



Historic England

Law Courts and Courtrooms 2: Civil and Coroner's Courts

Introductions to Heritage Assets



Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which lack such a summary. This can either be where the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood. Many of these are what might be thought of as 'new heritage', that is they date from after the Second World War.

Civil courts were originally part of the Assizes from the Middle Ages onwards, but to seek a remedy at these courts for a debt was a costly and time-consuming process. By the 16th century other more immediate forms of redress were being found via local Courts of Requests and this ad hoc system continued until the 19th century when it was replaced by the modern County Court. Another necessity was to have Coroner's Courts to assess how someone died. This document describes the development of buildings associated with these two strands of law, from adapting existing structures to creating purpose-built courts.

This guidance note has been written by Allan Brodie and Mary Brodie and edited by Paul Stamper.

It is one of several guidance documents that can be accessed at HistoricEngland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/listing-selection/ihas-buildings/

Published by Historic England August 2016.
All images © Historic England unless otherwise stated.

HistoricEngland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/

Front cover

Exterior of the Royal Courts of Justice on the Strand, completed in 1882, G.E. Street. Listed Grade I.

Contents

Introduction.....1

1 Civil Law.....3

1.1 Courts of Requests.....3

1.2 County Courts 1846-704

1.3 HM Office of Works 1870-19145

1.4 The County Court in the 20th Century6

2 Coroner's Courts.....8

2.1 London's Coroner's Courts.....9

2.2 The Location and Form of
Coroner's Courts10

3 Civil Courts Today.....13

4 Further Reading.....15

4.1 Contact Historic England16

5 Acknowledgements18

Introduction

Although the legal system of England and Wales may be referred to as a single entity, it is in fact a series of interconnected jurisdictions with specialised practices, staff and buildings. Specific buildings have evolved during the past two hundred years to serve each of the branches, though the buildings share some common design elements, themes and symbols. Each type of courthouse contains courtrooms, offices and chambers and rooms for judges, magistrates, coroners and other legal professionals arranged to guarantee an appropriate level of separation from other court users. However, courtrooms in each branch of law differ in the status of their fittings and the layout of their furniture, a reflection of the procedures in the courtroom and the character and extent of the jurisdiction of the court.

Although different types of law court shared many features and generally followed a similar stylistic evolution, it would be difficult to confuse them. For instance, in the late 19th century Assize Courts, County Courts, Petty Sessions Courts and Coroner's Courts were all often built in a Gothic style. However, each type of courthouse can be distinguished because of its location, scale and the design of the buildings. Assize Courts were among the grandest buildings in a town or city and would usually be located in the area occupied by other government buildings. Their massing would indicate that a grand public hall and large courtrooms were located within the building. Late 19th-century County Courts were often located in the commercial district of a town. Although externally they might be treated with elaborate detailing, their form would indicate that this was an office building as well as a courthouse. Magistrates' Courts were more frugal in appearance, an indication of their more humble status. Typically containing a single court, they were frequently adjacent to a police station. Purpose-built, dedicated Coroner's Courts began to be constructed during the late 19th century, particularly in London,



Figure 1
A keystone decorated with a bust of the blindfolded figure of Justice on the main elevation of the County Court at Sunderland, 1875-6 by James Williams of HM Office of Works. Located above the public entrance, this is a rare example of a figure of Justice decorating a County Court. Listed Grade II.



Figure 2

The Royal Arms on the facade of the former County Court at Sheffield, 1851-4, by Charles Reeves. It was more traditional for County Courts to bear Royal Arms,

a mark of their authority, but also a way to distinguish them from architecturally similar commercial buildings. Listed Grade II.

providing somewhere for a coroner and a jury to inspect the dead body as part of the process of reaching a verdict about a death. Due to the sensitive nature of their work, Coroner's Courts were often located close to a mortuary, often in a graveyard, and in a discreet location.

Symbols frequently adorn the exterior of purpose-built law courts and town halls that contained courtrooms. The figure of Justice holds a sword,

the emblem of her authority, a blindfold signifies her impartiality and her scales symbolise the task of weighing evidence to balance right and wrong, good and evil. The presence of Royal Arms may also denote that a building was the venue of a law court, although they also appear on other types of government buildings (Figs 1 and 2).

This survey is complemented by one which looks at [criminal courts](#)

1 Civil Law

The system of civil law in England and Wales is administered through the County Court, the Magistrates' Court, the High Court of Justice, the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court. There are also various courts, committees and tribunals that have been established to deal with specific matters and use existing court and office facilities. However, most civil matters are dealt with by County Courts, which were established in 1846, to provide a national system for small debt recovery. Since 2014 the County Court is defined as a single civil court sitting at a number of locations across England and Wales.

