

REVIEW – Records of Medieval Newmarket (SIAH, 45:4 2024).

Records of Medieval Newmarket. Manor Court Rolls 1399–1413 and Manor Account Rolls 1403–1483 (Suffolk Records Society, vol. 66). Edited by James Davis and Joanne Sear. xxxix + 318 pp., illustrations, appendix, two indices. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press for the Suffolk Records Society, 2023. ISBN 978 1 83765 012 5. Price £85 hb, £24.99 Ebook.

As a place that experienced growth in both physical infrastructure and commercial activity during the fifteenth century, Newmarket to some extent bucked the trend among small towns of the late Middle Ages, many of which suffered economic problems and stagnation. Newmarket was a ‘late developer’; as James Davis and Joanne Sear explain in their valuable editorial introduction to this volume, although a trading venue was established on the site around 1200, it was not until the fifteenth century that Newmarket fully established itself. It did so through its role as an important marketing hub for producers and consumers living within its immediate hinterland as well as for traders from further afield. Newmarket’s success was due in large part to its transport links — its place at the centre of a relatively dense network of roads is obvious to any visitor today — and to the presence of institutional structures which, as Davis and Sear argue, were especially well suited to encouraging trade. The town’s fifteenth-century fortunes can be traced in great detail thanks to the survival of the excellent series of court rolls and account rolls relating to the manor of Newmarket that are presented in this volume. These are prefaced by an Introduction which describes the records, provides essential background on medieval Newmarket (including several excellent maps), and picks out important topics illustrated by the sources such as the development of the town’s marketplace and the presence of women among its traders and property holders. The volume also features as an appendix two royal charters granted to Newmarket’s lord; a helpful glossary; and indices of persons and places, and of subjects.

The chronological overlap between court rolls and account rolls is slight, since the court rolls cover the years 1399–1413, and there is just a single comparatively short account roll for the year 1403/04. The next account roll in date is that of 1428/29, the first in a run that extends to 1439/40. The majority of the other surviving accounts form a sequence of ten extending from 1473/74 to 1482/83. Despite this, the two types of record can provide a complementary perspective on life in the town. The account rolls also shed some light on the frequency and revenues of the courts, through the detail in their ‘profits of the courts’ sections.

There are rolls for four different types of Newmarket court: a general court, a market court, a leet court, and a fair court. In their introduction the editors discuss the matters typically dealt with in each type of court, as revealed by its rolls, and point out that the division of business is not quite what one might expect on the basis of standard discussions of local court jurisdiction.

Perhaps the most important areas on which the court rolls shed light collectively are interpersonal litigation (mainly about debt), trading offences, and the transfer of shops and stalls. The trading offences are very various, covering matters such as prices, weights and measures, forestalling, regrating, and the illegal reheating of food. As one would expect, there is also a good deal of information concerning the enforcement of the assizes of bread and ale. The court rolls provide abundant evidence of the involvement of residents of Newmarket’s hinterland in exchange, both in the records of trading offences and in the civil litigation. Many lawsuits feature outsiders as both plaintiff and defendant. Litigation falls mainly in the market court, which of the four was the court held

most frequently, and the one which has left fullest records. This court evidently enjoyed the power to secure the appearance of non-residents of Newmarket via the processes of attachment and distraint. Many of the goods seized in attachment and distraint appear to have been of relatively high value, such as the three horses and a cart worth 40s by which Thomas Tapstere and his wife Agnes were attached to answer a claim of 14s 10d in 1409. This feature suggests the efficacy of the Newmarket courts in enforcing agreements. Claims in excess of the 40-shilling jurisdictional limit which prevailed in most 'ordinary' manor courts are common in Newmarket's market court. The records of the leet courts feature numerous entries concerning assault, which are characterized by interesting variations in format, and by the presence of people — both assailants and victims, described as 'servant'.

The particular strength of the account rolls is the high level of detail that is given in the dense sections that concern stalls and shops. The fullest of these sections detail the holders and former holders of the stalls and shops, the location of the relevant properties, and the rents they paid. This rich information permits the researcher to track Newmarket's retailing infrastructure over time, something that the editors make a start on in their introduction. In the later accounts this detailed information on shops, stalls and on plots of land held from the manor disappears, as it was evidently preserved in a separate rental.

This edition has been prepared with immense care. The text is essentially an English translation of the originals, but alongside the translations of the earliest example of each of the four types of court roll, and of the earliest account roll, the editors provide photographs of the original documents plus a Latin transcription. Elsewhere the editors sometimes give the Latin for some difficult phrases but, as is perhaps inevitable with a translation of record material of this kind, there are a few oddities or obscurities in the English text where one would like to be able to see the original in order to tease out the meaning for oneself. However, the reader cannot have everything, and the editors and the Suffolk Records Society are to be congratulated for making this rewarding and unusual material accessible to a wide range of readers and researchers in such a scholarly yet user-friendly format.

CHRIS BRIGGS