

RESEARCH GUIDE

41 - Coroners records for London and Middlesex

Introduction to coroners records held at London Metropolitan Archives

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Introduction

London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) holds coroners' records for the City of London and Southwark and for the former counties of London and Middlesex and, from 1965, for Greater London. The primary purpose of the appointed coroner in England, since the establishment of the office in the early middle ages, has been to investigate sudden, unnatural or unexplained deaths, as well as the deaths of prisoners. Coroners would also be consulted in the event of treasure trove - lost, abandoned, or concealed, gold and silver.

Although it was preferred, it was not necessary for the coroner to have medical or legal qualifications (he was often a significant local landowner). Money to pay for medical witnesses and post mortem examinations was not provided until 1836. The Coroners Act of 1926 made it requisite for a coroner to be a qualified barrister, solicitor, or legally qualified medical practitioner, with a minimum of five years' working experience.

In the event of a violent or unexpected death, the coroner would visit the scene where the body lay and call upon the service of a jury of between twelve and twenty three 'good and lawful' men. (Until civil legislation in 1926, a jury was required in such matters.) An inquest would then be undertaken usually - for convenience - in the local inn. For instance, the inquest into the death of a Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval, was held at the Rose and Crown in Downing Street on 12 May 1812. When the London County Council was established in 1889 it became responsible for the appointment and payment of coroners within the county and for the provision of inquest accommodation. A committee was appointed in 1892 to deal with the provision of satisfactory accommodation for coroners' courts. As a result the practice of holding inquests in public houses in London had ceased by 1901.

Coroners' records were regarded as the personal property of the coroner and on the death of a coroner records were liable to be destroyed. From 1921 the Public Record Office required all surviving records dating from before 1875 to be retained permanently, but advised that more recent

records need only be kept for 15 years. Consequently for the Counties of London and Middlesex many coroners' records have not survived.

When original records do not survive, an alternative source of information about the inquest may be a contemporary local newspaper. LMA does not hold copies of local newspapers. These may be in the possession of either the local reference/history library for the district in which the inquest was held or the British Library.

Second World War

During the Second World War it was not necessary for coroners to hold inquests into the deaths of many air raid victims. Defence Regulation 1939 No. 30 provided that a body might be interred and the death registered if a certificate was given by an authorised person that the death was due to war operations; ' - - - a coroner shall not be obliged or authorised to take any action in relation to any death if he is satisfied that the death occurred in consequence of war operations'. This was amended by Regulation 30A on 14 March 1941 which required that an inquest should be held if an authorised person had reason to believe that a death might have occurred in consequence of war operations but a body could not be recovered or could not be identified.

Access

Coroners' inquests before 1 January 1968: these records are now closed to public consultation for a period of 75 years from the date of their creation, while LMA reviews its access policy in the light of Data Protection legislation.

Coroners' inquests from 1 January 1968: these records are held by LMA on behalf of respective coroners, who retain indexes and other finding aids to the records. Applications for access to these records must therefore be addressed in the first instance to the appropriate coroner.

Information required

To begin your search, the following information is required:

- The name of the deceased
- The date of the death or inquest
- The location of the death or inquest

From 1 January 1875 certificates of all inquests had to be sent to the local registrars and the details entered in the registers of deaths. Therefore certificates of deaths after that date will state whether an inquest was performed and on what date.

Once in possession of these details, it is necessary to consult the District/Parish Index in order to establish which Coroner's District may have adjudicated on the death. Summaries and more detailed lists of surviving records for each district have then to be examined before any documents can be ordered from the strong-rooms.

The District/Parish Index is in Binder One, 'Coroners', of the Courts sequence on the open shelves. A copy of the index is also kept behind the counter in the Information Area. Please consult a member of staff for advice.

