

Coroners' Inquests

Legal Records Information 30

1. Introduction

It has been the duty of coroners since 1194 to investigate the circumstances of unnatural, sudden, or suspicious deaths, and deaths in prison. Until 1926 all inquests were held before a jury. The main surviving record of the coroners' hearings is usually the individual inquest or inquisition, giving the verdict, name, date, time, cause and place of death with the signatures of the jurors. In most cases, supporting evidence does not survive, although when it does it can be very illuminating of social conditions at the time. More modern inquests include medical evidence. Although The National Archives hold many records relating to medieval and early modern coroners' inquests, the majority of surviving post mid-eighteenth century records of inquests are not here. The exception is, if the inquest resulted in a murder or manslaughter trial, when a copy should be found with the trial record in The National Archives. The first work that an enquirer after any inquest, medieval or modern, should look at is *Coroners' records in England and Wales* by Jeremy Gibson and Colin Rogers (Genealogical Publishing Company Jan, 1998).

2. Modern Coroners' Records

From 1752 to 1860, coroners were required to file their inquests at the Quarter Sessions, and so they are preserved among the records of Quarter Sessions, mainly at local record offices. Later records have also been deposited in local record offices, although some records are retained by the present day coroners. Details of many locally held coroners' records can be found by searching [Access to Archives \(a2a\)](#). In the keyword or phrase box, type 'Coroner', in the 'Location of Archives' use the drop down list to identify the archive, or use the 'English Region or Wales' to identify the region if the archive's location is unknown. For contact details of local county record offices use [ARCHON](#), an online list of archives and repositories in the UK.

Surviving records include indexed registers of reported deaths, all papers dated before 1875 and cases of general public, scientific, forensic, social, local, industrial or historical interest along with papers relating to treasure trove. For more information about records relating to treasure trove see [Archaeology - Sources in The National Archives](#). Additionally, a random sample of other papers may also be kept, although coroners are free to keep all their records. For more information about the selection of modern coroners records see Operation Selection Policy OSP 6: [Records created by and relating to coroners](#). However, from the nineteenth century a newspaper report is more likely to be the only surviving account. These can be seen in local libraries and the Newspaper Library, Colindale Avenue, London NW9 5HE www.bl.uk/collections/newspapers

Coroners' records in England and Wales by J Gibson and C Rogers lists the surviving holdings for each county, both at The National Archives and elsewhere: this can be seen at the reference desks. It includes a list of coroners' districts arranged by county, which has been taken from Atlas of Coroners' Districts, 1888-1902 in [HO 84/3](#).

Coroners' records more than 75 years are normally open. Records held by the coroner which are less than 30 years old are open only at the discretion of the coroner. Apply to the coroner in the first instance. This includes records held at local archives but not formally transferred under s.4(1) of the 1958 Public Records Act.

Records deposited under s.4(1) with local archives (normally, but not always, over 30 years old) and less than 75 years old may be accessible on written application under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act. Applications should be made to the local archive in the first instance. The application will be judged on a case by case basis against possible exemptions. Matters for consideration might include the age of the records, living friends and family of the deceased, and the nature of the content of the records. It is possible that some information may be released under FOI, and some withheld, the right is not necessarily one of access to the original record.

Where there are special circumstances (e.g. access for legal purposes, close family of the deceased etc), it is possible that conditional access might be granted to them specifically even if general public access FOI is not possible. Evidence of such reasons is unnecessary but it may be helpful to provide details if access outside the Act is acceptable to the applicant, as the local archive can then consider both aspects

of the access request at the same time, and speed up the process of conditional access if access under FOI is refused.

4. Early Modern Coroners' Records

From 1487 to 1752 (although irregularly from about 1700) coroners were required to hand over records of all their inquests to the assize judges. The judges returned them into King's Bench on their return from the Lent and Lammas assizes, and they were filed on the indictments files for Michaelmas and Easter, in KB 9 and [KB 11](#). Western circuit assize judges appear to have continued collecting coroners' inquests until 1820 ([KB 13](#)). The earlier inquests for Nottinghamshire and Sussex, and for Wiltshire, 1752-1796, have been published by R F Hunnisett (see the bibliography), whose works should be consulted for procedure and interpretation. There are also some inquests among the London and Middlesex Indictments, 1675-1845, in [KB 10](#), and Indictments 1846-1926 in [KB 12](#). There are also coroners' inquisitions, 1748-1808, mostly from the Western assize circuit, in [KB 13](#). There are further records in [KB 140](#) and [KB 33](#) 12/3.

5. Medieval Coroners' Records

Very few early records survive. Until 1330 rolls had to be handed in to the eyre justices. From 1337 until about 1420 coroners had to present their rolls to the Court of King's Bench when it visited their county. Most of the rolls and files, 1128-1426 are now in [JUST 2](#), although some are in [JUST 1](#), [JUST 3](#) and under the specific references [DL 41/11](#); [CHES 17/13](#), rot 68; [CHES 18/1](#), rots 1-12. Some of the Coroners' Rolls have been transcribed in *Select Cases from the Coroners' Rolls 1265-1413, with a brief account of the history of the coroner* (Selden Society, vol. IX, 1896) and others have been printed mainly in county history series. There are cross-references to these publications in the series lists. There are also records where pardons were sought, in connection with criminal trials in [C 260](#), the Recorda Files, examples of which have been printed in *Sussex Archaeological Collections* vol XCV (1957) and vol XCVI (1958), and copies of inquests sent into Chancery were sometimes enrolled on the Patent Rolls in [C 66](#). These have been printed in the *Calendar of Patent Rolls*.

6. Coroners' Records From Other Jurisdictions

Jurisdiction	Date Range	Catalogue reference
Palatinate of Chester	1339-1850 (mostly 1714-1850)	CHES 18
Palatinate of Chester	1798-1891	ASSI 66
Palatinate of Lancaster: see also the informative depositions in PL 27	1626-1832	PL 26/285-295
Duchy of Lancaster (parts of Cheshire, Essex, Middlesex, Norfolk, Surrey and Yorkshire)	1817-1896	DL 46
King's Bench prison	1746-1839	KB 14
Millbank Penitentiary	1848-1863	PCOM 2/165
High Court of Admiralty: prisoners and those who died on or in the Thames	?	HCA 1
North and North-Eastern Circuit: Yorkshire and Westmoreland	1830-1890	ASSI 47/24-73

7. Records Associated with Criminal Trials

Inquisitions related to murder and manslaughter trials were retained among the assizes and Central Criminal Court records, and are kept with the indictments. See [Criminal Trials at the Assizes](#), [English Assizes](#) and [Criminal Trials at the Old Bailey](#). [CRIM 2](#), 1921-1966, are calendars of depositions, including those sent from the coroners' courts, which give a note of any attachments or exhibits accompanying the depositions.

8. Bibliography

- J Gibson and C Rogers, *Coroners' records in England and Wales* (Genealogical Publishing Company, 1998).
- R F Hunnisett, *The Medieval Coroner* (Cambridge, 1961)
- R F Hunnisett, *Calendar of Nottinghamshire Coroners' Inquests, 1485-1558*, Thoroton Society, vol XXV (1969)
- R F Hunnisett, *Sussex Coroners' Inquests, 1485-1558*, Sussex Record Society, vol LXXIV (1985)
- R F Hunnisett, *Sussex Coroners' Inquests 1558-1603* (PRO, 1996)
- R F Hunnisett, *Sussex Coroner's Inquests 1603-1688* (PRO, 1998)
- *The Medieval Coroners' Rolls* (The American Journal of Legal History), Vol. 3, No. 3 (Jul., 1959), pp. 205-22

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