

Introduction

The Court Rolls of Yeadon and Esholt Priory are the property of the Stansfield family and consist of Stansfield manuscripts 795, 778 and 779 deposited at West Yorkshire Archives in Leeds, their reference WYL500/c. After the dissolution they passed from the Prioress of Esholt to William Knevytte (see the dissolution rental in the appendix). Henry Thompson purchased the site of the priory shortly after and the rolls passed through his family to Walter Calverley who married Frances Thompson. Sir Walter kept the rolls in the right hand drawer “marked A” of his deal press (B.M. Add. MS 27,417) and they were given to the Stansfield family when they acquired the estate on the 14th January 1755.

Stansfield 795 consists of the 31 courts held between 1361 and 1377 in eleven rolls/sheets. The first is a short court of Yeadon dated 1361, the second and third rolls contain 6 courts of Thomas de Lumley of Yeadon and Esholt. The fourth roll consists of ten courts, the first 9 are courts of Yeadon and the 10th a court held at Esholt. The remaining seven rolls are all courts of Yeadon ending in a roll containing courts for December 1369 and June 1370. This last document has an inventory of Prioress Johanna de Mohaud of 1360 attached to it which is printed in the appendix, with the following five year’s accounts and a closing inventory.

The courts between 1370 and 1376 have not survived and Stansfield 778 contains 30 courts held between June 1377 and December 1407. All these courts are of Esholt or the Prioress of Esholt.

The final collection, Stansfield 779, consists of 40 courts of the Prioress of Esholt held between 1402 and 1476.

The rolls are by no means complete but the 100 plus surviving records all of which are printed here are a representative sample showing the development of the township during the closing chapters of the late medieval period. Seventy percent are courts held by the prioress of Esholt.

Some explanation concerning the location of Yeadon and Esholt is necessary. Esholt was an area of Hawksworth to the south of Guiseley and abutting the river Aire. It is in the parish of Otley. The Wards of Guiseley granted lands and property here to the nunnery.

Yeadon which adjoins both Esholt and Guiseley is in the parish of Guiseley. Four of the twelve bovates of land in Yeadon owned by Bolton Priory were granted to the prioress. There were additional grants of land from both the Vavasour and Meschine fees, together with grants of land in Idle and elsewhere.

The prioress therefore was possessed of quite an extensive tract of land in the locality but the majority was in Yeadon. The priory buildings were constructed at the extreme fringes of Esholt quite literally by the stream that is its boundary with Yeadon. Land in hand extended eastwards from there over southern Yeadon to Apperley Lane, the ancient boundary between Yeadon and Rawdon. Over the centuries this part of Yeadon became known as Esholt but it was not until after the sale of the estate to Bradford Corporation, who built the sewage works here, that the land was lost to Yeadon.

For the most part references to "Esholt" in the text mean Esholt Priory or its property. The hamlet of Esholt is sometimes referred to as west Esholt but the area can be identified by the tenant of the capital messuage there. This is more clear as the rolls are read and understood.

The region was the most densely wooded area of West Yorkshire and the rolls are valuable for their description of woodland management. Of the 4000 plus entries about 15% relate to cutting wood, 30% to cutting green wood and 3% to breach of the right of vert.

The growth of enclosures and assarts is clearly identified as are the prioress' attempts to manage the security of the common fields on behalf of the tenants. Dykes and other water courses are maintained together with common ways and boundaries.

One hundred and seventy entries relate to building repairs, about 700 relate to pigs in the pannage, depasturing and hedge breaking. Generally, depasturing issues fell over the period as more land was enclosed from the moorland wastes and from the woodland.

A strong sense of the social conditions that prevailed comes over. Ex wives quarrelled with former husbands, children's inheritances were purloined by a surviving parent and people argued and fought. There were good neighbours and bad ones. People were arrested (one "taken by their coat") and detained in what appears to have been the reeve's house.

The prioress delegated a great deal and there are a number of officers from forester to inspector of dwellings, reeve to guardian of the byelaws, tasters of bread and ale to assessors. Representatives of the same, dominant families held these positions over the whole period of the rolls.

Common field holdings were often given a personal name e.g. Laverokrood and Walkerrod as were clearings e.g. Nunroyd. Some families' lands were identified by the family name e.g. Chelleraylands and Chellerayfield.

There are hints within the rolls of the difficulties the prioress had dealing with free tenants in Yeadon and particularly the tenants of the Abbot of Kirkstall.

There are instances of scolding (15) and of calling neighbours “thieves and other shocking names” and using dishonest words. Men and women alike were involved.

Common offences were identified before the court was held with the scribe writing down a list of the usual suspects. The fine would be written above the name (on their head) and unexpected entries added later. The policy occasionally backfired as, at least once, a name was crossed out and “did not come he is dead” written in.

There are about 150 instances of taking of land. During the early years holdings were often returned into the hand of the lord. Later the tenants became more sophisticated and holdings were passed from father to son, sometimes arranged prior to the death of the senior holder. Rents rose only occasionally and entry fines were often ignored in return for a promise to effect repairs.

There is scope for a fuller analysis of the role of women in this small community where the Prioress was lord and women outnumbered men.

Editors Note

The original edition was published as a primary source for local historians and was produced for a small and local readership. There were admitted defects in the standard of editing which followed the lines of a literal translation. The volume attracted a wider than anticipated readership and has since been cited in more than a few learned tomes. The first edition is now attracting silly prices in the second hand market. It has therefore been decided to produce this version which remains cost effective and available. The editing has been much improved to enhance readability without losing meaning. The editor was a keen but amateur local historian in 1984 and remains so today, for which he makes no apologies. It is up to the trained eye to take the valuable material in these pages further. Thank you for looking at the work which it is hoped you find useful.

Roy Price (2006)