THE RECORDS OF THE MANOR OF WAKEFIELD:

A UNESCO-RECOGNISED RESOURCE

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This introduces the records of the manor of Wakefield and describes the role which the Yorkshire Archaeological and Historical Society has played in their survival and interpretation. Since 1943, the Wakefield court rolls and related records in Wakefield manorial archives have come into the ownership of YAHS. In 2015, the society transferred them to the safekeeping of the Special Collections department of the University of Leeds Brotherton Library, where (subject to the physical condition of individual items) they remain available to all.

The greater part of the court rolls, the rolled parchment (and, from the mid-eighteenth century, paper) files of its court proceedings – known as ‘court rolls’ – are of major historical significance. Their national importance to the history of Great Britain was recognised in 2011 when they were entered on the UK National Register of the Memory of the World by the UK National Commission of UNESCO.

A catalogue of the Wakefield manorial archives, and information about how to access them, can be found at: https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore?archiveRefCode=%22YAS%2FMD225%22

For more than a century, the society has been working to promote the study of the rolls and to uncover their contents. Up to the present (December 2017), the outcome has been the publication of twenty-five volumes of records relating to the manor, containing the text of dozens of court rolls. Most of the volumes are still in print and available for purchase, or are available via the YAHS website (see below).

WHY IS THE MANOR OF WAKEFIELD SIGNIFICANT?

The manor of Wakefield was an important institution for several closely-associated reasons. The manor covered an exceptionally large area. While most manors extended no more than about six square miles (approximately 1,500 hectares), the borders of the manor of Wakefield contained 150 square miles (almost 39,000 hectares). This was the area subject to the three-weekly court which dealt with a great variety of business, but principally land transactions and, in earlier centuries, disputes over debts and other matters. In addition a much larger area was subject to the jurisdiction of the manor of Wakefield’s court leet and ‘tourn’, a court which had powers to enforce compliance over a range of business relating to the well-being of communities within the manor.
The exceptionally large area affected by the jurisdiction of the manorial courts of Wakefield was matched by the remarkable survival of manorial records over a period of many centuries. The earliest surviving court roll dates from 1274, although few have survived before 1322. However, from then they continue in an almost unbroken sequence over a period of seven centuries, ending only in 1925, and by this time there were over 670 substantial rolls.

EXTENT OF THE MANOR

The manor governed several large areas in the heart of the West Riding of Yorkshire.

In the east were the six divisions known as ‘graveships’ centred around the small but prosperous borough of Wakefield: Alverthorpe, Horbury, Ossett, Sandal, Stanley and Thornes. This was lowland Yorkshire, which was prosperous arable land, and fairly densely settled from the Middle Ages onwards.

The other two districts of the manor were, in contrast, upland, sparsely populated, largely pastoral, and with plentiful scope for colonisation on the abundant, if very far from lush, moorland. To the south-west of Wakefield lay the graveship of Holme, with seven graveships centred around Holmfirth in the valley of the River Holme. West of Wakefield, along the River Calder and the River Ryburn, the manor had five graveships. East of Halifax were the four graveships of Hipperholme, Rastrick, shelf and Northowram. To the west lay the five graveships of Warley, Sowerby, Scammonden, Erringden and Soyland.

MANORS AND MANORIAL RECORDS

Manor courts were once a routine part of everyday life for the typical English man and woman, and so their records are an important source for the study of national and local history. This importance extended into relatively recent times, for less than a century ago, land subject to manorial rights – known as ‘copyhold’ – was still to be found widely over much of the country.

Only in 1922, with the reform of the law of what lawyers call ‘real’ property, (essentially meaning land) was the abolition of copyhold begun. On the manor of Wakefield this process, called ‘enfranchisement’, was not finalised until several decades later. With the end of copyhold, most manorial courts in England also ceased to meet, although some still survive for other purposes. Medieval historians have long recognised manorial records as an important aspect of historical study. However, long after 1500 the business of manors and their courts retained their significance.

Manorial records – principally their ‘court rolls’ – originated in the need for manorial lords to keep a check on the financial dealings of their stewards, and so the court rolls, which record the business which came before the courts and the court fees received, are, in origin, a type of financial record. It is important to understand this original purpose, as it explains the focus, and the limitations, on the confirmation to be found on the rolls.

The range of business was very wide, especially in the Middle Ages. The most important aspect of the work of the courts was recording land transfers amongst the residents of the manor, for technically all the land was subject to the lord’s property rights. Land wholly subject to the
The lord of the manor also had the right to administer justice within his manor, and on the manor of Wakefield these powers were very extensive, probably because the lord inherited the rights once in the hands of the king when it had been a royal manor. The most extreme of these rights was to execute thieves caught in possession of their thefts. Thieves could be hanged at Wakefield or beheaded at Halifax up to the mid-seventeenth century.

Most court business was more mundane than this. There are disputes over debts, but the information on the rolls about these is limited. The lord’s interest was primarily financial, as it was limited to the lord’s wish to extract a financial penalty from the guilty party.