1.1 Courts of Requests

The predecessors of the modern County Court are the Courts of Requests that had gradually been established in the 150 years before 1846. They were local tribunals providing a cheap alternative to seeking redress at the courts at Westminster. The origin of the Court of Requests in London dates back to the reign of Henry VIII, but it was not until 1604 that it was given statutory recognition as a court. It took until 1688 for the first Courts of Requests to be established outside the City of London, in Newcastle upon Tyne, Bristol and Gloucester. By 1840 there were 403 Courts of Requests in England and Wales, but they did not have a uniform constitution and jurisdiction and their distribution was uneven. Radnorshire had five courts, equating to one per 5,000 people, while at the other extreme, Cumberland had only two courts serving 178,000 people.

The number of buildings specifically erected for the primary purpose of holding such courts was low, the majority of Courts of Requests being held, like the Petty Sessions, in public houses, hotels, town halls and shire halls. In South Yorkshire, Sheffield Town Hall (1808-10) was used as a venue for the Court of Requests



Figure 3

The exterior of the former Court of Requests at Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, 1825. This is one of the small number of purpose-built courts of requests that were suitable for reuse as County Courts. It is now used as a public house. Listed Grade II.

and later the County Court until a new purpose-built County Court opened in 1854. In West Yorkshire, the Court of Requests in Halifax shared accommodation with the West Riding Quarter Sessions and manorial courts in a building located in Union Street until a debtors' prison with a Court of Requests courtroom was erected

in Harrison Street in c1828. Only five purpose-built Courts of Requests are known to have been built in England: Westminster (1751-2); Southwark (1824); Huddersfield, (1825); Keighley (1831-2) and Bradford (by 1841), the last three all in West Yorkshire. Huddersfield Court of Requests was erected in 1825 in Queen Street in the commercial centre of the town. The building has two principal storeys above a basement. It is five bays wide and the front elevation is faced in dressed stone (Fig 3).

1.2 County Courts 1846-70

During the 1820s and 1830s Henry Brougham and other politicians made various efforts to establish a national system of local civil courts. However, it took until 1846, when *An Act for the more easy Recovery of Small Debts and Demands in England* received its Royal Assent, abolishing the Courts of Requests and establishing the system of County Courts, which is still in existence today. England and Wales were divided into sixty districts in which one or more courts would operate. Each district was to have a judge who would be a barrister with at least seven years' experience. He would hear pleas of personal actions where the debt or damage claimed was not more than £20, but this rose to £50 in 1850.

Although the Court of Request as a legal entity was abolished, the jurisdiction of the new national County Court system was similar enough to its predecessor for purpose-built Courts of Requests buildings to evolve into County Courts. For instance, Southwark Court of Requests became Southwark County Court in 1847 and remained in use until the early 20th century. However, the new court system soon led to the creation of a new building type, although the majority of County Courts did not sit in new, purpose-built buildings. The reason for a degree of uniformity in new buildings was due to the design of the court buildings being managed centrally by a Surveyor of County Courts until the abolition of the post in 1870. Only two men held this position, Charles Reeves from 1847 until his death in 1866, and Thomas Charles Sorby from 1867 until 1870 when responsibility passed to HM Office of Works.

Charles Reeves reputedly designed and superintended the construction of 64 County Courts, although this probably included alteration work done to existing buildings. Reeves' and Sorby's designs were generally Italianate in style, which compared visually with contemporary metropolitan banks and commercial offices. The two Surveyors refrained from using the neo-classical style employed in the construction of Assize and Quarter Sessions Courts before the fashion for gothic-style buildings. This stylistic choice made a closer connection between the small debt court and the mercantile world than it did with the criminal law. Judicial symbolism is distinctly lacking from the exterior of County Court buildings. While it was common to see the Royal Arms decorating the main façade, very few County Courts displayed a figure of Justice.

The financial nature of the small debt court was reflected in its general layout. While a judge sat in court for only perhaps one day per month or fortnight, the office might be open daily. Entry to the public office was therefore at least as important as access to the courtroom. Access into the court buildings and circulation routes around them were important elements in the designs of Reeves' County Courts and varied according to the nature of the site on which the court was erected. The entrances and routes were designed to separate the judge and clerk (who was initially an experienced local solicitor) and from 1856 the registrar from the public and even other court staff. The judge had his own entrance into the building, which led to a passage or staircase to his private room. The clerk or registrar also used the judge's entrance in many cases as their office was often located adjacent to the judge's accommodation. There were either one or two public entrances. A single public entrance might provide access to both the offices and the courtroom, while those buildings with two entrances provided separate access to each (Fig 4).