Types of records

The coroners' records held in the LMA fall into these main categories:

- Inquest or inquisition, This is a one page document, giving the verdict, name date, time, cause and place of death with the signatures of the jurors
- Depositions are the statements of witnesses to assist in the proceedings of an inquest and may contain more information about the particulars of a death.
- Registers of inquests received directly from coroners and covering the years 1856- 1965 (with many gaps) for the Counties of Middlesex and London.
The register of inquests should note inquest date, name of deceased, address and place of death, cause of death, the verdict, and the coroners' expenses. They do not add significantly to the information contained in a death certificate.
- Case papers. The handwriting of many 19th and some 20th century coroners' inquests in LMA is very poor, and sometimes illegible. In the worst cases, you might have to see press reports for details

City of London

Before 1478 the King's Chamberlain was King's Butler and Coroner for the City. In 1478 the City of London Corporation was granted the right to appoint its own Coroner for the City of London, and has done so ever since. LMA holds Coroner's inquests for the City of London (including St Bartholomew's Hospital.)

Coroner's inquests for the City before 1788

A City of London Coroner's roll of 1272-1273 is held by The National Archives. Most other City of London and Southwark Coroners' inquests before 1788 are in LMA. All the medieval Coroner's inquests held by LMA have been edited and published. Inquests, many earlier than the eyres themselves, are included *The London Eyre of 1244* ed. HM Chew and M Weinbaum (London Record Society Vol. 6, 1970) and *The London Eyre of 1276* ed. M Weinbaum (LRS Vol. 12, 1976). A copy of the Coroner's rolls for 1276-1278 is published in the *Calendar of ... Letter Book B* ed. RR Sharpe (London, 1900). These are all available on British History Online at <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/place.aspx?region=1>

LMA holds Coroner's Rolls 1300-1378 (with gaps) (CLA/041/IQ/01/001-009), edited and published in the *Calendar of Coroner's Rolls of the City of London 1300-1378* ed. RR Sharpe (London, 1913). One gap in the series is partially filled by a Coroner's Roll for the City of London 1315-1316, held by The National Archives. A 19th century transcript and translation of this roll (and some of LMA rolls) is available as 'Coroners' rolls for London, 1300-77. Transcript, with an English translation, extracted chiefly from Corporation records' (CLC/511/MS00126).

We also have a Coroner's roll of 1590 (CLA/041/IQ/01/011), with a manuscript calendar, including inquests on Newgate prisoners. This has been published in "London Coroner's Inquests for 1590" by TR Forbes in *Journal of the History of Medicine & Allied Sciences* XXVIII, 4, Oct 1973, pp 376-386.

The City of London Sessions Papers includes some depositions made c.1670s-1780s before the Coroner for the City of London in cases where a trial was subsequently held at the Sessions.

Coroner's inquests for the City after 1788

LMA has a complete series of Coroner's inquests and depositions for the City of London 1788-1995 (CLA/041/IQ/02-05).

Indexes to City of London inquests 1861-1901 are available on microfilm X085/183. Paper indexes for both the City of London and Southwark 1788-1860 and 1901-1927 are on the open shelves in the Information Area.

The inquests and depositions for 1788-1799 have been digitised by the London Lives 1690-1800 project and can be searched and viewed on their website.

The records of the City of London Coroner include the inquest on Catherine Eddowes, a Whitechapel murder victim. A complete photocopy is available of the papers relating to this inquest dated 4 October 1888 (CLA/041/IQ/3/65/135).

LMA has inquest records for the City's prisons (including Newgate, Bridewell, Ludgate and the Compters) and the Fleet in a separate series 1783-1839 (with gaps) (CLA/041/PI). The City Coroner's jurisdiction also covered Holloway Prison 1852-1965 and records of these are amongst the City of London Coroner's inquests and depositions.

The City of London Coroner's inquests series includes inquests on suicides who threw themselves off the Monument. Their names 1788-1842 are listed in A Guide to the Monument.

LMA also holds records of cases of sudden death for which no inquests were held 1901-1937 (CLA/041/NI) and records relating to fire inquests 1888-1947 (CLA/041/FI).

