

MEMBERS MEETING 2 JUNE 2009

“How the Parish was run” Talk by Sonia Preece with examples of the documents described.

Sonia's talk was based on her experiences of the archives at Chatsworth, Ault Hucknall and the Record Office at Matlock. Examples of some of the documents vary from maps, accounts and settlement papers and are dream documents as far as the family historian is concerned because they contain ancestor's names and also give details of the parish history.

The Stewards of a Lord's estate had to be very knowledgeable about the land and the economy of the area they were in charge of. They would have to know about the manor house and its maintenance. They would also have to know who was staying on the estate, who these people were, why they were there and where they were living. Bailiffs were appointed to run the estate. They would manage lands, collect rents and be responsible for evictions. It was a salaried job with perks. The Bailiffs appointed were often outsiders, this was because when they had to evict people it was better if it was not people they knew.

Reeves were employed to work at court under the Bailiffs and had to be men of the manor. They had to be knowledgeable about cases being brought to court. They were usually in office for one year but some Reeves were long serving and their names appear repeatedly in the records. Reeves were selected by the Lord of the manor or the villagers and they had to pay to elect him therefore they were careful whom they chose.

Vergators were responsible for everything to do with the economy of the parish. They had to know who the thieves were and who were the hard workers. Those who threw a “sickie” could be sued. These men had therefore to be tough to report a neighbour, to take him to court and they had to be honest and reliable.

Churchwarden's accounts survive for us to see today because they were written on parchment. Paper had not yet been discovered and records written on paper were often eaten by rats, mice, squirrels and birds. These parchment records detail what we would now deem petty things. The reason why they were important then was that everything came at a cost. If a gate was broken it had to be mended which cost money. If a pig escaped to a field of turnips and ate them there would

be a fine. If people drew blood in a fight there was no medicine and a chance they could die of septicaemia.

There is an example in the accounts of one Elizabeth Fretwell whose husband died after a fight. As she became dependent on the parish the Lord of the manor took her horse, cow and pig in payment for her upkeep. So getting into a fight could lead to long term financial problems. People who ran away to the next village to marry became a loss to the workforce and therefore people were fined if they married without permission. Adultery was a sin. It often resulted in the splitting up of a family who in turn would fall on parish relief. Punishments for adultery and lechery were either a flogging or an appearance in church in front of the congregation dressed in a white sheet, bare foot in ashes. People were fined for encroachment (seizing somebody's land) poaching and stealing grain.

There were strict policies about who could stay overnight as a guest or stranger in the parish. The Lord of the manor would have to know if they stayed on parish relief.

From 1538 parishes recorded baptisms, marriages and burials and from 1555 the parish became responsible for maintenance of its highways and roads. Roads at this time were primitive and there were often holes in them so large that people could fall in them! People took short cuts through fields to avoid these holes causing more problems for the farmers. In 1572 The Overseers to the Poor Act was introduced and in 1601 the Elizabethan Poor Law Act was brought in. Churches had to keep all their parish records safe and the law required that these records were kept in the parish chest with three key holders – the Lord of the manor, the Churchwarden and the Vicar.

The parish employed various people to ensure the laws were upheld. The Beadle was a parish officer with the power of punishing petty offenders.

The Beggar Banger looked for strangers in the community. Strangers were allowed to stay for forty days if they worked but were then escorted back to their own parish. Pregnant women, even those who were eight and a half months pregnant would be sent back to their own parish because a child born in the parish would have a settlement certificate and would become a drain on the parish funds. If a handicapped child was born in the parish it could be dependent for life.

A Pinder was responsible for rounding up stray animals.

Court Barons were scribes and good writers who dealt with disputes over the value of forty shillings. The documents these people produced

give us information about people in the parish who were committing misdemeanors. The same names crop up and Sonia has noticed that in Ault Hucknall the name of Fretwell occurs often!

A Dog Whipper was responsible for keeping dogs out of the church. The rails around the altar known as “knocker knobblers” were there to keep the dogs away from the altar!

The Searcher's job was to verify the death of individuals whether it was due to the plague, childbirth or the ridding of an unwanted mother-in-law! The Surveyor of the Highways was responsible for ensuring that everyone gave two days of work on the upkeep of the roads. People disliked doing this work particularly in bad weather and would often pay someone else to do their stint.

The Poor Law of 1601 provided for relief to be granted to paupers only in the parish of their legal settlement. The act said that a person was legally settled if they had lived there for one month. This was a burden on some parishes so the Poor Relief Act 1662 provided that a newcomer to a parish only acquired a legal right to settlement if they fulfilled a range of requirements.

Bastardy Bonds ensured that the fathers of illegitimate children paid the parish officers for any costs of the maintenance of the mother and child.

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 introduced Workhouses. These workhouses were feared by people as terrible places to be sent to even into the 20th century. The workhouse at Southwell is a typical example of what workhouses were like. On being admitted to the workhouse families were separated. Mothers were only able to see their children once a week and husbands and wives were separated to avoid further pregnancies. However, on the plus side the workhouses did provide medical care to the inmates.

Sonia believes the job of Churchwarden would have been suited to someone like Norris in Coronation Street as he is a bit of a busybody! Churchwardens were elected annually to act as overseers of the poor. They were unpaid but had expenses from parish funds. They dealt with their peer's misdemeanors. Refusal to serve was punished by a fine. They had to be literate, honest and have intimate knowledge of their peers. They monitored people's attendance at church and they were fined heavily if they did not attend.

The census records from 1841-1901 show where individuals came from and in addition the Rental Rolls from the 1600's may show a number of

generations of the same family and the rents they paid. They give a perfect picture of families 200 years ago.

The Parish Constable was responsible for maintaining law and order in the parish. The constables accounts contain useful information for example one report shows that payment was made to a young lad for two shirts, a pair of shoes and some trousers. He was then paid to travel to Chesterfield to obtain an indenture for a job. In another case an old man was given coal and had his cottage thatched but he became ill and died. His funeral was paid for by the parish.

Wills and Inventories contain useful information about the family. They may explain for example why one son received only one shilling whereas another son is given the farm.

Excommunication was an awful fate for the individual concerned. It meant that they were excluded from church, from the company of Christians and possibly most cruel it was impossible to work or socialise. It was difficult to obtain absolution. Records of excommunication often survive in records that were read out in church.

Sonia concluded by saying that the parish was a tight knit community and that the many records kept by them are invaluable to the family historian.

A vote of thanks was given by Roy Pidcock.