

THE CREATION, USE AND WIDER SIGNIFICANCE OF CHESHAM'S MANORIAL RECORDS

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Within the records of Chesham's fourteenth-century manor courts there are certain entries that, incidentally, reveal something of how the records themselves were prepared and then used. This information is complemented and expanded by additions made subsequently in the form of text and symbols, and which concern matters varying from how the blank membranes were distributed to why the records were searched at a later date. The study presented here reveals the life cycle of the records and, in doing so, shows that they formed part of the fourteenth century's general acceptance of written records as a replacement for, and improvement on, human memory. The paper also describes and discusses the origin of the symbols that were used to mark the records.

INTRODUCTION

Browsing through Chesham's fourteenth-century manor court records, the extent to which the scribes' accounts of the court proceedings are accompanied by contributions from other hands is striking. It is not uncommon to find that as many as five other hands have made their mark on a single court record: occasionally even more have contributed. The additions may be preparatory, part of the court proceedings or subsequent additions. They may be in an accomplished hand or an unpracticed one. They may be formal in style, simple repetitions of something already written by the scribe, or in the form of a symbol. The overall consequence is that many of the records carry with them quite detailed evidence of their preparation, creation and usage.

In revealing the ways in which the records were used, the additions also show how the use of written records changed the way the court operated. Old practices, based on memory, were quite rapidly replaced by new ones which made use of the written documents. These changes not only affected the fundamental issue of the dispensation of justice, but also caused changes within wider society.

As well as annotations, symbols were added to the records. The meaning of the symbols is not always obvious. It turns out, though, that they were drawn from other contexts where they

were widely used, and that those contexts were religious. Now, the court records may be seen as instruments of the law, of finance and even of prestige, but not of religion, in that religious matters did not fall within the remit of the court. All the same, it is reassuring to find in them some allusion to religion, if only as a reminder of its importance in the Middle Ages.

Manorial records, and in particular a run of manor court records, provide the best source for studying matters concerning the lower levels of rural society in the Middle Ages (Maitland 1888, xi–xv). The practice of reading such records for this purpose as texts rather than simply as records of court proceedings is long established: Maitland's Selden Society volume includes discussion of the practice (Maitland 1888, xi–lxxiii). More recent examples of work of this kind include that of Razi and Smith (1996), Bonfield and Poos (1997) and Tompkins (2006b). The work of Tompkins is particularly interesting here. It makes a case that fifteenth-century peasants, contrary to received opinion, made use of lawyers when they bought or sold land, an assertion that could also be examined by a close reading of the Chesham records. It should be noticed, though, that Tompkins does not claim to prove his assertion, and that, as he notes, the evidence is 'not direct' but 'must surely point in that direction', namely, in the direction of the truth of his assertion (Tomp-

TABLE 1 Chesham court records.

<i>Dates of courts</i>	<i>BAS code</i>
6 March 1309	D/BASM 18/5
31 August 1311	D/BASM 18/6
13 April 1314	D/BASM 18/7
14 October 1314	D/BASM 18/7
13 April 1325	D/BASM 18/12
1 October 1326	D/BASM 18/14
20 February 1327	D/BASM 18/14
16 March 1327	D/BASM 18/15
10 September 1327	D/BASM 18/16
22 September 1334	D/BASM 18/25
18 March 1335	D/BASM 18/25
17 December 1334	D/BASM 18/27
August 1335	D/BASM 18/29
22 November 1337	D/BASM 18/31
27 June 1338	D/BASM 18/34
17 October 1345	D/BASM 18/39
4 December 1361	D/BASM 18/53
23 February 1372	D/BASM 18/70a
7 June 1386	D/BASM 18/88
8 June, 1389	D/BASM 18/92

kins 2006b, 80). This is, inevitably, the nature of discussion based on close reading of texts. It does, indeed, characterise the discussions presented in this paper.

The court records that provide the primary sources for this work are listed in Table 1. In the main text of this article each court is referred to by its date: the table provides the identifying codes for the membranes on which the respective courts were recorded. The membranes are all held at the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies.

The purposes of this paper, then, are to draw out the way in which these court records carry the history of their own creation and use, and to describe some of the processes involved, as well as to explore some of the social consequences that followed as the court learnt to use its written records to advantage.

