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The detailed proceedings of over 20 manor courts have recently come to light in the Public Record Office (S.C. 2/211/46), mostly relating to the manors of Eston, Hutton Rudby, Seamer and Greenhow. Unfortunately, large sections are unreadable, but what remains provides a unique picture of early 15th Century life in the Cleveland Plain. Although rich in Medieval land-charters, few such dynamic and human documents have so far been found for the area.

Documents of this kind speak for themselves, but the general reader might find a few introductory remarks helpful.

In spite of the decline of the manor in the later Middle Ages, the Courts of Lord Darcy and Meynell were not short of business. In the first place, the Court was an instrument of manorial discipline, and administration. It dealt with cases of trespass on the lord's own land, his "severalties"; with the enforcement of labour services; with the leasing and upkeep of tenant farms; the leasing of demesne lands and the maintenance of villein obligations. Seamer was a baronial court as well, at which tenants of knightly rank did homage for their lands. However, the Courts belonged to the people as well as the lord and there is one example of the tenants winning an important case against their lord in the Seamer court. Much of the Courts business consisted of civil cases brought by one tenant against another, usually involving small debts or "unjust detention" of goods that had been paid for. The open fields, meadows and pastures were regulated by the Court in the interests of the whole community and part of the fines went, not to the lord, but to defray the expenses of the jury and to pay for the services of a common pinder. The Court Jury was itself composed of villagers, though probably appointed by the lord's steward, and was known on all these manors as the "Jury of the People". In addition to presenting defaulters, it made bye-laws (ordinances) for the common good and appointed a committee of four "ordainers of the people" to see to their execution. Finally, the Jury elected all the village officers - Reeve, "Ordainers", Constable and Assessors (who assessed the fines).

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In spite of the growth of royal justice from the 12th Century onwards, the Courts still exercised a petty criminal jurisdiction in such matters as assault and affray. The King's Constable was appointed by the Court, like the other officers. There can have been few areas of life that were totally unaffected by its activities.

Finally, the Court Rolls provide much valuable information as to the condition of Cleveland after the demographic disasters of the 14th Century. References to waste and dilapidated tenements occur in every Court; most of the demesnes have been leased out and at Eston even the manor house is in a semi-ruinous state.

It is hoped to include further extracts from these rolls in a later "Bulletin".

Extracts from the Court Rolls of Lord Darcy and Meynell. 1406-1411

Greenhow 5th Dec. 1406

It was found by the oath of 15 sworn men (named) that the Fflethir i.e. the Westdike was not yet opened around the tofts, through the neglect of William Smyth....

They also say that the Appilgarth has not been adequately hedged in by William Smyth, so that the ash saplings growing there were devoured by cattle to the damage of the lord and his tenants.....

It is ordained that no tenant of the lord shall keep pigs unless they are ringed, under penalty of 4d for each unringed. It is ordained that no tenant..... shall question the verdict of the jury under penalty of 6/8d. It is ordained that 4 men elected by the people's jury shall execute its decisions under penalty of 6/8d and that anyone rebelling against or neglecting the said ordinance shall incur the said penalty, half of it being for the lord's use and the other half for the use of the people's jury.. John Bobby junior is elected to the office of reeve for this year and sworn in; Thomas Brian is elected to the office of King's Constable; William Snawball senior, John Snawball, Thomas Virly and John Porter are elected ordainers of the people; Robert Leventon, John de Aton, Thomas Virly and John Snawball are elected assessors of the court.

Cont'd.....

William Tyndell takes the agistment and herbage with the meadows within the Park of Greenhow, together with the pannage, to hold for 6 years from February 2nd. He shall have free entry and exit by the gate from the ancient street. He shall save enough pasture and hay for the hunting beasts and wild beasts and he shall adequately guard the pales and hays of the Park from the lord's beasts. He shall pay an annual rent of 50/-.

Eston. 9th Dec. 1406

Richard Virley and John Carter are fined 2d each because they did not repair the ditches and couldn't deny it.

The jury say that Nicholas Cornay made an affray and blood was drawn on Walter, servant of John Robynsson, in violation of the peace. He is amerced. Walter Crayk, William Robynson, John Carter and Robert Taleor are elected ordainers of the jury of the people; Nicholas Cornay is elected reeve; William Wilardby is elected King's Constable; John Carter and John Wylkynson are elected assessors.

An inquiry made before the Auditor and Receiver of the lord about the ruinous state of the manor house of Eston, by 12 sworn men. They say that the walls of the hall are prostrate and the beasts and cattle worsened by the neglect of Richard Lilling, the damage to the lord being estimated at 13/4d. The walls and roofs are weakened by his neglect ( damage of 3/-); the dovecote is worsened by the neglect of Thomas Morlay in spite of the 10/- given him by the lord for repairs (damage of 6/8d); ..... a common oven belonging to the lord is worsened by Richard's neglect (damage of 22/8d); two houses standing together on the west side of the garden are weakened; the lord's granary is nearly prostrated to the ground (damage of 10/-); a kiln there ..... (damage of 12d); .....