Treasure-Trove

Treasure trove is any gold or silver coin or other object hidden in the earth or other private place. It belongs to the crown, unless its owner claims it. The City's jurisdiction over treasure trove in the City of London and Southwark was granted by various charters. Records of treasure trove inquests are amongst the series of Coroner's inquests and depositions in LMA. Some of the more famous artefacts (such as the Cheapside jewellery hoard, found 1912, and items found in Budge Row and at the Temple of Mithras in 1958) are now in the Museum of London (London Wall, London EC2Y 5HN, telephone 020 7600 3699, email info@museumoflondon.org.uk)

Borough of Southwark 1788-1932

In 1550 the City of London Corporation acquired the right to appoint the Coroner of the Borough of Southwark by a charter of Edward VI dated 23 April, and for many years prior to 1932 the same person held the offices of Coroner of both London and Southwark. In 1932, the then Coroner for the City of London and Southwark, Dr. F.J. Waldo, resigned, and the provisions of the Coroners' (Amendment) Act, 1926 came into force. Under this Act, the right to appoint the Coroner for Southwark passed to the London County Council, but the City Corporation retained the right to appoint the Coroner for the City of London

LMA has a complete series of Coroner's inquests for the ancient Borough of Southwark 1788-1932 (including Guy's Hospital, and St Thomas's Hospital before it moved in 1862). In this context, the Borough of Southwark covers only part of the ancient borough, mainly the area near the southern end of London Bridge, and not the larger, post-1900 Metropolitan Borough of Southwark.

For inquests 1788-1837 see CLA/041/IQ/02. For inquests 1838-1932 see CLA/042.

The inquests and depositions for 1788-1799 have been digitised by the London Lives 1690-1800 project and can be searched and viewed on their website.

Indexes to Southwark inquests 1861-1901 are available on microfilm X085/184. Paper indexes for both the City of London and Southwark 1788-1860 and 1901-1927 are on the open shelves in the Information Area.

Princess Alice disaster 1878

LMA holds coroners' papers relating to inquests on the victims of the wreck of the 'Princess Alice' steamship which collided with the steamship 'Bywell Castle' on the River Thames off Tripcock Point, Plumstead Marshes on 3 September, 1878. (COR/PA)

County of Middlesex 1747-1965

The coroners for the County of Middlesex were elected by county freeholders (except in certain liberties) and held the office for life. Coroners' records were regarded as the personal property of the coroner and were often not passed on to the successor in office. The earliest surviving records of inquests held by the coroner for Middlesex came to us not from the coroners' offices, but as part of the Middlesex Sessions records. Under an Act of Parliament of 1752 coroners were paid expenses from the county rates of 20 shillings for each inquest held plus 9d for every mile travelled to view a body and these records were submitted to the accounts committee of the Middlesex Justices in support of such claims. In addition inquests into homicides may be found on the Middlesex Sessions rolls until about 1834 either used as an indictment of the perpetrator or accompanying the indictment. For instance the inquisition into the death of Spencer Perceval, the Prime Minister, who was shot in the lobby of the House of Commons on 11 May 1812 can be found on the Middlesex Sessions Roll for Gaol Delivery for 13 May 1812 together with the record of the trial of his murderer, John Bellingham (OB/SR/452 no.23).

From the 18th century Middlesex was divided into two main coroners' districts, the Eastern and Western Districts. In addition the Liberty of Westminster and the Liberty of the Duchy of Lancaster were franchise districts which had their own coroners. In 1862 a new district was formed, the Central District of Middlesex, by taking 23 parishes and districts from the Western District. In 1888 the Eastern District was divided into two districts, the North Eastern and South Eastern.

On 1 April 1889 part of the County of Middlesex was transferred to the newly created County of London leaving most of the Western District, much reduced areas of the Central and North Eastern Districts (which was renamed the Eastern District, and the Edmonton and Enfield part of the Liberty of the Duchy of Lancaster in Middlesex. Some parishes were transferred from the Western District to the Central District in 1915. In 1926 the Central District and in 1932 Edmonton and Enfield were absorbed into the Eastern District.

In 1889 the power to appoint coroners was transferred to the newly created county councils, though they still lacked any authority over the disposal of the coroners' records. Middlesex County Council started to require candidates for appointment to the post of coroner to agree that, if appointed, they would regard the records as county records. The later records have come to us directly from the coroners' courts. For most of the coroners' districts in Middlesex the inquests and often the depositions survive from either 1889 or 1890 onwards, though with some gaps.

Western District of Middlesex 1753-1965

Returns of accounts of inquests, made by Coroner to the Clerk of the Peace for Middlesex to claim

expenses. These often include formal inquest documents and depositions. 1753-1842 (with many gaps) - MJ/SP/C/W

Records 1750-1800 have been digitised by the London Lives 1690-1800 project and can be searched and viewed on their website.

