

## Library of Birmingham Archives & Collections

### CORONER'S INQUEST'S

The role of coroner has existed from around the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The position of Birmingham Coroner is a relatively new one, having been in existence from around 1838, when the newly created Birmingham Corporation sought to establish their own quarter sessions and as a result of this, the position of Coroner. Note that prior to around 1838, inquests for deaths in Birmingham would have been held in Warwickshire, as Birmingham reported to the Warwickshire Quarter Sessions. The role of the coroner's court is:

- 1) to investigate sudden or suspicious deaths which are reported to him/her,
- 2) to deal with applications to transport a body to another country for burial or cremation
- 3) to investigate cases of Treasure Trove (the discovery of buried coin or other valuables)

### What records do we have?

Birmingham Archives, Heritage and Photography are lucky in having an almost complete holding of the inquests held in Birmingham over the whole period there has been a Birmingham Coroner. We hold a microfilm of the "roll of the inquests" in the Heritage Research Area, covering 1838 - 1875. The roll records very little detail on the cases, giving names, address, cause of death and verdict. There are no further details relating to the death and on the whole, the entries do not tell you any more than you would find on a death certificate

From 1875, we hold the individual files relating to deaths investigated by the coroner. Unlike the earlier Coroner's roll, the files are very rich in detail and content. These files contain all manner of statements from witnesses alongside the medical information about the autopsy. The information in the file can allow the researcher to not only build up a very vivid picture of the person and the circumstances relating to their death but also their life and conditions in the period prior to their death.

## How do I view an inquest file?

First, establish if an inquest was held and if it was by the Birmingham Coroner – this will be on the death certificate of the deceased. (We do not hold records of the Warwickshire Coroner; it must state Birmingham Coroner on the death certificate.) If the death occurred pre July 1875, then you will need to consult the Coroner's Roll on microfilm in the Heritage Research Area.

For any deaths post July 1875, the inquests are stored in our archival strong rooms in chronological order, so we need to be given the exact date of the inquest in order to find the file. As the files are original archival material, the inquests can only be seen by making an appointment to view them in the Wolfson Centre for Archival Research (e-mail [archives.appointments@birmingham.gov.uk](mailto:archives.appointments@birmingham.gov.uk) to make an appointment).

A card index for inquests between 1875 – 1877 can be found in the Wolfson Centre for Archival Research.

We also hold volumes of news cuttings for coroner's court cases from 1876 onwards. These are indexed alphabetically. Viewing these can be useful if you know a rough year of death but not an exact date. Please order these in advance either through the Heritage Research Area or the Wolfson Centre for Archival Research.

## Some things to note

Researchers should keep in mind that, by their nature, inquest files can be very graphic and distressing: photographs of the deceased and the scene of death are often present (even in some of the late Victorian inquests); inquest files for suicides frequently contain the actual suicide note of the deceased; all descriptions of deaths will be graphic.

Note that any inquest held more than 75 years ago is open to the public (i.e. 1941 and earlier at the time of writing). For inquests more recent than 75 years ago, researchers will need to contact the coroner's office and request the file.

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Coroner's Court  
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Birmingham  
B4 6NE  
Tel No: **0121 303 3228**  
Email: [coroner@birmingham.gov.uk](mailto:coroner@birmingham.gov.uk)

The coroner will then decide what information can be released from the file to the researcher.