BEFORE THE COURT

Chesham's lord of the manor was a magnate lord, the Earl of Oxford, who held a number of manors scattered across Essex, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Buckinghamshire. Maitland (1888, lxxii) mentions the earl as an example of the great social distance that could exist between a lord and his tenants.

Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the administration of the manors varied with the incumbent lord of the manor, essentially in response to the increasing number of manors that he held. This is reflected in the increasing size of the earl's household, which grew steadily from approximately 45 in the 1290s to 120 in the 1480s (Mertes 1988, 35 and 141). In the early years, when the number of manors was small, stewards



FIGURE 1 The top of the obverse of the membrane bearing the court record of 14 October, 1314

travelled to the manors to check their operation and collect the money they owed, while in later years the stewards travelled to earl's home base at Hedingham, in Essex, to account for their manors and to hand over what they owed. Accordingly, the stewards, who were initially drawn from the earl's household, came to be drawn from each manor's local community. A *compotus* roll of 1422–1423 (Essex Record Office, D/DPR/138) documents the receipts brought from the various manors, and also lists the expenses incurred by their bearers (Greatorex 2010, 55–56). The court records contain glimpses of the operation of the centralised administration that supported the Earl of Oxford's manor courts.

Chesham's manor court records were written on large sheets of thick parchment, which were typically around 20 centimetres wide and 40 centimetres long. The width varied little, and the length a good deal. Even so, it was not uncommon for an extra piece to be sewn to one end to allow the court proceedings to be recorded in full. The parchment was made from the hide of a sheep or a cow: once it has been prepared, it is difficult to determine from which it came (Clanchy 1993, 121).

The sheets of parchment usually came to the court as blanks but, on occasion, something had already been already written on them. The top of such a membrane is illustrated in Figure 1. This membrane was used at the court held on October 14, 1314. The two words on the top line, after translating the second one from Latin, are 'Chesham

Court'. They were added well after the court had been held, and we shall come to them later. The second line was written before the court was held, and it can be translated as 'For the first court after Michaelmas in the eighth year of the reign of King Edward'. (Michaelmas falls on September 29)

In similar vein, two items were already present on the membrane prepared for the court held on March 16, 1327, which unfortunately is in rather poor condition – too poor to illustrate here. The first line may be translated simply as: 'For the first court after Michaelmas', and the second as: 'Plea for the first court held on the Friday after Saint Valentine's Day in the first year of the reign of Edward III among the rolls of Edward II, namely on the back of the roll for the twentieth year of the reign of Edward II.'

Each year, courts were held soon after Easter and Michaelmas. Courts could also be held at other times as was deemed necessary. Each membrane bearing the 'For the first court after Michaelmas' directive was obviously intended for use at a regular Michaelmas court. The directive came from the central administration responsible, among other things, for preparing and distributing the membranes for use at these courts.

The second inscription on the 1327 membrane came from a clerk in the central administration, and is a plea for a record that had gone astray. The following sequence of events, from the surviving records, describes the circumstances that gave rise to the plea:

October 1, 1326. A post-Michaelmas court was held. It was, as it turned out, the last court held in the reign of Edward II.

February 20, 1327. The first court in the reign of Edward III was held. It was recorded on the back of the membrane which already held the account of the last court of Edward II.

March 16, 1327. Less than a month later another court was held. It was recorded on a fresh membrane but, unfortunately, under the inscription: 'For the first court after Michaelmas', which it obviously was not.

September 30, 1327. The year's Michaelmas court, recorded on the membrane headed by the plea for the record of the court held on February 20, 1327.

This sequence of events shows that the clerk who wrote the plea for the record of the first court held under Edward III was responsible for the care, organisation and storage of the court records within the central administration. This person, perhaps already irked by the misuse of the prepared membrane at the court of March 1327, was trying to resolve the problem of what to do with the membrane holding the records of the last court of Edward II and the first of Edward III. It would appear that the records of the courts held under Edward II were kept in one place while those held under Edward III were kept in another, with the consequence that the membrane in question was needed in two places at the same time. It may be that it was needed in Chesham, with the now completed run of records from the reign of Edward II and also at Hedingham, with the current run of records from the reign of Edward III.

