

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2009

Berkshire Manorial Records

Sarah Charlton gave an illustrated presentation on Berkshire Manorial Records for their October meeting. Sarah is an archivist at the Buckinghamshire Record Office in Aylesbury, and was the project officer responsible for indexing all the manorial records for both Berkshire and Buckinghamshire.

The process to identify the manorial records for the two counties had taken from 2006 - 2008. Sarah had researched all 145 of the ancient parishes in the old Berkshire (as it was before 1974). In this area, 347 manors were identified.

Sarah explained that the fact that a property had the name 'Manor' did not necessarily mean it was one. Antiquarian histories, had frequently concentrated on manorial history, but their significance was often not understood or under used. The earliest references to manors is in the Domesday Survey of 1086, where the 'Kings Tenants in Chief' are listed. The Domesday Survey is not arranged by parish, but by manor, as what was important was who exercised 'rights over people' - ie who was the Lord to whom the people had to answer or pay their dues. Over the years, a forum was developed where these rights could be discussed, and these evolved into the manor courts. The rights of the peasants and tenants would be represented by a jury, and the lord of the manor by a steward or reeve. The manor court would sort out disputes - such as the repair needed to a fence, or the result of a riot in the alehouse. They would also levy fines - such as heriot (a kind of death duty), merchet (on the marriage of a daughter), or a fine levied on being allowed to take over a piece of land. In return, the lord of the manor had to keep to 'the custom of the manor', and levy fines within limits agreed by the manor court. The court also appointed local officials, such as the hayward, the ale taster and the constable. The court kept a record of the proceedings, and these 'court rolls' - listing the people present and the business of the court form the core of the manorial records. There are also 'account rolls', which list the rents paid by tenants, and often have lists of animals on the back. Other documents to be found include estate maps, lists of residents, customals (a statement of the customs of the manor, services to be provided by both free and unfree tenants, and the obligations of the lord. When land changed ownership, A copy of an entry in the court roll was, in effect, the title deed for the land.

This holding of a manor court was what was taken to define what was a manor as such, rather than in name only. (It being at one time considered 'fashionable' to call a larger house or estate a manor). Of the 347 manors identified in Berkshire, records were found to survive for 265 (although strangely, for none of the manors that had previously belonged to the Abbey at Abingdon). Of those records, almost a half are now at the Berkshire Record Office, the remainder being either at The National Archive, or in other public repositories, or in private ownership (such as many of the Oxford colleges, which had owned many manors from their inception in the 1300s.

Sarah then showed us how to find where these records were to be found, using the village of Wargrave as her example. Although in the Victoria County History, Wargrave is said to have 5 manors, only 2 held courts - Wargrave and Culham. There were 39 entries for Wargrave, which had been owned by the Bishops of Winchester until the middle 1500s, when it passed to the Neville family. Mary Tudor took it back into the ownership of the Crown, and then it reverted to the Nevilles. There is a large collection of records that survive - as the manor court for Wargrave survived until 1891, detailing the lives or the villagers over several centuries. Most of these are to be found at the Berkshire Record Office, but many early documents are in Hampshire, as a result of the Bishops of Winchester's time as lord of the manor. The Bishops had been one of the largest landlords in the country, and had divided their lands up into bailiwicks for administrative purposes. Wargrave was the 'head point' for the bailiwick which comprised

the manors of Billingbear, Waltham St Lawrence and Warfield, and Ivinghoe and West Wycombe (both in Bucks). Amongst the earliest documents is a survey, at The National Archive, made in 1288, and a register of customs and rents, from about 1200, now at the British Library. Rather fewer records survive for the manor of Culham, and these are all now at the Berkshire Record Office. The earliest lists the rents paid by tenants in 1375.

Sarah showed us how to search the Manorial Documents Register data - at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/mdr/?WT.lp=sa-33619>, and also indicated useful aids to transcribing and translating the documents that survive from the records of the manor courts.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday November 10th, when Bill Bookless will talk about aspects of the history of Wargrave Scouts, this year celebrating its centenary, then on Tuesday, December 8th the Society will have its Christmas Party, and on Tuesday January 12th 2010, Ted Fox will recount some of his memories as My Life as a Countryman.