

REVIEW – Monks Eleigh Manorial Records, 1210-1683 (SIAH, 45:4 2024)

Monks Eleigh Manorial Records, 1210–1683. (Suffolk Records Society, vol. 65). Edited by Vivienne Aldous. lv + 370 pp. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press for the Suffolk Records Society, 2022. ISBN 978 1 78327 679 0. Price £90.00 hb, £24.99 Ebook.

This edited collection of Monks Eleigh documents contains a selection of manorial records, alongside charters and legal documents concerning a fifteenth-century affray, relating to the Suffolk manor of Monks Eleigh. It forms part of the Suffolk Records Society's (SRS) excellent series, which publishes volumes focused on original historical documents. The volume is preceded by three short pieces commemorating two former SRS leading lights: David Dymond (by Heather Falvey) and Victor Gray (by Harvey Osborne); and John Weller (by the editor and Harvey Osborne), the researcher responsible for commissioning much of the translation and transcription of the volume's documents. The volume is broadly split between a substantial introduction, numbering some fifty-two pages, and the translated or transcribed documents. The latter section is divided by document type as follows: charters, extents, accounts, building accounts, court rolls, rentals; with a final section relating to a petition and legal documents concerning a riot in 1481.

The excellent introduction covers a wide range of pertinent themes. It begins with a history of the manor's ownership, from Ælfgar in the tenth century, to the priory of Christ Church, Canterbury — later Canterbury Cathedral — under whose ownership it remained (excepting a hundred or so year period during the interregnum) before its transfer to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, whose successors still hold the manor. Further sections focus on the priory's management of its East Anglian estates, specifically emphasising food-farm, or the maintenance of the priory's religious community; the management of the demesne, and ecclesiastical and manorial officials. Additional sections in this part of the introduction include a focus on tenants, rents and labour services; and on the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Each section offers a detailed overview, helping non-specialist readers to understand the historical background, and placing the experience at Monks Eleigh into context for the period. The introduction then goes on to present each of the document types featured in the volume in turn, explaining that their selection here was driven by the choices made by Weller during his original research. Again, each section offers a thorough, first-rate overview, helping the reader by building a rich picture of medieval and early modern Monks Eleigh — especially useful for non-specialist readers.

Notwithstanding the limitations of documents of this type, they nevertheless offer a wealth of evidence for life in medieval and early modern Monks Eleigh. We learn much about the agrarian operation of the demesne, how it was managed, and how tenants provided additional labour as part of their rents. There is detailed information, for instance on 'mondaylands', held by customary tenants who owed labour on the demesne every Monday, each holding contributing eighty works every year or the cash equivalent. These documents not only elucidate what was owed by tenants to the lord, but also what the lord was obliged to give the tenants in return for their customary labour at harvest-time, which in the later thirteenth century included a beef carcass, 200 herring, wheat and rye, cheese, peas, garlic and salt. There are references to virgin land being used for cultivation: glebe land was broken up for sowing rye and barley in 1285/6, and in 1310/11, turf was taken up to grow barley. In amongst the usual tasks that are expected to feature within manorial account rolls from this period, there are occasional hidden gems that offer up a more detailed glimpse of the work of the rural labourer, including restoring vines in the vineyard, making a ditch flanked with poplar and blackthorn, and

making cider. Separate building accounts offer an interesting window upon the manorial infrastructure, which by 1407 included both an inner and outer courtyard.

The court rolls are fairly typical for the period, offering insights into the ways in which local society was organised. It was here that officials were elected, death duties were recorded, customary land was transferred, and petty crimes were adjudicated. The business of the leet court focused on civil responsibilities, assessing such matters as the regulation of bread, ale, and the sale of other commodities such as meat and fish; affray; and the management of the infrastructure of the vill, such as roads, bridges and watercourses. There is so much here of interest to social historians: from peasants failing to perform labour services; to the tenants of 'smytheslond', whose rent was paid in iron each year for the lord's plough; and a wonderfully detailed late sixteenth-century entry accusing Richard Aggas of keeping 'a common alehowse and ... receive[ing] into the same gestes of ill behaviour, and keeping ill rule in the tyme of devine service to the prophanynge of the lordes day...'.

The rentals are of particular interest. The first one in this collection — dated 1379/80 — not least because the expenses for its production are included in the accounts featured in the same volume, and from which we learn that the document took ninety-four days to produce, offering a rare glimpse of the production process for documents of this type. The collection takes us from the late fourteenth century to the late seventeenth century, and it is possible to trace several of the holdings over the course of this three hundred year period. The final set of documents relate to a local riot in 1481, and will no doubt interest both local readers and historians interested in disorder.

The volume concludes with a very useful glossary, which includes key saints' days alongside an explanation for medieval and early modern terms found within the text. Occasionally, I felt that more could have been added to this. What, for example, is a 'tye' (p.144)? This is possibly a word that is well known to Suffolk readers (The English Dialect Dictionary suggests 'an extensive common pasture or field; a large common', a term common to Suffolk, Essex, Kent and Sussex), but is less likely to be known more generally. Whilst the analysis is generally careful and thoughtful, a reference to rights of 'herbage' on an alder-holt being described as 'coppicing' jars slightly, since coppicing would usually be referred to as 'underwood' (pp.xxxv and 5). Spread throughout are many plates featuring Weller's hand drawn maps, which occasionally also include sketches of the landscape. Whilst these are a wonderful addition, some of them can be quite difficult to read, and may have been better as fold-outs. Overall, though, this is a very well-produced and edited volume that is a wonderful addition to the series, and that has much to offer readers of all kinds, whether their interest is local or general.

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