

GUIDE TO MANORIAL SURVEYS

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MANORIAL SURVEYS

The large parish of Halberton contained many historic manors which over time were owned by several different landowners. Ownership obliged the landlord to hold local courts in order to dispense the business of the manor and this, together with day to day administration, generated much manorial documentation which often survives today in local record offices.

Manors themselves were freehold property which could be bought, sold, inherited, mortgaged and settled on marriage, all of which results in documentation. Smaller holdings, however, within the manor were held direct from the landlord by **copyhold** tenure, that is a form of tenancy whereby the official record is written up in the manorial court roll or book. For the tenant the steward of the manor wrote out an official copy of the entry which was kept as proof of title. This is where the term 'copyhold' comes from.

Most copyhold land could also be bought and sold, inherited, mortgaged and settled like freehold property. Indeed many landholdings were held by members of the same family for generations. The difference was that every transaction had to go through the Lord of the Manor and such changes were recorded in the manor court roll or book. The landlord had the right to take fees from new tenants, rents and to receive a '**heriot**' or payment on the death of a tenant. This heriot comprised either a sum of money or the 'best beast' or best possession. Copyhold declined in use over the nineteenth century, particularly as the land was converted to freehold, and was finally abolished in 1922.

A popular form of West Country copyhold was the '**three life lease**' for 99 years or until the death of the last of three named people (all living when the lease was granted). This encouraged a more secure tenure for the tenant and his immediate family which could later be extended. With 'three life leases' it was often possible to 'add one life to two' to extend the period. This lease started on the death of a 'life' and so brought the number of people on whom the tenancy depended back to three. Any such alterations were recorded in the court rolls as mentioned above.

Manorial surveys were compiled as part of the ongoing administration of the estate. Usually they detail tenancies including holdings and rentals but sometimes were also used as working documents as evidenced by the crossings out and substitution of names.

Bibliography:

N. W. Alcock, Old Title Deeds, a guide for local and family historians (Phillimore, Chichester, 1986)

Manorial Records, Devon Archives & Local Studies Service Information Leaflet, South West Heritage Trust, available from Devon Heritage Centre (DHC)

www.essexrecordofficeblog.co.uk/what-is-a-manor-and-what-are-manorial-records

University of Nottingham – excellent site for research students giving detailed information about transcribing old deeds with examples:

<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/manuscriptsandspecialcollections/researchguidance/manorial/supporting.aspx>