This brings us to Joan Gambon. She was a person of some significance in Chesham at the time. A widow, she had become rich in her own right because, as her late husband's executrix, she had managed to keep his wealth for herself while avoiding the payment of his debts. The accounts of her manoeuvring appear in the courts held from September 1334 to August 1335. She lived in a house in the centre of Chesham, which, as recorded in one of the charters concerning the descent of her house to her children and grandchildren, was situated between 'the water running through the middle of the town of Chesham and the road leading from Wycombe to Berkhamsted'. The charters are recorded on the back of a re-used portion of membrane with the BAS code D/

BASM/18/359. At the court held on November 22, 1337 it was recorded that she was one of the people entrusted to care for the official measures used in the market, 'namely a larger one for counting and a smaller one for selling'. Subsequently, at the court of June 27, 1338, it was recorded that Joan Gambon, in a wording that echoes that of the charter, 'has a certain wardrobe by the water course running through the middle of the town'. A wardrobe was a room or container for keeping valuable items, including clothes. It was usually in the main residence of a noble household, but some lords kept a wardrobe at other places they might visit (Mertes 1988, 45). Given the context, it seems reasonable to understand the court's laconic account as meaning that in the wardrobe at her house she kept items of value to the earl and to the court. These may have included the measures but, as none of the others responsible for their care are mentioned, perhaps it was something else. It is tempting to think that she may have kept the records from the reign of Edward II, but this seems unlikely. Perhaps she kept the supporting documents needed by the court, such as the lists of the manor's villeins and of those in the tithings, which, although they are mentioned in the court records, have not survived. If this is so, it does offer an explanation of why the supporting documents no longer exist, while the court records do.

There is another relevant issue. It is shown in a later section that the court records were consulted after their creation for various purposes, such as to determine whether a holding had been returned to the lord and, more generally, particular aspects of customary practice. This suggests the need for somewhere safe to hold the records locally, and temporarily, for to transport them from Hedingham on demand and to return them at once, while not impossible, would have been both inconvenient and expensive.

AT THE COURT

In the first half of the fourteenth century, the Chesham records were written in the secretarial hand of trained scribes. Later, after the Black Death, they were written in less accomplished hands in many and varied styles. This is not to say that the writers were uneducated: they clearly knew their Latin, but had not practised writing to the same extent as the trained scribes (Castor

2006, 51; Clanchy 1993, 125–131). Trained or not, the scribes wrote their records as the court was in progress. This is clear from the way that the handwriting deteriorated as the court went on and, sometimes, as a lengthy case dawdled almost certainly to an unresolved ending. The scribes made use of formulaic entries: a key word such as ‘debt’ or ‘trespass’ triggered the appropriate formula, leaving in the record an entry revealing absolutely nothing about the person named in it. The accounts of long cases occasionally make no sense at all, presumably because the scribe could make no sense of the presentation occurring before him. Also, the records were often written with blank spaces to be filled later: sometimes they were, although in a different hand, but more often they were not. Names were crossed out and the correct one written above: occasionally, the matter of a case was corrected in the same way.

When all the cases had been presented, the assessors, after discussion with the steward, decided on the amercements to be imposed on; for example, those whose animals had been grazing on the lord’s land, and on the brewers and the bakers. The amount of the amercement was written, by a clerk, above each name and was also noted in the left-hand margin. After this, all the fines and other amounts of money due as a result of the court were added up, and the sum total was inserted as the final entry of the court record. This was not, however, necessarily the final action at the court for, on occasion, the account of a further case or two was slipped into the record between what had

until then been the final case and the entry giving the sum total due. This appeared in a hand different from that of the scribe. If a fine was involved, the informal nature of the addition is reinforced by the crossing out of the original sum total and the addition above it of the new one. Figure 2 shows the end of the record of the court of 8 June, 1389, and illustrates precisely this situation. The first four lines are the account of the final case held in the court proper, and were written by the official scribe. The next three lines record an extra case in a different hand. Below this, in the hand of the official scribe, are the names of the assessors and the amount of the sum total due to the court. But the amount has been crossed out, and replaced by that due as a consequence of the unofficial entry.

At this stage, as many as half a dozen different people may have made their mark in the course of creating the record of a single court but, as we shall see, there were yet more contributions to come.

AFTER THE COURT

There is evidence in the records themselves to show that they were consulted soon after their creation. The following examples illustrate some of the various reasons for doing so.

