

SOCIAL HISTORY, WOMEN'S HISTORY, AND THE BRITISH ARCHIVE SYSTEM

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When I signed up for Barbara Hanawalt's graduate seminar on the social history of medieval England, I found it extremely difficult to decide on a research topic for the class. Every book we read referred to a bewildering array of archives, libraries, and record offices, and the source materials were not as obvious as the chronicles and saints lives I'd been reading in other classes. None of the topics proffered by Professor Hanawalt caught my interest either. In exasperation, she took me in hand to the library, pointed me at the *Somerset Record Society* and said something like, "I found these sources called churchwardens' accounts. No one has worked on them for a century; surely you can do something with them." My research paper reconstructed one parish's finances, building projects, and liturgical life using these financial records along with deeds, wills, and local tax records. What was

immediately striking to me was the prominent role women played in parish life. Single women rented property from the parish, widows left testamentary bequests of household objects to be turned into liturgical items or money to expand the church building, and some women bought pews. Even when women were not specifically mentioned in the records, I knew that they watched the parish's Corpus Christi procession and they went to mass. The larger lesson I learned was that women interacted with medieval bureaucracies and understanding how bureaucracies worked would lead me to medieval women. Most of these records remain as yet unpublished and housed in that bewildering array of archives, libraries, and record offices I'd noticed in the footnotes.

Although local record societies have been publishing editions of original sources for decades, there are still many more records that remain

unpublished. Many editions were produced in the 19th century and are only calendars of the original documents. This means that editors abbreviated the sources, taking out what they considered irrelevant, uninteresting, or repetitive. In particular, they often took out legal formulae, the names of women, or details of behavior considered too scandalous for nineteenth-century sensibilities. These limitations mean that historians interested in women's social history have to go to the archives. By looking at legal or administrative records we can see the opportunities and limitations of this facet of women's lives. Understanding the legal formulae exposes how women moved within the legal system or how it excluded them. Much of this work requires understanding the legal and economic systems that produced the records. Although administrative sources do not always tell us as much about women as we might wish, or as much about certain kinds of women as we might like, medieval women interacted with bureaucracies. It is in understanding about

bureaucracies—town, episcopal, royal, and manorial—and how and why they generated records that lead to sources for studying the social history of women. Published records are an indispensable resource and a good place to start, but reliance on only them limits scholars to what previous editors thought were important or interesting. Archive work allows historians to take their own priorities to the original sources.

My dissertation and first book looked at parish communities within the diocese of Bath and Wells. The diocese's borders were, for the most part, geographically contiguous with the historical borders of the county of Somerset. (The British government reorganized the county borders in 1974.) This coincidence made collecting my sources much easier. Basically, I only had to work in one county. Although women were not my primary focus, parishes included women, and I tried to make it clear throughout the book that women were a part of parish life. My conclusions grew as much out of considering

women's involvement as men's. Despite the relative simplicity of geography, researching this project introduced me to a range of local archives. I worked predominantly in the Somerset Record Office in Taunton, Somerset, but I also made forays to two city archives: Bristol and Wells. The Wells City Archives reside in the basement of the old town hall, where the eighteenth-century city jail used to be. The Bristol Record Office was not as picturesque, but it holds the records from three parishes in suburban Bristol that were under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Bath and Wells. I also worked in the Wells Cathedral Archives and the Public Record Office (PRO) in London. At first, I was doubtful that national archives would be very useful, but because I was living in a small village without a pub, I was determined to find something so that I could make periodic trips to London. As it turns out, national archives are indeed useful for local historians.

This project taught me many things about archival work. Working in provincial archives can be painfully lonely. I was

living in a tiny village 45 minutes away from Taunton. The people in my village were very nice, but they could not share my success and failures of research, nor could they reassure me that I would eventually be able to amass enough information to write a dissertation. The churchwarden, a woman of 80 plus years, did try to match me up with a local bachelor farmer, for whom she cooked. Until I could make a strategic mention of my married state, I learned a great deal about hedge maintenance and sheep farming. I also learned that medievalists are a novelty in county and city record offices. Most people who work there are genealogists, or in the case of the city archives, residents fighting about outdoor drains. By-in-large, their Latin and paleography skills are worse than yours. I found this comforting, because even when I was overcome with frustration, the genealogists were impressed at how old my documents were—and how pretty. By the standards of art historians, they weren't that pretty, but sometimes a medieval scribe left fun doodles and the

handwriting looked cooler than their printed records, even if I couldn't always read it. Yet the lack of other academics, medieval or otherwise, also contributes to the loneliness of working in local archives. I did meet a few local historians tracing the histories of their villages, schools, or houses. Some of them are very knowledgeable and helpful and I even stayed with one when I worked in Wells.

Most importantly, I learned that everyone panics the first time they see an unfamiliar document or handwriting. Patience, periodic trips for chocolate, and slow comparisons with the published versions gradually allowed me to see letters where there had been chicken scratch. Every archive I have ever worked in also has dictionaries and paleography manuals to help you. Archivists can also be very helpful. They won't do your work for you, but they will help decipher the odd word or unusual handwriting. They can also direct you to sources that you had not considered. Many archivists are also women and are interested in women's

history. Some archivists make you wear gloves so that you won't soil the records, and some turn off the heat in March because it's March, regardless of the temperature. I've never been as cold as when I worked in Taunton in April, even though I had come from Minnesota! Most archivists will also ask you for copies of your publications and your dissertation to add to their reference sections. This is also a good way of increasing the visibility of women in medieval scholarship. Providing them with requested off prints and copies of dissertations can also secure future help and continued interest in you and your research. The reference rooms in the county archives are a treasure trove of hard-to-find publications. Not only did I come home with stacks of transcripts, I photocopied piles of articles on local history.