A detailed list of these has been included in our catalogues which can be searched on our website.

- Coroners' registers 1856-1862, 1941-1965 - COR/A, COR/MW/RX
- Case papers 1890-1894, 1917-1965 - COR/MW
- Photographic exhibits 1960-1965 - COR/MW/PH

Eastern District of Middlesex 1747-1888

Returns of accounts of inquests, made by Coroner to the Clerk of the Peace for Middlesex to claim expenses. These often include formal inquest documents and depositions. 1747, 1777-1838 (with many gaps) - MJ/SP/C/E

A detailed list of these has been included in our catalogues which can be searched on our website.

North Eastern District of Middlesex 1888-1892

Returns of inquests and depositions made by Coroner to the Clerk of the Peace for Middlesex to claim expenses June 1888 - August 1892 - MJ/SP/C/NE (uncatalogued)

After March 1889 these are for Tottenham and Wood Green only because the rest of the district had been transferred to the County of London. As the records are uncatalogued, access is by prior appointment only. However photocopies of the inquest papers relating to Marie Kelly, one of Jack the Ripper's victims, are available on the open shelves with the catalogues of MJ/SP/C.

South Eastern District of Middlesex 1888-1889

No records survive.

Eastern District of Middlesex 1892-1965

- Coroners' registers 1942-1965 - COR/ME/RX
- Case papers 1892-1965 - COR/ME

Central District of Middlesex 1862-1926

- Coroners' registers 1862-1910 - COR/A
- Depositions (in bound volumes, many are unfit for consultation) 1862-1874 - COR/B
- Returns of inquests and depositions made by Coroner to the Clerk of the Peace for Middlesex to claim expenses 1889 (detailed list) - MJ/SP/C/C
- Case papers 1890-1926 - COR/MC

Duchy of Lancaster 1789-1932

The liberty of the Duchy of Lancaster in Middlesex comprised the Savoy area of Westminster and the parishes of Edmonton and Enfield.

- Returns of accounts of inquests, made by Coroner to the Clerk of the Peace for Middlesex to claim expenses 1789, 1828-1829 - MJ/SP/C/LAN
- Inquests for the Duchy of Lancaster, Middlesex 1817-1878 are held by The National Archives (TNA) Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 4DU, telephone 020 8876 3444, email enquiry@nationalarchives.gov.uk.
- Returns of inquests and depositions made by Coroner to the Clerk of the Peace for Middlesex to claim expenses 1884-1889. A detailed list of these has been included in our catalogues which can be searched on our website. - MJ/SP/C/LAN
- Case papers for 12 inquests in the Duchy of Lancaster's franchise district in Clapham, Surrey 1884-1889 (uncatalogued, found with Middlesex records) - MJ/SP/C/LAN
- Case papers for Edmonton and Enfield 1890-1932 - COR/DOL

Liberty of Westminster 1757-1842

Returns of expenses for inquests, made by Coroner to the Clerk of the Peace. With orders to surgeons, and returns of inquests on children and infants 1832-1842 1757-1785. 1814-1842 - WJ/SP/C

City of Westminster inquests c.1760-1879 are held at Westminster Abbey Muniments and Library, London SW1P 3PA, telephone 020 7654 4830, email library@westminster-abbey.org.

Records 1760-1799 have been digitised by the London Lives 1690-1800 project and can be searched and viewed on their website.

County of London 1889-1965

The County of London was formed on 1 April 1889 from parts of Middlesex, Kent and Surrey. In 1892 this new county was divided into eight coroners' districts. Penge was transferred to the County of Kent in 1900. In addition there were four franchise districts within the County, Westminster, the Savoy and Clapham parts of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Borough of Southwark, and Tower Liberty. The Coroners (Amendment) Act 1926 abolished the franchise coronerships with effect from the next vacancy to occur on the office after the passing of the Act. The coroners' districts were reorganised in 1912, 1930, 1940, 1943 and 1956.

