

Review Article

The Fifteenth Century Inquisitions Post Mortem: The Newest Calendars

1432-47

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C[alendar of] I[nquisitions] p[ost] m[ortem] and other analogous documents preserved in the Public Record Office, 2nd ser. xxiv, xxv, xxvi (Woodbridge, 2009-10), pp. xxliv + 2229, £175 each.

These splendid volumes are the latest instalment of a great historical enterprise! Archaeologists, geographers and historians of many varieties, academic and recreational, should thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council, The National Archives, the University of Cambridge in the person of Professor Christine Carpenter, and her team of researchers for producing this uniquely comprehensive and usable resource. More of the same is eagerly awaited.

Inquisitions *post mortem* (IPMs) were formal inquiries into the lands held at death by every lay tenant in chief of the crown and sometimes of other lords also. They inform us of their names, their landed estates and of whom held and for what service, the names, ages and relationship to them of their heirs, and often also about ancestors, wives and widows, and younger offspring. Incidental to all this (and much valued by modern researchers), there is information about agriculture, landscape and land-use, both current and (through place names and field names) of past centuries, of estate management and sometimes expenditure, about towns, markets and fairs, tolls, courts, fisheries, parks and franchises. Inquisitions record buildings and their state of repair, mills, dovecotes, and other physical features. Often there can be gleaned such economic data as the changing value of land per acre, conversion from arable to pasture, and the mid fifteenth-century depression. Some at least of Professor Bruce Campbell's remarkable pre-Black Death *Atlas*

can be replicated for the fifteenth century.¹ IPMs are the best source for the demography of the aristocracy and on the development of English land law and its social implications. They cast light on the status of the upper peasantry and (through proofs of age) of their mental horizons.² Although much used, IPMs remain an under-exploited treasure house for a wide variety of modern researchers.

The original inquisitions vary enormously in size, from brief statements that the deceased held nothing in this county to enormous returns on multiple membranes – the record here seems to be seven – and are mounted in files by regnal years. Often faded, dirty, rubbed and blackened, they are ever more difficult to read. Hence the Victorian decision to spare the originals and to calendar the predominantly Latin text in modern English. So far 29 huge calendars span the years from 1236 to 1447 and from 1485 to 1509. The Victorians looked to the inquisitions primarily for information on landholders, estates, and inheritance. They deliberately omitted the extents (surveys of property) included in a third of returns or the valuations so replete in economic information; the nature of the writ, names of the chancery clerk and county escheator, so revelatory of the administrative process of enquiry; the names of the jurors who constituted the bottom level of local government; and a mass of incidental data of use to archaeologists, geographers, genealogists and demographers, much of it anticipating research yet to be developed.³ It is already apparent how much more there is to learnt from the IPMs. A mastery of palaeography, diplomatic, and Latin is needed to calendar the data successfully, all of which the researchers apparently possess. Having read all 1,946 IPMs in these volumes, this reviewer has found no errors, only occasional ambiguities, often also present in the originals.

These IPMs cover all those from southern England; separate series cover the northern palatinates. Out of 4,479 entries in vols. 21–26, 1,683 (26.7%) entries relate to the South as shown in the table below.⁴

Counties vary in size, of course, and southern England was not uniform in its geology or estate structures. Dorset, Hampshire and Kent were dominated by great Church estates that cannot occur in IPMs, Cornwall and Surrey by great lay estates, Wiltshire and Somerset being

1 B.M.S. Campbell and K. Bartley, *England on the Eve of the Black Death: An Atlas of Lay Lordship, Land, and Wealth, 1300–49* (Manchester, 2006).

2 M. Holford, 'Testimony (to Some Extent Fictitious): Proofs of Age in the First Half of the Fifteenth Century', *Historical Research* 82 (2009).