In March 1309, a certain Osbert owed the lord ‘15 pence annually for rent and services as shown in the roll of the court held in Easter week in the 15th year of the King’s reign’.

In April 1325, Alexander Fryday and his wife were granted the tenancy of a cottage and some

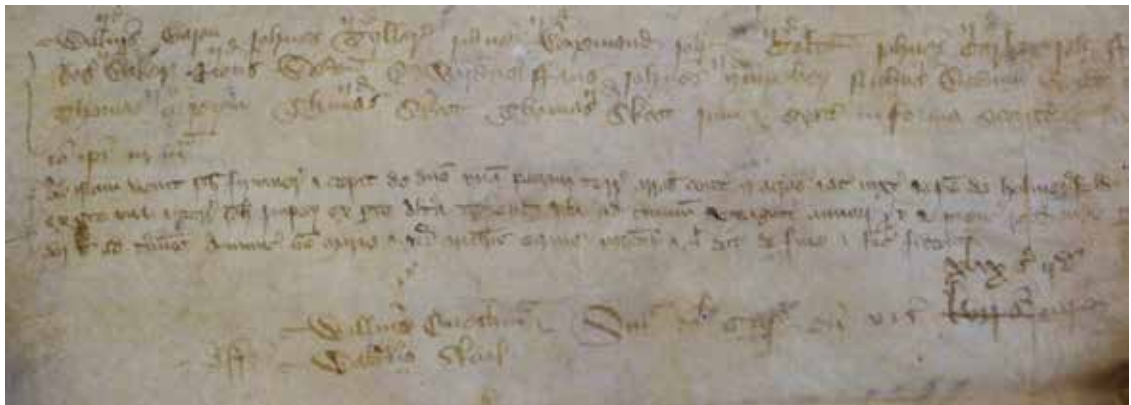


FIGURE 2 The bottom of the reverse of the membrane bearing the court record of 8 June, 1389

land because 'it was determined by the court and the court roll' that they had been returned to the lord by the previous tenant.

In March 1335, Roger of Tring was given the lord's permission 'to consult the roll' to establish his client's right by inheritance to a certain holding.

In December 1361, Richard Morwyne paid a fee of sixpence 'for scrutinising the court roll'.

The unstated reason for the latter may have been that Richard Morwyne needed to prove his title to customary land, which, as Tompkins explains, he could only do by finding the entry in the court rolls granting it to him (Tompkins 2006b, 75).

The records must have been stored in a careful and organised way to enable their frequent consultation, of which these examples are a small sample. We have already had glimpses of the preparations for and implementation of this.

At some later time, it seems that the system for the storage and retrieval of the records broke down, for annotations of the same kind and in the same hand as that on the top of the document shown in Figure 1 appear on many of the fourteenth-century documents. Since the annotation gives the name of the manor and the type of the court, and sometimes

also the name of the monarch and the year of his reign, it appears that someone had been given the task of restoring order to a jumbled pile of court records for a number of manors, presumably the manors held by the Earl of Oxford.

Fifteen of the membranes have been tagged by having a small rectangular piece of parchment sewn to them. Twelve date to the reign of Edward III, two to Richard II, and one each to Henry V and Henry VI. It is not apparent why they were tagged, although it seems safe to say that these are membranes that someone knew they would want to find again for one reason or another. Some, such as that shown in Figure 3a, were annotated with the regnal year that the court recorded on the membrane was held. The illustrated inscription is 'Anno 46', which means 'in the year 46', and in this case refers to the 46th year of the reign of Edward III. Others had nothing written on them. Figure 3b shows the back of another tag. It was cut from a court record written in a truly accomplished hand. Other tags were cut from the same document. The most recent date for a tagged membrane is 1455 and, given that the annotations are all in the same hand and that many of them come from the same



FIGURE 3A Obverse of the tag sewn to the membrane bearing the record of the court held on 23 February, 1372



FIGURE 3B Reverse of the tag sewn to the membrane bearing the record of the court held on 17 October, 1345

source, this provides a date after which the tags were attached.

The records bear further marks in the form of annotations and symbols. The annotations, one of which is illustrated in Figure 4, indicate that systematic searches of all the fourteenth century records were made. The searches, or at least the carelessness of the searcher, may have caused the

disorder of the records. The annotations are in a hand quite different from any of those contributing to the initial creation of the records, and were written using ink made from oak galls, which has discoloured the parchment and eaten into it.

