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WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

#13 - Rolls

by Mike Fitton

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A genealogist working prior to 1830 will have encountered Rolls. There are Manor Rolls, Recusant Rolls, Burgess Rolls, Muster Rolls, Subsidy Rolls, and dozens of other kinds. It all sounds like some sort of exotic bakery. What are Rolls?

Paper was developed by several civilizations. After the invention of moveable type and the printing press about 1460, it was the ideal; material for cheap and popular books, and for scandalous political broadsheets. And it still is, if you look at the checkout counter at your favourite grocery store. Paper is excellent for producing copies for immediate use.

But, paper is not a good medium for records. Records tend to be produced in only one or two copies, but they must be kept indefinitely. In the damp climates of Europe, paper rots unless carefully stored. The first English parish records after 1538 were written on paper, and when they were ordered recopied in 1598, quite a few no longer existed.

What medium was flexible, durable readily available, inexpensive, and fairly easy to store? Animal skins are the obvious answer. Even after providing shoes and clothing, every farm had some available. A thin bleached sheet of animal skin, suitable for writing on, is known as a membrane of parchment. The thinnest and softest, obtained from young calves or lambs, is known as vellum.

Writing was done with ink, usually made by the writer from his own recipe. He would mix oak-galls, iron sulphate, gum arabic and water, a mixture that was liable to turn rusty yellow and fade in the course of time. The script used was generally known as Court Hand before 1570, Secretary Hand for the next century, and our familiar Italic Hand since then. An entire written and signed document is known as a holograph

The best side of the parchment was the part from inside the animal. This was known as the face and was where most of the writing was done. The opposite side, rougher and perhaps hairy, was known as the dorse. Usually only brief notes and titles were written on the dorse, such as an approval. That is where we get approved as one of the meanings of the word "endorsed", which actually means, written on the back. If parchment was bound into a book, the right hand page was known as the recto and the left hand page (actually the back of a right hand page) as verso.

Sometimes, as with a deed or other indenture, the text of the document was written two or more times on the single membrane, which was then cut into its separate copies. The multiple-copy membrane is called a chirograph. If the writer made a mistake, and had to erase and write over the mistake, this was called a palimpsest

A series of membranes of parchment would be made every time a record was made. These would be stitched together in the days before staplers, in one of two ways. Membranes could be stitched top to bottom in one long continuous strip; or piled vertically and the top edge of each sheet stitched to the top edge of each of the others, like a pad of paper. The result was then rolled up for storage, and that is a Roll. Anything recorded on a Roll, was said to be enrolled. A small Roll of just a few membranes was called a rotulet.

We still use these words in a similar way today. Our municipal tax records are no longer rolls of parchment, but we still call them tax rolls. Our list of voters is the electoral roll. Our children are enrolled in school. If you read from a list to confirm who was present, you are doing a roll call.

There are some old words that should be re-introduced into modern language. For example, it is wise to remember, when visiting a washroom, to check that it is equipped with a roll, not a rotulet.

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