3 For the new policy, see C. Carpenter, 'General Introduction', CIPM, xxii.1–42.

4 CIPM, xxi–xxvi (2002–10).

	1418-22	1422-27	1427-32	1432-7	1437-42	1442-47	Totals
Berkshire	16	16	21	24	17	16	110
Bristol	4	1		1			6
Cornwall	19	26	16	9	12	26	108
Devon	34	25	35	16	41	21	172
Dorset	30	23	30	24	29	13	149
Gloucester	43	17	27	28	28	19	162
Hampshire	27	26	21	21	21	21	137
Kent	25	15	16	15	31	24	126
London	15	10	8	21	9	17	80
Middlesex	12	14	8	11	8	4	57
Oxfordshire	20	28	15	20	12	28	123
Somerset	37	33	27	25	44	27	193
Surrey	21	21	7	21	11	10	91
Sussex	18	26	12	12	8	10	86
Wiltshire	54	34	33	17	16	29	183
	275	315	276	255	125	108	1683

gentry counties. Much lies behind these figures: Anglo-Saxon religious foundations and the Norman land settlement, for instance. The IPMs expose some of the enduring realities of feudal lordship. Among the great families that feature prominently are the Beauchamps earls of Warwick, who had outlying properties in most counties, the earldom of Arundel that survived partition and a rapid turnover of heirs, the earldom of Salisbury that passed from the Montagus to the Nevilles, the estates of the Hungerfords and Moleyns, of Thomas Broke Lord Cobham, Alice Courtenay Countess of Devon, and Margaret Duchess of Clarence. There is the IPM of 1439 of Eleanor widow of William Talbot, coheirress of Margaret Peverel and sister of Katherine Lady Hungerford, who predeceased her sister, whose husband Walter Lord Hungerford (d. 1449) for a decade cut out his son Robert Lord Hungerford (d. 1459).⁵ There are also many prosperous gentry families, such as the Luttrells of Dunster and Hills of Spaxton (Somerset), and also a shoal of minnows netted in royal wardship by tiny fractions of knights fees. Some IPMs extend, amend, or duplicate earlier ones, as

5 CIPM, xxv.255-6.

omissions were pursued, errors corrected, and the heirs of deceased wards were solicited. Apart from IPMs, these volumes contain a few partitions – like those resettling the Holland earldom of Kent⁶ – some assignments of dower and several dozen proofs of age. Assignments of dower give much more detail, down to allocating specific rooms, and proofs of age (even if somewhat repetitive and fictional!) cast illuminating shafts of light onto everyday life, godparenthood, and the use of churches.⁷ The custody of idiots and their property belonged to the crown: somehow William Brecore's family concealed him for forty years, his heir through six descents being a second cousin once removed Richard Wellington.⁸

There is much here about genealogy, inheritance, arranged marriages, entails, trusts, and other family settlements. When Edmund Holland, Earl of Kent died in 1408, there were four dowagers and five heiresses (one childless), who had gradually consolidated a huge estate into four parts by 1442. Outside the peerage Otes son of Richard Champernon esquire was a tenant of the under-age earl of Devon, as son of Katherine daughter of Thomas son of Margaret sister of Richard. Otes died in 1423 seised of property in Devon, his three aunts and their heirs being his coheirs. One line was represented by another esquire, William Bigbury, his second cousin twice removed, who left three daughters as his heiresses and royal wards in 1426. Thus Elizabeth (b. 1417), Margaret (b. 1424) and Elizabeth (b. 1426) were all baptised at Bigbury (Devon) and proved their ages in 1433, 1439 and 1442 respectively. The elder Elizabeth was married to Robert Burton and Margaret to Stephen Durnford. Another coheir was William Gilbert (d. 1428) who left a son, another Otes, who was also a royal ward by 1431 and also had to prove his age.⁹ The IPMs are essential links in such chains: but Bigbury is indexed Bikebury and Bykebury, Champernon as Chambernowne and Chambernoun, so it is not easy to locate them all. What happened between the generations is illustrated by John Seymour esquire, son of Sir John Seymour, who married Elizabeth the daughter of Sir Thomas Brook, who outlived him and left an eleven-year-old son Thomas as his heir in 1439. Apart from her jointure and land in trust, Sir John left only two-thirds of North Molton in Devon, the balance still being the dower of his own mother Margaret, who had remarried to William Cheyne. John Seymour junior had appointed for life a parker of