Seamer. April 1407.

John Legg accuses William Colynson of withdrawing with his corn to various mills, grinding it outside the demesne and not making the accustomed suit to the lord's mill.

Cont'd....



He thus ground 4 bushels of wheat and 4 bushels of barley for brewing without paying the tax, which is now assessed at 1 bushel of wheat, 1 bushel of mixtil and one bushel of barley for brewing .....

The jury shall view ruinous houses before the next court, under penalty of 6d for each juryman.

Hutton Rudby April 8th, 1407

The jury find that each tenant is bound to open the Grippes before May 3rd, under penalty of 12d for each gripp. It is ordained that each tenant scour and strengthen the ditches for drying the meadows before May 3rd under penalty of 12d for each part neglected.

The jury present that a tenement lately held by Richard Wyly is vacant on account of the shortage of tenants and in the hands of the lord for one year. Richard Smyth, the lord's reeve, has paid nothing from it except 2/- for herbage. William Hunter has now received it from him i.e. two waste places lying together and one bovate of land for the term of 3 years, paying 5/- per annum and other services.

Eston 10th Oct. 1409

It is found by the oath of the jury that 4 men (each fined 3d) had colts untethered in the sown fields, within the corn. It is ordained that none shall keep a colt within the sown fields unless tethered, from August 24th to September 29th, unless it is with the carts carrying away the corn, under penalty of 6d each. .... They say that a watercourse running from the lord's wood has been diverted from its proper course by the servants of the Grange of the Prior of Guisborough; Fine of 2/- and ordered that it be placed in its right course under penalty of 6/8d. They say that a road coming from the lord's wood to the village is used by the Prior's servants in autumn and at other times of the year, carting to the Prior's Grange, and it has not been restored, whence the high road is in holes. Fined 12d and ordered to mend it before Sept. 29th under penalty of 3/4d.

Seamer 12th April, 1410

The jury say that Thomas Dynys led three horses into the Cornfelde against the ordinance. He claims they are strays. He is ordered to answer for them.

They say that Robert Fewler trespassed with his beasts and cattle from the village of Tunstall on the demesne at Seamar. He does not appear and it ordered that he be distrained to attend the next court. They say that Agnes Brewster had 6 sheep within the demesne, not agisted; Fined 1d. William Stevenson (fined 3d) and William Colynson (fined 2d) sold ale contrary to the assize.

The tenants are ordered to bring 80 stakes to the lord's mill within 15 days of this court, under penalty of 20/-. Each tenant shall look after his part of the common pound, making and maintaining it under penalty of 12d for each instance of neglect, paid to the keeper of the cattle.

Eston. 13th April 1410

The jury find that the Meers and Balks are diminished throughout the field, by whom it is not known. They are to make a close inquiry by May 11th.

At the next court, let an inquiry be held into unmade ditches, land not "gripped" and colts untethered within the fields unless following carts and horses and beasts tethered in the severalties.

Greenhow 16th April, 1410

The jury say that there are within the demesne one dund coltstagg, one sore filistagg, one mare mowsdund and one gray filistagg, one stirk of two years Broun upon the Rygg. Because they were not within the demesne for the whole year, they will not be valued until the next court. They say that Robert Broun son of Simon Broun, a villiein (nativus) of the lord, married in Ferndale and resides there without seeking licence or paying chevage. He is to be brought back before the next court is held. John son of William Smyth came and took from the Steward the tenement lately of Richard Fletcher with the "Grynhouse" built on the lord's waste, to hold for life according to the custom of the manor paying 7/- per annum. He shall build a new house there at his own cost, except for the timber given him by the lord i.e. 3 couples of beams with their attachments.

Thomas Darcy, John Bowton, William Freman, Thomas Semer, John Meynell, Thomas Fewler and Peter Conpscake, suitors of this court, appeared and pledged themselves to hold their tenements by military service and suit of court.

Robert Fewler of Tunstall places himself in the grace of the lord for breaking into Seamer to drive his cattle back to Tunstall.

The jury say that John Lowyk had one horse tethered outside the Kerr against the ordinance; Fined 3d. Robert Laton did not make the Kerdic; Fined 6d. Thomas Yhork, Stephan Frer and William Meneelman mowed within the pasture against the ordinance; Fined 6d each. They say that from the time in which memory does not run, the tenants of the lord of Seamer had common in Aidistune throughout the whole of Brawathfelde and now Thomas Darcy denies them their common. They are ordered henceforth to place their cattle there and depasture them according to the form used from ancient times. They say that 5 people (named) pulled up heather on the lord's moors without licence. Fined 1d each. It is ordained that none shall pull up heather on the moor penalty of 6d.

( To be continued.)