

The Coroner

It is important to point out that any searchers interested in coroners' records that are less than 75 years old have to apply personally to the Coroner in the first instance. Contact details for the Oxfordshire Coroner are: coroners.oxfordshire@oxfordshire.gov.uk

The office of Coroner was established under Article 20 of the Articles of Eyre in 1194, and his duty was to: "keep the pleas of the Crown" (the Latin for which is: "custos placitorum coronas", and it is from this phrase that the word 'coroner' is derived). The coroner's main duty was to protect the financial interest of the crown. In the years following the Norman Conquest many Normans were being killed by the local communities. In an effort to stop this, a fine was introduced on every dead body found in a village, the assumption being that the body was that of a Norman. This was known as the 'Presumption of Normanry'. It was up to the village to prove that it was not a Norman, and this was known as the 'Presentment of Englishry'. The fine was known as a 'Murdrum', and it is from this word that the word 'murder' is derived. One of the duties of the early coroners was to hold inquests that dealt with the 'Presumption of Normanry'.

The coroner had the administrative task of "keeping the pleas" but under Chapter 24 of the Magna Carta of 1215, no sheriff, constable, coroner or bailiff could take on the judicial task of "holding the pleas". This was to be done by judges who travelled the country holding Assize courts. During the period 1487-1700, coroners submitted their inquests to the Assize courts.

From the 13th century, most coroners' jurisdictions were roughly by county, although some were responsible for specific boroughs or liberties. For almost six hundred years (1340-1926), the only qualification the coroner needed was to be a landholder. From 1926 they were required to have medical or legal qualifications.

From 1752 to 1860 the county coroners had to submit claims to the Quarter Sessions for fees incurred. From 1835 the borough coroners were able to make similar claims for payment of fees, under the Municipal Corporations Act). Magistrates could, and often did, question these claims and sometimes payment was refused. After 1860 the county coroners were salaried.

Since 1926 most inquests are held without a jury, however a coroner may decide to appoint a jury, and in certain cases a jury is required. The inquest is held in public unless there is a threat to national security. Newspapers have reported cases for over 200 years, and particularly for the 100 years before the Second World War, a newspaper report is more likely to be found than a coroners' record.

Key Dates

1194 - Office of coroner established under Article 20 of the Articles of Eyre

1215 – Magna Carta – decreed that coroners could not “hold the pleas”

1844 – Coroners’ Act – county coroners were elected by freeholders of the district, in pursuance of a Writ de Coronatore Eligendo addressed to the sheriff

1860 – County coroners received a salary

1887 – Coroners’ Act – repealed much of the earlier legislation, particularly with regard to the fiscal responsibilities of the coroner

1888 – Local Government Act – provided for the appointment of coroners by the County Council, in pursuance of a Writ de Coronatore Eligendo addressed to the County Council

1892 – Coroners’ Act – provided for the appointment of Deputy Coroners by the Coroners

1926 – Coroners’ (Amendment) Act – abolished the de Coronatore Eligendo procedure – coroners now had to have medical or legal qualifications

Where are these records?

Oxfordshire History Centre

The bulk of the collection of coroners’ records held at OHC is for the 20th century, with many gaps in the early years. All that survives for the 19th century are a few index registers, and these only give name, date of inquest and place of inquest.

County and Borough coroners bills, or vouchers, can be found in the Quarter Sessions records (county coroners, 1752-1860; borough coroners, 1835-1887). Some coroners’ papers are held under the reference: COR. I-IX. These records include: election of district coroners; coroners’ returns; salaries and fees; correspondence; and papers relating to jurisdiction.

Newspapers are held on film at OHC.

The National Archives

From 1487 to 1700 coroners handed all their inquests to the Assize courts, and those that resulted in trials at the Assizes are to be found among the Assize records. However, those inquests that did not result in a trial at Assizes were

forwarded to King's Bench. Chancery records also contain records of inquests on which pardons were based. For more information see: [The National Archives](#)

Where is the catalogue

The coroners' records held at Oxfordshire History Centre are not available online.

[Visiting and contacting the Oxfordshire History Centre.](#)