6 E.g. CIPM, xxiv.72; xxv.443; xxvi.59–66, 182.

7 E.g. CIPM, xxiv.124, 132.

8 CIPM, xxv.15.

9 CIPM, 141–3, 771–2; xxxiii.502; xxiv.124; xxv.296, 297; xxvi.224

two-thirds of his park who received a gown of kendal each year and pasture for one horse.¹⁰ In or before 1385 Alice Beauchamp of Powicke married first Thomas Butler, Lord Sudeley (d. 1398), by whom she begat three successive barons. She had remarried Sir John Dalingridge (d. 1408) of Bodiam Castle in Sussex, who was concerned to keep his line alive. Had they living issue? If not, Dalingridge directed his trustees by will to convey his estates to her for life, with remainder to the male heirs of his uncle Walter. Walter's son Richard had to wait until Alice's death in 1443 to secure Bodiam; so indeed did Ralph Lord Sudeley to enter Sudeley Castle (Gloucestershire).¹¹ Bodiam of course is a striking medieval survival; so indeed are Berry Pomeroy (Devon) which features in the IPM of Edward Pomeray in 1446, and Nunney Castle (Somerset). When Constance widow of John Paulet died in 1443, Nunney (described as a 'mowte'), Basing and Abbotstone (Hampshire) would have passed in 1443 to her son and heir John (aged 14) had she not begotten a daughter Anne by her second husband Henry Green, who remained tenant by courtesy. ¹² No wonder IPMs are so important to local and family historians!

These volumes are also unexpected treasures of incidental information. There is a great deal about obsolete tenures: how easy, one wonders, was it to supply landlords with an unmewed goshawk or 11 sparrowhawks a year? Some reveal the identities of particular abbots and priors; that New Romney rectory house was already ruinous in 1437; that Walter Lord Hungerford was among those who delivered a return to chancery; a find of gold and silver in an earthenware crock at St Mary Cray that should have been treasure trove and that escaped the eagle eyes of the *Calendars of Inquisitions Miscellaneous* completed to 1485. At Boardfield Church in Kent in 1446 Simon and Stephen atte Seathe felled and carried off six carts of underwood growing on the king's highway value 2s. without licence or accounting to king. A breach of the statute of mortmain was detected in 1440 for five houses in the parish of St Stephen Walbroke bequeathed as long before as 1382 to the hospital of St Thomas Acon. ¹³ Patrons of monasteries and advowsons, sometimes incumbents and valuations, current and past holders of knights fees are revealed.

We can now read 25 years of IPMs 1422–47 oneself, provided of course one can afford them or find them in a major library. Extracting

10 CIPM, xxv.224–6.

11 CIPM, xxvi. 109–13; GEC, xii(1), 418–19.,

12 CIPM, xxvi.29, 417.

13 CIPM, xxv.186, 269, 392, 589.

the information and analysing it remains time-consuming and difficult. To maximise their value they need collating with other calendars – the Close, Fine and Patent Rolls – and the standard biographical dictionaries.¹⁴ The editors have done their best with comprehensive indexes: to the jurors, persons, places, and subjects. Wonderful though these are, they remain deficient. Which spelling is chosen for a surname makes a difference. Sir John Pickering and Sir Thomas Etchingham, like Bigbury and Champernoun, are not listed under their usual spellings. Merryweather is not correctly Englished. Was Petronilla's real forename Parnell? Multiple entries for the same individuals, such as Thomas Lord Cobham and Jacquetta Duchess of Bedford, are not cross-referenced. Could not the dates of death (where revealed by IPMs) have been inserted? Place-names have been printed in modern form, the spellings in the original so valued by place-name scholars appearing only in the index, surely the wrong way round. The subject indexes are inconsistent, both in what is included and where it is located: dower and escheat, for instance. One could go on. Modern researchers expect the convenience of electronic searching, whether keynote or through a fully-developed website. Both, it is hoped, will happen soon, together with calendars for the missing years 1447–85, but all will depend on these splendid volumes which will remain the easier read and best insight into future avenues of research. At last these IPMs can release all their secrets.

14 *The Handbook of British Chronology*; G.E. Cokayne, *Complete Peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom*, ed. H.V. Gibbs et al (12 vols, 1910–59); *The House of Commons, 1386–1421*, ed. J.S. Roskell, L. Clark and C. Rawcliffe 4 vols (Stroud, 1992); J.C. Wedgwood, *Biographies of the Members of the Commons House, 1439–1509*, 2 vols (London, 1936–8); *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 64 vols (Oxford, 2005).