More important are the sessions of the court leet, which regulated community behaviour of many kinds, both in the practical matters of communal agriculture and in anti-social behaviour, from cheating over the supply of bread and ale to infringing the norms of moral conduct.

THE MANOR OF WAKEFIELD AND THE YORKSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The association between the manorial records of Wakefield and the Yorkshire Archaeological and Historical Society began over a century ago. By the close of the nineteenth century, manorial records, and particularly court rolls, the documents that record the proceedings of the manorial court, were coming to be recognised as a valuable source for historical, legal and genealogical research. The distinguished historian F. W. Maitland published extracts from several manorial courts held between 1246 and 1303, with an introductory study, as the second volume of the publications of the Selden Society for legal history in 1891.

A few years later the first local instances of a growing interest in the contents of manorial court rolls began to make their appearance. Amongst these was an edition of the earliest rolls of the manor of Wakefield, the result of the enterprise of several members of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society (as it was then known) but especially through the joint efforts of two of its members, J. W. Walker and W. P. Baildon.

Walker was a native of Wakefield, the second generation of his family to practise as surgeons in the town, who had developed antiquarian tastes and became a prominent member of the YAHS from 1888 to 1948. He would naturally have been aware of the existence of the manor of Wakefield, whose rolls office and moot hall then stood in the centre of the town near the parish church of All Saints, and whose steward, a partner in the firm of local solicitors, would probably have been known to him personally in the small social circles of professional men in the town.

The records of the manor that were then in the possession of the steward were mostly court rolls and enclosure awards. Other records had become dispersed as a result of changes in the ownership of the manor over the centuries, and many manorial accounts remained amongst the records of central government as a result of ownership by the Crown over a considerable
period. Walker had a close interest in his native town, whose history he was to write at some length and publish in 1934, as *Wakefield Its History and People*.

It is likely that he would have taken steps to stimulate the curiosity of the other leading members of the YAHS. The lady of the manor, Lady Yarborough, was approached to give her consent to a project to transcribe the earliest of the rolls for which the society had raised the funds amongst its members. The society then employed a record agent and the money raised allowed her to produce translations of all the rolls that survived between 1274 and 1340. These were published in the society’s Record Series between 1901 and 1944.

In the year before the last volume was published, a momentous change had taken place. The manorial rolls office in Wakefield was demolished in 1913, and the records were transferred to the cellars of the firm of solicitors which acted as manorial steward. Then in 1943, ‘through the good offices of the president’, (J. W. Walker) the court rolls were presented to the society as a gift to the YAHS by the Earl of Yarborough. Gradually the contents of the rolls office were transferred to the YAHS strong-rooms in Leeds.

The gift was probably made at this date because their practical value as legal documents was drawing towards a close after seven hundred years. The Law of Real Property Act, 1922 had abolished copyhold tenure with effect from 1925, but the relationship between the manorial lord and his former copyhold tenants was not severed in law until compensation agreements were negotiated between each of them following the procedures prescribed by the Act.

The manorial moot hall and its rolls office were sold and the records were moved into the steward’s office basements. The process of terminating the final ties between lord and tenant began on the manor of Wakefield in 1927 and was well advanced by 1943, although not finally completed until November 1946. The first set of records transferred to the society comprised the court rolls up to 1750, followed by successive batches until 1980, when the society received the last consignment.

An essay on the society and the Wakefield manorial records can be found in *Wakefield Court Rolls 1436-37*, Wakefield Court Rolls Series, vol. 17, 2014.

**PUBLISHING THE WAKEFIELD COURT ROLLS, 1901-1945**

There are two basic obstacles to accessing the court rolls. One is the language, because like all English court records up to 1733, they were written in Latin and not in English. (It was, incidentally, an initiative by the magistrates of Yorkshire which led to English being adopted at this time by parliament as the language of the English courts.) The other problem is handwriting, as styles of writing have varied considerably over the centuries, and so even those who could read the Latin may be perplexed by the script.

The rolls thus required translating and publishing before they could be generally useful for reading and research. So the society took on the work of publishing editions of the court rolls. The first published editions of Wakefield court rolls appeared between 1901 and 1945, as volumes 29, 36, 57, 78, and 109 in the YAHS Record Series. These drew upon transcriptions and translations undertaken by Ethel Stokes, a leading record agent in the early twentieth century. (For further information on Miss Stokes, see the article by Elizabeth Sheppard at [https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10502-016-9272-x](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10502-016-9272-x)). The first three volumes in the series are the most scholarly. The first contains the text of the rolls in both Latin and English
and the second contains an extensive introduction. The last volume in this series is restricted to entries relating to the proceedings of the court at Wakefield only.

A sixth volume related to the court rolls was published in the YAHS Record Series in 1939. This was the Wakefield Manor Book, a thorough description of the possessions of the manor compiled in 1709 for the benefit of the new owner, the Duke of Leeds (YAHS Record Series, volume 101).

