

LHG Workshop on Reading Deeds and Manorial Registers, 6 December 2019

Run by Caroline Adams

Understanding the parcel of deeds relating to our property in East St had always been on the backburner until we started looking at the history of our street in 2018. Then the realisation dawned that paperwork of this kind is better kept in The Keep, so before we hand them over we wanted to decipher and tap them for any relevant information they might hold.

Therefore, we signed up for this three-hour course. I had already attended Caroline's Palaeography day earlier in the autumn, and that had revealed a whole new world behind ancient calligraphy.

Caroline had what, superficially, might have appeared to be a clear brief: to explain how to understand deeds and manorial records. She gave us a framework for the key elements of old property deeds. However, there are many different types, plus the requirements of her audience were tremendously varied both in terms of location, era, and whether the documents they needed to access referred to urban or rural property.

The first new word, of many, I learned during the morning was 'messuage' - a dwelling house with outbuildings and land assigned to its use. (Apologies to any reader who knew this already, but this does illustrate my starting point.)

Next Caroline tackled the topic of manorial registers. For this she had constructed a fictitious manor (Maiden Heaven) to illustrate the key points and considerations using a subtle level of humour to retain our attention.

We were lucky to have other delegates who had more than a passing acquaintance with the subject and their contributions were gratefully received, but really served to show how complex and varied this area of historical research is. Caroline, from her work as an archivist, illustrated how important the ability to decipher these documents can be in modern day life, as well as for historical research. She described a case where lack of attention to their detail had resulted in the acquisition of a field for a building project with a single access track to which the new owner had no right to use, and hence no ability to carry out the intended development.

Caroline did succeed in allowing us to unlock our own pile of deeds and the one we unfolded for the first time at the workshop revealed a contract between two women in the mid-19th century. It related to the sale of outbuildings in what had been the end of our garden and is now under the tarmac of Little East Street. Fascinating reading, but not easy!

Sarah & Peter Earl