In 1890 records in the custody of the coroners were regarded as their personal property and were liable to be destroyed on the death of the coroner. From 1902 the London County Council, which was now responsible for the appointment and payment of coroners as well as for the provision of premises for holding inquests, required candidates for appointment as county coroners to agree, if appointed, they would regard the records as county records and not the property of the coroner. Following receipt of instructions from the Public Record Office in 1921, many coroners' records were transferred to County Hall. The few surviving records for the County of Middlesex dating from before 1875 were preserved, but because of lack of space, all the coroners' inquests and depositions for the County of London dating from after 1875 but before 1927 appear to have been destroyed. From 1927 to 1965 the records were weeded and for most years only a 10% sample of the inquests has been retained. An index to the surviving files can be consulted by staff on request.

Case papers (10% sample) for many districts 1927-1965

Coroners' registers survive for some districts 1889-1954 - COR/A

Greater London area 1965 -

On 1 April 1965 the London County Council and Middlesex County Council ceased to exist. The County of London together with most of the County of Middlesex and parts of Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent and Surrey became the Greater London area.

LMA holds a 10% sample of coroners' inquests for the Greater London area 1965-1968. The surviving files have been included in the index to coroners' files for the County of London which can be consulted by staff on request.

Later records are held on behalf of the coroners. Applications to see these records must be addressed to the appropriate coroner who will hold indexes and registers to the files.

Where to go next

City of Westminster inquests c.1760-1879 are held at Westminster Abbey Muniments and Library, (London SW1P 3PA, telephone 020 7654 4830, email library@westminster-abbey.org).

Some inquest records for Paddington, 1860-1864 are at the City of Westminster Archives Centre, 10 St Ann's Street, London SW1P 2XR, telephone 020 7641 5180, email archives@westminster.gov.uk.

Inquests for the Duchy of Lancaster, Middlesex 1817-1878 are held by The National Archives (TNA), Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 4DU, telephone 020 8876 3444, email enquiry@nationalarchives.gov.uk,

Records relating to medieval and early-modern coroners' inquests are at The National Archives.

Any surviving coroners' records for Kent (including Charlton, Deptford, Greenwich, Lee, Lewisham, Plumstead and Woolwich before 1889) may be held by the Kent History and Library Centre, James Whatman Way, Maidstone, Kent, ME14 1LQ (Tel: 0300 333 6022) email: historyandlibrarycentre@kent.gov.uk

Any surviving coroners' records for Surrey (including Battersea, Bermondsey, Camberwell, Lambeth, Newington, Rotherhithe, Wandsworth and part of Southwark before 1889) may be held by the Surrey History Centre, 130 Goldsworth Road, Woking, Surrey, GU21 6ND (Tel: 01483 518737) email: shs@surreycc.gov.uk

Copies of the City of London's local newspaper, the City Press (succeeded by the City Recorder) from 1857 are held on microfilm by Guildhall Library, Aldermanbury, London EC2P 2EJ, telephone 020 7332 1868, email guildhall.library@cityoflondon.gov.uk.

Contemporary local newspapers may be searched on The British Newspaper Archive at website www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk Alternatively they may be held by the local studies library for the area in which the death or inquest took place or the British Library.

Further Reading

All these publications are available to view in the LMA Library

- Coroners' Records in England & Wales, by Gibson & Rogers (Reference R60.32 GIB)
- Ancestral Trails - the Complete Guide to British Genealogy and British History, by Mark Herber (R61.2 HER)
- Studies in London History edited by Hollaender and Kellaway (R69.0 HOL) includes article on 'The Coroner in Medieval London'
- Tracing Your Ancestors in the Public Record Office by Amanda Bevan (R61.2 BEV)
- Coronership by Gavin Thurston (R21.54 THU)
- Coroner's Practice, by Gavin Thurston (R21.54 THU)
- Jervis on Coroners by W.B. Purchase (R21.54 JER)
- Coroner's Inquests, A Source of Vital Statistics, Westminster, 1761 - 1866 by Greenwald & Greenwald (P21.54 GRE)
- Coroners Courts - Their Lives and Abuses by Edward Nundy (P21.54 NUN)
- The Ancient Office of the Coroner by F.T. Waldo (P21.54 WAL)
- Coroners' Jurisdictions in England & Wales (1909) (P21.54 HOM)