The six volumes were reprinted by the Cambridge Reprint Library of Cambridge University Press for the society’s 150th anniversary celebrations in 2013.

Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield 1274 – 1297, edited by W. P. Baildon (1901).
Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield 1297 – 1309, edited by W. P. Baildon (1906).
Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield 1313 – 1316, edited by J. Lister (1917).
Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield 1315 – 1317, edited by J. Lister (1930).

To buy CUP reprints follow the links from http://yahs.org.uk/Publications/Wakefield-Court-Rolls-Series

PUBLISHING THE WAKEFIELD COURT ROLLS: 1974 TO THE PRESENT

The YAHS Wakefield Court Rolls Series was established in 1974 to resume publishing editions of the Wakefield court rolls. Its committee decided to publish rolls from all periods, rather than only the medieval centuries covered by the volumes published 1901 to 1945.

The new series has its own general editor and an expert advisory board. It was agreed that the rolls would continue to be translated from Latin into English and their contents summarised in detail, rather than as a literal transcription. Volumes have an explanatory introduction by the volume editor, and indexes of persons, places, and subjects. Starting with volume 16 (2014) a glossary, explaining the meaning of unfamiliar words and concepts, has been included. These publications are an invaluable resource for local and family history as well as for academic research. New volumes have been published approximately every two years.

These volumes, from 1977 to the present, comprise eight rolls from the fourteenth century, four from the fifteenth, eight from the sixteenth, seven from the seventeenth, three from the eighteenth and one from the nineteenth century. Copies of the volumes still in print can be obtained from the society: http://yahs.org.uk/Publications/Wakefield-Court-Rolls-Series

Volume 1 1639 - 1640 edited by Dr C M Fraser and K Emsley
Volume 2 1348 - 1350 edited by Dr H M Jewell
Volume 3 1331 - 1333 edited by Professor S S Walker
Volume 4 1583 - 1585 edited by Professor A Weikel
Volume 5 1664 - 1665 edited by Dr C M Fraser
Volume 6 1350 - 1352 edited by M Habberjam, M O'Regan and B Hale
Volume 7 1550 - 1553 edited by Professor A Weikel
Volume 8 1651 - 1652 edited by L Robinson
BOOKS AND ARTICLES FEATURING THE WAKEFIELD MANORIAL RECORDS

This is a selection of books and articles which have drawn upon the records of the manor of Wakefield for a variety of historical purposes.


S. A. Moorhouse, ‘Documentary Evidence for the landscape of the manor of Wakefield during the Middle Ages’, *Landscape History*, vol. 1, (1979), pp. 44-58.


*West Yorkshire: An Archaeological Survey to A. D. 1500* (3 volumes), West Yorkshire County Council, 1981

**MANORIAL RECORDS AND THE INTERNET**

There is a great variety of information sources about manorial records that can be accessed online. These are some of the most informative.

**The National Archives: Manorial Documents Register**

The National Archives (TNA) has the responsibility to manage the National Manorial Documents Register. This was created under an Act of 1925 to ensure that a proper centralised record was kept of the location of manorial records because of their importance in establishing a legal title to land. Information about twenty-six of the counties of England, including Yorkshire, has been digitised and can be searched online at: [http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/manor-search](http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/manor-search)

**The National Archives and the Manor of Wakefield**

There are many documents relating to the manor of Wakefield at TNA because it was held by the Crown and by members of the royal family for long periods before its sale into private hands in the early seventeenth century. As a result, many of its records are to be found in The National Archives (TNA). The manor of Wakefield was one of the Crown estates transferred to the Duchy of Lancaster by an Act of Parliament in 1555 and it seems that the duchy then took possession of all of the manorial records of Wakefield held by central government, including those predating the Act. Many of the documents relate to accounts, but there are also court rolls which supplement those in the YAHS Manor of Wakefield archive.

TNA records can be found using the search facility on The National Archives website using ‘Duchy of Lancaster’, and then choosing the ‘Held by the National Archives’ option. It is advisable to use a variety of search terms.

**Lancaster University**

The Cumbrian Manorial Records site compiled by the university is particularly wide-ranging. It contain not only information about the manorial records of the county but links to many useful sites which anyone interested in manorial records would find useful to know about: [http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/manorialrecords/](http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/manorialrecords/)
Nottingham University

The university’s Manuscripts and Special Collections department holds a range of manorial records and has provided a series of web pages on their contents and uses. These include a useful glossary of manorial terms. It can be found at: https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/manuscriptsandspecialcollections/researchguidance/manorial/introduction.aspx

Sheffield University: Conisbrough Manorial Court Rolls

The university’s Humanities Research Institute has placed online a project on the manorial records of Conisbrough, a village in what is now south Yorkshire, which was part of a manor which was held, like the manor of Wakefield, by the Warenne family. It includes translations of a number of medieval and early modern court rolls and a range of contextual material. The site is not immediately easy to navigate. The translations of original records can be found most easily under ‘Browse’ heading on the site: https://www.hrionline.ac.uk/conisbrough/index.html

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