The annotations consist of the repetition of a key word or phrase from the case to which they refer. The words that recurred most frequently were *vastum*, meaning 'damage', and *herietum* meaning 'heriot'. They indicate that the records were systematically searched, and that the annotated cases were the targets of the most fruitful searches. Not all the cases concerning damage and heriots were marked, showing that the searches had aims narrower than the purely general.

The word *vastum* was typically added to entries where it was deemed that one of the Lord's villeins had 'damaged his holding', which was the formulaic phrase used by the scribes to indicate that land or a dwelling had not been kept in good order. In one such case, from August 1311, William Waleys was fined because he had 'badly damaged his tenement'. That the state of the houses had been a matter of concern for some time prior to this date is emphasised by the case of Walter Morwyne at the same court. He was allowed to hold a tenement for his lifetime on conditions which included that he 'did no damage to it'. Other cases were marked with the phrases 'inquiry concerning damage', 'damage in the wood' and 'pledge for not doing damage'.

What was the benefit of looking up old cases of damage? It is possible that the lord of the manor was checking to see whether all the 'damaged' holdings had been attended to, or perhaps he was checking on the state of his housing stock. A better explanation, though, is suggested by the earlier work such as that cited above that has concentrated to a considerable extent on the transfer of land. Land itself would have been considered damaged if, for example, it had not been cultivated, and a likely reason for its being so was that it had been abandoned (Tompkins 2006a, 27). If there were such land in the manor, no rent was being received from it. A search of the records would establish whose land it was so that the owner could be pursued for the rent or, if he had died or vanished, the land could be returned to the lord. Similarly, if a dwelling had been abandoned it would vanish over time. If it had been held as part of a tenement consisting of, say, a messuage with ten acres of

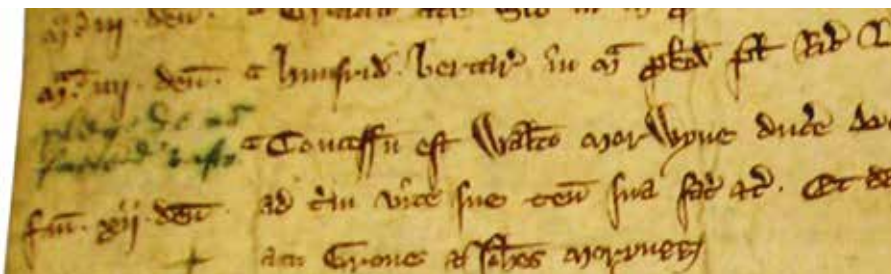


FIGURE 4 Annotation added to the record of the court held on 31 August 1311. Its last word is 'vastu(m)'

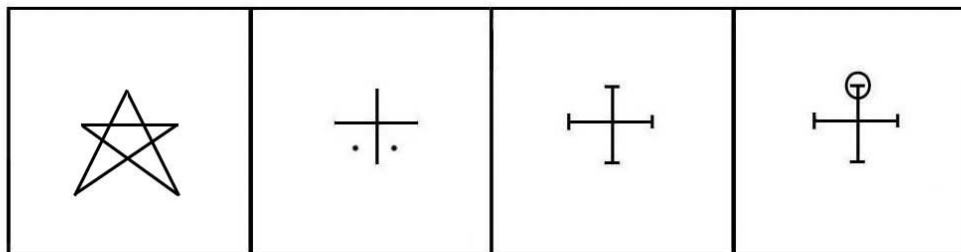


FIGURE 5 Symbols added to the court records

land, then the holding would have become simply ten acres of land (Tompkins 2006a, 62). Again, a search would establish whose holding it had been and put the lord in a position to do something about it.

The cases marked with the word 'heriot', or with a phrase containing it, have in common that the heriots in question were in some way problematic. The purpose of the search, therefore, was to locate such heriots so as to clarify for future reference what they should be. The subject of one such case was the heriot due on the death of Ade de Croydon who held 'a messuage and three acres of land and a certain half an acre of grain'. After some discussion, it was agreed that the corn harvested from the half acre plot would be accepted for the heriot. But this was clearly not something that could be delivered as required in the future when a tenant died, not least because the plot would not be used to grow corn every year. And even if it could be delivered, its value would vary from one harvest to the next depending on its yield. The solution is not recorded. Another such case concerned the heriot of 'half a cow before calving' that was due on the death of Emma of Bellingdon who held 'a messuage and 24 acres of land'. This heriot, in addition to

begging a question which will be answered below, is certainly problematic.