Working in London at the PRO was a very different experience. Here medievalists are not rare, and tea or coffee could be quite social as well as informative. Until about seven years ago, the PRO was on Chancery Lane in central London. The old

building was a large Victorian structure that looked like a giant wedding cake. Those who worked with government documents produced after 1850 took the train out to Kew to the sparkling new facilities that had heat, electricity, and space, but no handy sandwich shops, or puce colored walls in the lounge. Now the PRO has moved completely out of Chancery Lane to Kew. Although the new building has more space, is definitely cleaner, and has better coffee, it seems less social.

For my second book, I am writing about "all the women who aren't Margery Kempe." I want to understand what types of opportunities and limitations parish participation provided English women, and how their class, life-stage, and geographical locations shaped their religious involvement. This second project has compelled me to work in many more county record offices, city archives, and the Westminster Abbey Muniments Room, which has the lovely acronym of WAM. It is located in the attic of the Abbey's cloisters.

You get to it through a door that says, "keep out." I have also continued to work at the PRO. Like the PRO, many country record offices are moving to new buildings where they can preserve their documents better and provide more space for researchers. This is a good thing, but it does mean that they are increasingly located on the outskirts of towns, harder to get to, and far from sandwich shops. Soon the Devon County Record Office in Exeter will no longer be within walking distance of the cathedral. The other thing that keeps changing is the names of archives. The PRO has now been rebranded the National Archives and the Somerset Record Office is now Somerset Archive and Record Service, which gives it the unfortunate acronym SARS. Name changes can add another layer of confusion for finding sources.

Working in so many different local archives shows the variety among them. Some require the County Archive Research Network's ID card, some also charge fees, which

in my experience only apply to genealogists not academics, and some suffer academics but welcome genealogists. It is a good idea to call ahead and reserve a seat, especially in the summer when space can be limited. All archives require to you use a pencil, if you work long hand, and increasingly they allow laptops. For this we must thank the genealogists, because when academics started using them there were lots of complaints about their noise and the dangers of electrical cords. But genealogists are the tax paying public, and there are more of them than academics, so laptops are now common in most archives. WAM, however, still has no electrical outlets near the researchers' table; computers must work off of batteries.

Finding sources in country record offices requires understanding something of how medieval parishes fit into the ecclesiastical organization and how parishes came to be the central unit of civil administration after the Reformation and up to the present. Before the Reformation, the parish was a

unit of moral control, religious instruction, and financial extraction for the Church. After the Reformation, the parish remained as a religious unit, but increasingly it took up secular and governmental responsibilities. As a result, county archives organize most of their local records by parish. Most parish records will be modern such as poor rates, pew rates, and school records. If the parish still has medieval records, they will be categorized in the archive indices according to type of document: secular or ecclesiastical. Secular records include manor court rolls and deeds; ecclesiastical include churchwardens' accounts and parish guild records. These are all records generated by the locality itself. In rare instances parishes might still control their records. Wydmonham, Norfolk, for example, still has its churchwardens' and guild wardens' accounts, but most parishes do not have the money or facilities to store and preserve their records.

Country record offices also hold medieval ecclesiastical records. Documents produced by and for

the episcopal bureaucracy, such as bishops' registers, ecclesiastical court records of various kinds, and wills all became part of the diocesan archives if they were not thrown out. They are usually catalogued as diocesan or ecclesiastical records. Counties and diocese do not usually overlap like they do in Somerset. Typically the county where the cathedral is located will have the diocesan records.

Because genealogists use records, such as wills so often, archives have taken to microfilming them. There might even be a hand-written transcript or a detailed index produced by local historians. If there are microfilms or transcripts, the archivists will usually want you to look at them first, but I have never had a problem with gaining access to originals when I have needed to see them. You can also hire archives to make you your own microfilm copy, and increasingly they now let you use digital cameras. Taken together, County Record Offices can yield a great deal of administrative and legal information about women: parish participation,

land holding, family and inheritance, business practices, and scrapes with the law.

Lest the British archive system sound completely systematic let me assure you it isn't. There are other archives that are potentially rich in material about women, such as cathedral archives and city archives. These archives may also hold deeds, wills, and manor records. Cathedral archives, by-and-large did not disband after the Reformation. Although many documents were lost or defaced, records and books produced and collected by the cathedral staff remain there if they have survived. What is in these archives versus the county record offices has much to do with the history of each archive as it does who won the last turf war. For example, the churchwardens' accounts for St. Margaret's, Westminster are in the Westminster City Archive, but the parish guild records and everything else relating to the medieval parish of St. Margaret are in the Abbey muniments room. Many archives now contain microfilm copies of local documents they

do not hold. By-in-large, the contents of monastic libraries are now part of the ecclesiastical holdings of country record offices if they are not in the British Library or university libraries. Westminster Abbey is a special case because it never ceased to exist—it is after all the burial ground of kings and queens. Typically city archives hold a range of urban records including court rolls, apprentice contracts, and trade guild material. They may or may not also hold ecclesiastical records from religious institutions within their precincts. Many of these archives are quite tiny and only open a few days a week. In one city archive, which should remain nameless, the archivist was so happy to have me and not the usual feuding neighbors in his archive that he served me tea and biscuits while I was working. Some local records also end up among the private papers of local gentry families. These families may have their own private archive, or have deposited them with the British Library or a university library.

The process of hunting for women in this maze of archives

is time consuming, but I think rewarding. The large amount of women's history now published means that most archivists are well aware of what records will help you study women. What surprised me initially was the close connection between bureaucracy and bureaucratic history with finding sources, whether about women specifically or the communities in which they lived.

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