



Somerset Archive and Record Service

Information Leaflet

Coroners Records in Somerset

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CORONERS RECORDS

Introduction

Today, coroners are independent judicial officers who are responsible for enquiring into the medical causes of sudden and unexpected, unnatural, violent or suspicious deaths. The office was formally established in 1194, when its duties were more those of a medieval tax gatherer and included the investigation of almost any aspect of medieval life, that had the potential benefit of revenue for the Crown. Sudden death in the community has always been considered important and was investigated by the coroner, although for fiscal rather than judicial reasons. For example suicides were investigated, on the grounds that the goods and chattels of those found guilty of the crime would then be forfeit to the crown, accidental deaths, such as being run over by a cart, were investigated as the offending article was then confiscated. All coroners investigated cases of violent death, fires and the finding of hidden treasure and those in maritime counties investigated shipwrecks.

At first the Crown appointed coroners, later the office became one elected by the freeholders of the county. Since 1888 the County Council has appointed coroners. The sole qualification until 1926 was that the coroner should be a landholder. Today, a coroner must be a medical practitioner or lawyer.

Not all deaths are reported to a coroner. It is usually done if the death has occurred in suspicious or unforeseen circumstances such as:

- by violence or accident
- within prison or police custody
- an industrial disease such as pneumonicosis
- during an operation or under anaesthetic
- if the deceased has not been seen by a doctor in the previous 14 days

If a death is reported, the coroner gathers all the relevant information surrounding the death in order to make a decision about the cause. If there are questions concerning the causes of death the coroner may arrange for a post-mortem examination to be carried out. If this shows that the death was not due to natural causes the coroner will then hold an inquest, the purpose of which is to find out the cause of death, and to provide the particulars needed for its registration. It is not the coroner's responsibility to establish who is to blame for the death.

The four main questions to be answered at an Inquest are: who was the deceased and how, when and where did they meet their death?

Prior to 1926 all inquests were held with a jury, from 1926, although a jury can be called, the majority of cases are heard in public without one and they are very often reported in local newspapers or the national press, if the inquest is one of public interest. A coroner has similar powers to a magistrate and can insist that witnesses attend an inquest to give evidence in the case. However, witnesses can refuse to answer any question that may incriminate them.

Somerset Coroners' Records

With the exception of Carhampton Hundred and the Boroughs of Langport and Bridgwater (see below), Somerset has few coroners' records prior to the 1920's. At this time the county was divided into three divisions, North, West and South East, each with its own coroner. In 1974, due to Local Government reorganisation, the Northern Division was abolished and there are now the two divisions of East and West. If you know or suspect that an inquest was held, it is always worth checking the local newspaper for a report. Microfilm copies of nearly all Somerset newspapers are held at the Somerset Studies Library, Paul Street, Taunton, telephone 01823 340300, email somstud@somerset.gov.uk.

East Somerset (ref: C\CR\SE)

- Account books, 1929-1965 (C\CR\SE/1)
- Registers of deaths, 1955-1989 (C\CR\SE/1)
- List of cases destroyed, 1929-1971 (C\CR\SE/1)
- Inquests and natural causes, 1929-2005 (C\CR\SE/2-181)

West Somerset (ref: C\CR\W)

- Account books, 1935-1964 (C\CR\W/2-3)
- Inquest lists, 1971-1983 (C\CR\W/1)
- Inquests and natural causes, 1931-2002 (C\CR\W/4-265)

North Somerset (ref: C\CR\N)

- Correspondence, 1934-1947 (C\CR\N/1)
- Annual reports, 1932-1937 (C\CR\N/2)
- Daily records, 1928-1970 (C\CR\N/6-8, 24-28)
- Registers of deaths reported, 1953-1972 (C\CR\N/8, 22-23, 29)
- Inquests, 1946-1954, 1968-1973 (C\CR\N/40-43)

Miscellaneous (ref: C\CR\MISC/1)

- Appointments, fees, salaries and returns, 1889-1930 (C\CR\MISC/1)

Carhampton Hundred

- Coroner's roll, 1315-1321 (Published in Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries 31 p.322) (DD\L/P/31/1)

Bridgwater Borough (ref: D\B\BW)

- Inquests, 1717-1751 (D\B\BW/1917/1-72)

Langport Borough (ref: D\B\LA)

- Inquests, 1669-1867, incomplete series (D\B\LA/32/1-77)
- Inquests, 1868-1886 (D\B\LA/97)

Other material

- Daily record including inquests in Bishops Lydeard police district, 1880-1926 (DD\ASC/6/1/1)
- As above, Ilminster police district, 1880-1904 (DD\ASC/6/1/7)
- Coroner's records including inquests, South East division, 1929-1930 (DD\LC/26/1)
- Coroner's accounts, South East division, 1872-96 (DD\LC/32/1-2)
- Transcripts of depositions in inquests, South East division, 1895 (DD\S\TA/1)
- Transcripts of depositions in inquests, Bishops Lydeard, Dunster and Skilgate, 1838-1839 (DD\X\JF/15)
- Details of inquests on infants under 12 months, no places given, 1844-1849 (Q\C/4/7-9)

Access by the public

All files are closed for 75 years with the exception of Treasure Trove files, which are closed for 50 years.

Permission to see files within the closure periods must be obtained from the relevant Coroner.

For the **North Somerset** division records contact Avon Coroner, The Courthouse, Old Weston Road, Flax Bourton, BS48 1UI

For the **South East** division records contact East Somerset Coroner, Argyle House, Bath Street, Frome, BA11 1DP

For **West Somerset** division records contact West Somerset Coroner, Blackbrook Gate, Blackbrook Park Avenue, Taunton, TA1 2PG

North Somerset division records after 1971 and Bristol City records from 1936 are held at the Bristol Record Office, B Bond Warehouse, Smeaton Road, Bristol, BS1 6XN.

Inquests for the **Bath** area 1776-1835, 1929-1950, 1960-1962, 1968 to late 1980's are held at the Bath and North East Somerset Record Office, Guildhall, High Street, Bath, BA1 5AW.

Bibliography

J D K Burton, D R Chambers and P S Gill *Coroners' Enquiries* 1985

C Gross *Select Cases from the Coroners rolls 1265-1413 with a brief account of the office of Coroner* Selden Society vol. 9 1896

R F Hunnisett *The Medieval Coroner* 1961

G Thurston *The Coroners' Practice* 1958

A series of historical novels on "Crownor John" of Exeter (late 12th century) by Bernard Knight, a former Home Office Pathologist and Professor of Forensic Pathology at the University of Wales, are good for details of an early coroner's responsibilities

http://www.yrtk.org/wp-content/20050531_coroners_districts.doc lists the jurisdictions and contact details of all Coroners' officers

Contact details

Somerset Record Office
Obridge Road
Taunton
TA2 7PU

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01823 278805 (Enquiries)
01823 325402 (Fax)

Website : www.somerset.gov.uk/archives

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