

Beyond the mists of time: sources for British medieval and early modern genealogy

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Overview

This presentation will explore the main sources that can help you trace your British ancestors prior to the eighteenth century, as well as explain the key challenges you'll face along the way. The majority of the session will focus on English material, though reference will be made to Wales and, to a lesser extent, Scotland and Ireland.

Introduction: Practical Information

This introductory session will outline:

- The best way to get started
- Language: interpreting Latin and Anglo-Norman French
- Palaeography: what does it say?
C. Trice Martin, *The Record Interpreter*
www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography/
<http://paleo.anglo-norman.org/>
- Names: who is it exactly?
- Geography: understanding medieval place names
- When is it? Dates and the medieval calendar
C. R. Cheney, *Handbook of Dates*

Section 1: Feudalism, landholding and social hierarchy

This section will provide an overview of the feudal system, manorial court administration and records of estates and landholding, within the framework of English social hierarchy; along with the relevant records that survive in archives.

Many manorial records can be located via <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/mdr/>

Section 2: Government and local administration

The section will look at administrative records generated by the Crown and central government, in particular name-rich documents produced by the main departments of state – the Chancery and Exchequer – as well as the royal Council and Parliament.

Local administration is covered in this section, such as the work of royal officials in the counties who presided over inquisitions and enquiries, management of Crown and other lands, and ensuring law and order was maintained.

Section 3: Law and justice

This section provides an overview of justice and the legal system from the twelfth century onwards, explaining the various jurisdictions – Crown and forest, borough and manorial, and ecclesiastical – and the difference between civil and criminal cases according to either common law process, or equity cases (a rich source of information for genealogists given they often related to disputed inheritance). The records generated by the key law courts – Kings Bench, Common Pleas, Old Bailey for criminal and common law civil cases; Chancery, Exchequer, Requests, Star Chamber for equity suits – will also be examined.

Section 4: Other lines of research

There are a myriad of other sources that can be explored, depending on everyone's family history. A quick summary of some of the key types is provided here, covering military records, trades and occupations (for example guilds), universities and schools, plus material relating to migrant communities who settled in England.

Conclusion

A summary of the key techniques, and the potential need to travel to view non-digital material deposited in local archives back in England.