

Grimy bundles at Kew

Keith Percy delves into PROB46

Records that ought to be looked at by one-namers are lying almost untouched in boxes at the National Archives, Kew. That would be no surprise if they were some ancient, obscure tax list, but they are not. The grimy bundles in the boxes are the bonds of administrations granted by the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC) in the years 1713 to January 1858.

For me, the mystery began with an innocent question at the Family Records Centre as to whether there were any bonds for PCC administrations. I wanted my "grants" index for the WHITEHOUSE name to be as complete as possible. The most experienced person on duty had never received such a request before, so he scuttled off to the back room and eventually came up with the answer in an old typescript guide. I needed to consult class PROB46 at Kew. It is given a brief mention in the book "Tracing your ancestors in the Public Record Office" 6th ed. 2002.

Bonds were entered into by the administrator and one or more sureties for the honest administration of the estate of a deceased person who left no will or a will that was legally deficient and so could not be proved. They supply the place of residence and the occupation of the parties making the bond. This information can be crucial for PCC administrations, as it is not given in PROB6 or in the Estate Duty Office Register (IR26).

I sorted my index of WHITEHOUSE grants from 1731 onwards, finding 44 PCC administrations of intestates and 11 with the will annexed. Ordering PROB46 is simple once you know the month and year of grant from PROB6 or the administration calendar (PROB12). Alas, whereas there is an index to PCC wills available from "Documents On Line" and this includes administrations with will annexed, there is no composite index to PCC administrations after the year 1800, only the yearly calendars. PROB46 has roughly one piece for each month, although occasionally two months are contained in the same piece. So I duly put in a bulk order for the 52 different pieces that I needed, using the National Catalogue on-line.

Bulk orders, as I discovered, are hedged about with various rules. Firstly, there are daily overall limits on the number of bulk orders that can be processed and then there is a limit to the number of documents that can be ordered by an individual researcher for a single day. In my case, because the piece numbers required were not consecutive, the maximum was 30. In fact, it was not too bothersome to have to put in two bulk orders for separate days, because finding and reading these bonds is a slow business.

While ordering the pieces was easy enough, there was further preliminary work to do. The bonds are arranged by "seats" of the probate Court. The Court divided its work geographically into five "seats", each representing a region in which the deceased resided. These are:

1. Registrar's	Overseas or at sea (unless grant was to the widow, in which case jurisdiction passed to the seat in which she was resident), if the deceased died outside the PCC jurisdiction and estates subject to litigation
2. Surrey	Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Hants, Somerset, Surrey, Sussex, Wilts
3. Welsh	Berks, Derbyshire, Gloucs, Herefordshire, Leics, Northants, Oxfordshire, Rutland, Salop, Staffs, Warwicks and Worcs; also, Wales
4. Middlesex	Bedfords, Bucks, Cambs, Essex, Herts, Hunts, Kent, Lincs, Middx (except those parishes in the London seat), Norfolk, Suffolk
5. London	31 parishes in London and Middlesex

PROB46 bonds are arranged in bundles by seat, so it is advisable to make a list with a column for the seat. The seat can be discovered either from the county etc. given in PROB6 or its calendar or from the folio number of the PROB6 entry. There is a guide book at the National Archives which lists the seats

that correspond to the folio numbers. It is also advisable to know whether the administration is "plain" (PROB6) or with will annexed (PROB11), since from 1796 onwards, there are separate bundles if there was a will.

The pieces came in large, heavy boxes, packed with the precious, dirty bundles. A huge trolley piled high awaited me in the Map Reading Room on the second floor, where there are tables dedicated to bulk orders. My earliest year was 1737, for which the record was stored off-site, but the others, from 1750 to 1857 were all on-site. That was good news, because mistakes resulted in my having to order 3 pieces individually, which seemed to be allowed. They all came in under half an hour.

For the earliest years, 1750s and 1760s, the documents were on pieces of parchment, about the size of a DL envelope that takes A4 paper folded into three, and in no discernible order. Fortunately, there were only between 30 and 40 of them per bundle. Later, they were on a printed paper form and sorted by a calendar of the surname, but at first there was more than one such sequence per bundle. Throughout, I found some documents out of calendar order, often at the bottom of the bundle, after "W" or "Y".

The whole exercise took 11 hours, so my average speed was 5 documents per hour. Despite this, I never appeared to be going slowly. Remarkably, I found all but one of the 55 and that was a grant following an incompletely administered probate of a will. In all but two instances, I found the bond in the correct seat bundle - and one of these discrepancies was because the labels on the bundles had been swapped around. Another surprise was to find a few dates of death not given in the Estate Duty Office Register entry.

What struck me most was the bonds had obviously never been much consulted, as they were so tidily bound in their ribboned bundles. Yet, these are essential papers for anyone wanting maximum information from a PCC administration and no grants index can be complete without covering the PCC.

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