

Using Deeds and Civil Court Records to Trace your British Ancestors

RootsTech 2025 webinar

Saturday 8th March 2025

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General Reading

Nat Alcock, *Tracing History through Title Deeds: A Guide for Family and Local Historians* (2017).

Amanda Bevan, *Tracing your Ancestors in the National Archives: The Website and Beyond* (2006).

Bruce Durie, *Understanding Documents for Genealogy and Local History* (2013).

Susan Moore, *Tracing your Ancestors through the Equity Courts: A Guide for Family and Local Historians* (2017).

Deeds

Before the twentieth century, documents drawn up by English and Welsh lawyers for buying, selling and mortgaging land (known as ‘deeds’) were often long and elaborate, and organised in several connected parts. Examples of deeds include: deeds of gift, bargains and sales, leases and releases, mortgages and conveyances.

University of Nottingham webpages about deeds:

<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/manuscriptsandspecialcollections/researchguidance/deeds/introduction.aspx>

National Archives guide to enrolment and registration of title, 1227-c. 1930:

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/enrolment-of-deeds-registration-of-titles-land/>

London Metropolitan Archives guide to Middlesex Deeds Registry:

<https://www.thelondonarchives.org/your-research/research-guides/middlesex-deeds-registry-research-guide>

North Yorkshire County Record Office FAQs about Yorkshire deed registries:

<https://nycroblog.com/frequently-asked-questions-about-the-north-riding-register-of-deeds-nrrd/>

Feet of Fines

There is one English court whose records can often be used in conjunction with (or instead of) deeds: the Court of Common Pleas. This court sat in Westminster Hall and issued final concords, also known as the feet of fines, from 1182 to 1833. These short documents mostly used Latin formulas prior to 1733 and concerned fictitious legal disputes about pieces of land that were actually being sold in the usual way.

National Archives guide to feet of fines, 1182-1833:

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/land-conveyance-feet-of-fines-1182-1833/>

Chancery

The English court of Chancery also sat in Westminster Hall from medieval times until the late nineteenth century. It had many functions, including the settling of disputes about inheritance and property. Many records were kept of these civil cases, known as Chancery suits. All of the records of Chancery itself

are in the National Archives in London, although researchers may find papers concerning suits in local and private archives. Examples of Chancery records include: bills and answers, order books, masters' reports, depositions, affidavits, exhibits, masters' papers and accounts. Chancery and other courts in London had jurisdiction across England and Wales.

National Archives guides to Chancery records:

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/chancery-equity-suits-before-1558/>

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/chancery-equity-suits-after-1558/>

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/civil-court-cases-chancery-division-since-1875/>

Other Courts

The records of courts such as the Exchequer, the Star Chamber and Requests also contain very extensive information about families, though sometimes it is harder to find than in the Chancery records due to a lack of comprehensive indexes to search.

National Archives guide to Court of Exchequer:

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/court-exchequer/>

National Archives guide to Court of Star Chamber:

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/court-star-chamber-records-1485-1642/>

National Archives guide to Court of Requests:

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/court-of-requests-records-1485-1642/>

Scotland

Scotland's legal records are extensive and (so far as the deeds are concerned) more complete than England's. They include the register of sasines (for land transactions), the retours of heirs (inheritance) and the civil lawsuits heard in the Court of Session.

National Records of Scotland guide to inheritance:

<https://webarchive.nrscotland.gov.uk/20240326182500/https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/research-guides/research-guides-a-z/inheriting-land-and-buildings>

National Records of Scotland guide to sasines:

<https://webarchive.nrscotland.gov.uk/20240326182622/https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/research-guides/research-guides-a-z/sasines>

National Records of Scotland guide to Court of Session records:

<https://webarchive.nrscotland.gov.uk/20240326182506/https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/research-guides/research-guides-a-z/court-of-session-records>