The symbols added to the records include the 'pointing finger' and simple two-stroke cross, and are intended to draw the readers' particular attention (Clanchy 1993, 173–175 & 291–293). Both were ways of marking a passage so that it could be found again, and were copied from the practice of readers of books. Many more symbols and images were placed in the margins of medieval books: their purposes are usually unclear, and none bears any resemblance to those added to the records (Clanchy 1993, Plate XV; Carruthers 1999, note 137). The symbols added to the records include those illustrated in Figure 5. They are a pentacle, and a cross elaborated in some way by serifs, circles and dots. The pattern of elaboration suggests the existence of an underlying hierarchy. Although the symbols may have had meaning for the searcher, it is no longer always apparent, usually because they do not seem to have been employed in a consistent fashion.

The symbol on the right of Figure 5 can be assigned a meaning with some confidence. It occurs seven times on the fourteenth-century documents, and on each occasion it marks a case

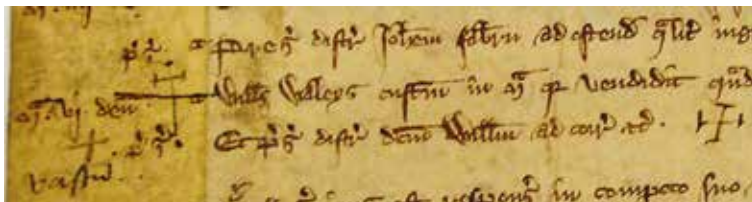


FIGURE 6 Entry marked by an annotation ('vastu') and three different crosses from the record of the court held on 31 August 1311

where 'damage' is involved. The cases, however, range through Simon of Ashley wasting his tene-ment in April, 1314; ordering an inquiry into who damaged the land of Helewisia Partrych in March 1345; and John atte Thorne cutting down and removing 65 trees from William Smith's wood, and thereby damaging it, in June 1386.

The ten cases marked by a cross with serifs cover a range of issues that represent a significant proportion of the court's activities, making it difficult to see that this symbol was being used to identify any specific activity. The simple cross with two dots occurs only once, so that any attempt to deduce its meaning would be of dubious validity.

Sporadically, a case is marked by an annotation and a symbol, or even by several symbols, as in Figure 6. The use of an annotation and a symbol would seem to suggest that an initial search, which produced the annotation, had been refined, so giving cases marked with both an annotation and a symbol. Since the combination occurs most frequently on cases of damage, it would not be surprising if attempts were being made to locate different kinds of damage, each with their own consequences. The most convincing example, though, concerns the pentacle shown on the left of Figure 5. It appears against only two cases, both of which involve heriots that are annotated accordingly. The heriot, in both cases, is 'half a cow before calving'. The pentacle symbol has been used to link two problematic cases and so to provide assistance in finding a workable replacement. The situation arose in the following way. When Nicholas del Hel (also known as Nicholas atte Hyl) died, his land, for which the attached heriot was a cow before calving, was divided between his two daughters, Emma and Alice. In acquiring part of their father's land, each daughter also acquired part of the associated heriot. Hence the two occurrences of 'half a cow before calving'.

All in all, the discussions of this section, show that, quite soon after large amounts of information were first recorded, sophisticated methods were devised for examining it.

OUTSIDE THE COURT

Information handling

In a recent book, Ziauddin Sardar recounted this exchange with an official as he attempted to enter Iran:

"In your passport it says that you are an information scientist. What is an information scientist?" he asked in a matter-of-fact way.

'An information scientist is someone who handles, processes, stores and retrieves information. He is a sort of librarian who knows how to use computers,' I replied calmly." (Sardar 2004, 172).

According to this definition (except for the reference to using computers) the medieval clerks who dealt with the court records could be called information scientists, a description of a job that most people would think of as a modern creation. The court records contained information, and the clerks handled them and their contents. They stored information, as the annotations of the kind illustrated in Figure 1 show: a systematically stored collection of membranes could be seen as a 'sort of library'. They also retrieved information, with tags for retrieval at the level of a membrane, and with annotations and symbols at the level of the content of a membrane. In addition, they processed the information, notably through searches and the capability to refine them.

