

Court rolls (c1200-1954)

What are they?

Court rolls are the records of those courts which provided justice at the local level and should not be confused with the records of the central law courts at Westminster.

Court rolls record the proceedings of public, franchise, manorial and other local courts. The principal courts were the **court baron** and **court leet**.

The **court baron** was the court of the chief tenants of the manor. It was responsible for the internal regulation of the local affairs within the manor.

The court was attended by all those free tenants whose attendance at court was a condition of their tenure, and by customary tenants. Customary tenants, the most significant of which were **copyholders**, held land by an agreement made at the manor court which was entered on its roll, a 'copy' of which was regarded as proof of title.

A **court leet** exercised the peace-keeping jurisdiction of the sheriff's twice-yearly tour of the hundred courts.

What information do they provide?

They contain a wealth of information, often about the lowest members of the social hierarchy, and concerning local issues, including:

- cases of transferring property rights, notably copyhold tenure
- occupation of land at a given time
- the enforcement of law and order, including cases of minor disputes and debts, theft or petty assault
- the regulation of agricultural affairs such as the allocation of strips of land
- the enforcement of bye-laws about common land, ditches and crops
- the enforcement of labour services
- the election of local officials
- the obstruction of highways and watercourses
- the name of the lord of the manor

The variety of business conducted in manor courts declined from the 18th century as the courts became increasingly concerned with the surrender of and admittance to copyhold land. Land was continually being converted into leasehold which reduced the amount of copyhold land.