings of the court.

The preamble names the court, the lord and his wife, his steward and the date of the court. The proceedings were transcribed in Latin in ink onto a roll of parchment by a scribe, who is not named, but would be an educated man.

Tenants and residents would be required to attend the View of Frankpledge.

If any suits or appeals were to be brought, they are named. Here, none.

Next were the essoins or apologies for absence, brought by a proxy. Again, none.

The jury to decide cases were named and sworn. We see that on this day 13 residents did not attend and were therefore fined.

John Church and Osmund Adkins had obviously fallen out and come to blows and were both fined.

After election of the titheingman, the business passed to the Court Baron.

The customary tenants, those who owned or leased land were named and the Homage (or jury) were selected and sworn.

The Court then dealt with business regarding management of the manor and land.

Richard Badcock had failed to attend a previous meeting of the Homage and was fined.

Thomas Woodliffe had not cleared his ditch; Thomas Mayo likewise.

Then orders of the court which would attract fines if not complied with. A gateway had to be maintained; the Homage would meet to beat the bounds and maintain the parish boundary; mares with colts would no longer be allowed to graze where crops were growing on common land.

Richard Badcock and John Cockins both received land from the lord. (Their possession would be recorded, a copy given to them and they thus became copyholders) , the land to be theirs for life after payment of the entry fine and subject to a yearly or monthly rent.

Finally the afferors or witnesses signed and the steward confirmed the proceedings.

The scribe used by manorial courts may have been used by several courts in one area. By the 16th century the records were written in "Secretary" hand, a form of script which developed from the earlier "Court" hand and which could be written more speedily than the formal scripts of charters and government. Although the proceedings were conducted in English, the record was written in Latin until 1733. The language was often abbreviated and made use of many set phrases. Occasionally, whenever a name, local reference or idiomatic term was required for clarification, the scribe would write *anglice* and insert the word(s) in English.