In their own way, the court records and the ways in which they were used shed light on the changes brought about by the introduction of written records. The move from relying entirely on memory, whether of what happened in a court or of anything else, to creating and then using written

records required new ways of working and new ways of thinking. In the course of developing these new ways, medieval clerks invented many of the ideas and methods of what we now call information science long before computers existed.

The symbols

The symbols that appear on the records are intriguing. It seems as if they ought to have a meaning but, if they do, it is not always apparent. It may be that trying to relate their meaning to the substance of the cases they mark is mistaken. Perhaps the difficulty lies in failing to appreciate the thought patterns of the medieval mind.

An explanation for the difficulty of interpreting the symbols, suggested by more than one person, is that it was a private code of the person searching the records. While this is plausible, it can be shown that the symbols were in widespread common usage before the records considered here were written, let alone examined and marked with them. In Saint Mary's church in Chesham, for example, amongst the graffiti scratched on the nave columns, are crosses with serifs and crosses with circles. One

of the former is shown in Figure 7. In the church of Saint John the Evangelist at Whitchurch (where the manor descended with that of Chesham after the marriage of the third Earl of Oxford to Isobel de Bolbec (Page 1925, 206)) are more crosses with serifs and, as shown in Figure 8, what is almost a 'master cross' from which the crosses illustrated in Figure 5 may be generated by appropriate omissions. More of the crosses are to be found in other churches both in Buckinghamshire and widely across England.

The pentacle marking cases described above is also among the graffiti in St Mary's church. In this context, it is thought to be a device to protect against the devil, and was popularly known as a 'demon trap' (Champion 2014, 249–250, Champion 2015). So, the symbols, both crosses and others, were not private. In fact, they were familiar to everyone in the community, and were in common usage.

Crosses similar to those among the church graffiti and on the court records are also to be found in another setting. Papal bulls issued in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were countersigned by a number of cardinals. Beside each signature was a



FIGURE 7 Cross carved on a pillar in Saint Mary's church, Chesham



FIGURE 8 Cross carved on a pillar in the church of Saint John the Evangelist, Whitchurch

cross, elaborated in essentially the same ways as those described above. The symbols would seem to indicate the rank of the signatory in the hierarchy of cardinals. The Papal Bull concerning the Papal overlordship of England and issued by Pope Innocent III in 1214 (British Library Cotton Charter VIII 24), which was exhibited in the British Library's recent Magna Carta exhibition, provides a fine example of a set of signatures with crosses.

The crosses found on the court rolls, then, arose in and were familiar from religious contexts, from which they were borrowed to be used on the decidedly secular manor court rolls.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The preparation and making of the manor court records called for the contributions of a number of skilled people. Their skills included the preparation of the parchment; the organisation of its distribution to specific manors for specific courts; the penmanship and linguistic skills of the scribes, who had not simply to write down the court proceedings but to comprehend and express them in Latin; and the administrative skills necessary to store the records in such a way that they could be retrieved when needed for any of a wide range of reasons.

The after-life of a court record could be quite as remarkable as its creation. Many of the records bear the signs of their subsequent use. They were utilised, among other things, as evidence in support of a claim; to track the progress of a case; to trace the previous holders of a tenement; and to identify all the perpetrators of a particular misdemeanour.

In this way, as well as evidence of the existence of a wide range of skills in the Middle Ages, they also show how the end-product of these skills changed the way in which people behaved, in particular, how they adapted to the possibility of moving from reliance on memory as a guide to what had been done in the past, and what ought to be done in the present, to making use of written records, which, for better or worse, provided for much more reliable decision making.

In the fourteenth century, these records of the proceedings of manor courts were used in conjunction with other documents, such as rolls listing the names of the members of the manor, records of the

customs of the manor and perhaps even a cartulary. It is frustrating that, in Chesham, absolutely none of these supporting documents has survived. This makes interpretation of the court records more precarious than it otherwise might be, and it also means that links to other relevant material, documentary or otherwise, are not apparent. This is one of the reasons that the crosses and other symbols added to the court records in their after-life are so difficult to understand, even though they were part of a widely-used system of signs.

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