In 1847, the plans for Reeves' first purpose-built County Court in Royston (Hertfordshire; listed Grade II) were approved by the Secretary of State. The building, which bears a datestone of 1849, is single storied and constructed in brick with stucco



Figure 4
The exterior of the former County Court. Bradford, West Yorkshire, 1859, Charles Reeves. This early 20th-century photograph shows the classic design developed by Reeves, with the pair of doors at either end of the façade, the public entrance having the Royal Arms above it. Listed Grade II.



Figure 5
The exterior of the former County Court in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, 1851-4, Charles Reeves. Another of the designs by the prolific Reeves, it was innovative as the courtroom was located on the first floor, allowing the ground floor to be used for office space. Listed Grade II.

dressings, including rusticated pilasters. The public entrance in the centre of the front elevation is topped by an arched panel containing sculpted Royal Arms. Compared with later designs, this early example is rather small and would have contained the public office to the front of the building with a courtroom to the rear. During the 1850s, Reeves' County Court designs increased in size, reflecting the amount of business that was passing through the system. At Sheffield, the County Court (1851-4; listed Grade II; Fig 5) included the tall courtroom on the first floor, the detailing around the courtroom's fenestration reflecting its superior status.

1.3 HM Office of Works 1870-1914

The County Court (Buildings) Act 1870 transferred all property and responsibilities relating to County Courts from the Treasurer of County Courts to HM Office of Works, which, with Treasury approval, built, purchased or hired premises to carry out the work of the County Court. Two significant factors had to be addressed by the architects at HM Office of Works during the first twenty years after the 1870 Act. Firstly, many of the new County Court

buildings became multi-functional. In 1881 Inland Revenue offices also became the responsibility of HM Office of Works and from this date many County Court buildings included accommodation for the Inland Revenue. The Probate Registry, Customs Office and even the Post Office also began to be incorporated into County Court designs. Secondly, the County Court Act of 1888, which consolidated and amended previous Acts, addressed the problem of the increasing court workload by permitting the court Registrar to operate a court of his own.

Initially, County Courts designed by HM Office of Works were stylistically similar to those of Charles Reeves and Thomas Charles Sorby. The County Court in Sunderland (1875-6; listed Grade II; Fig 6) has two storeys and a basement. The basement and ground-floor levels are faced in rusticated stone and the first floor is faced in brick with stone dressings. The front elevation has seven bays with entrances in the first and seventh bays. For the first time, an image of Queen Victoria was used to decorate a County Court building. The keystone above the judicial entrance includes a bust of the monarch while a blindfolded Justice decorates the keystone of the public entrance,



Figures 6 (top) and 7 (bottom)

(Top) The main elevation of Sunderland County Court, 1875-6 by James Williams, HM Office of Works. One of the earlier designs by HM Office of Works, it is essentially an updated version of the designs used by Reeves and Sorby. Listed Grade II.

(Bottom) Exterior of the former County Court, Inland Revenue Office and Probate Registry at Derby, 1895. The inclusion of Inland Revenue and Probate offices coincided during the late 19th century with HM Office of Works architects embracing Gothic detailing. Listed Grade II.

which provides access to the ground-floor offices and to the first-floor courtroom. A slightly more elaborate County Court in Birmingham (1882; listed Grade II) was located on a corner site and therefore had two stone-faced elevations, both of which contain entrances to the building. Its formal, Italianate style is in marked contrast to the nearby Gothic, brick and terracotta Victoria Law Courts, which was completed a few years later.

Towards the end of the 19th century a Tudor-gothic style replaced Reeves' and Sorby's predominantly Italianate designs, particularly when Inland Revenue offices began to be incorporated into the designs. In Cheshire, Warrington County Court and Inland Revenue Office (1897; listed Grade II) had separate public entrances for the County Court offices, the courtrooms and the Inland Revenue office. The building was designed to contain two County Court courtrooms, located on the first floor of the building above the various offices. The registrar's court was larger than the judge's court, reflecting the volume of business that passed through the courtrooms rather than the complexity and value of the matters being considered. Two exterior elevations of the registrar's court faced onto the street and were accordingly decorated with architectural embellishments to emphasise its significance. In contrast, the judge's court, which was hardly visible from the street, included only a small degree of decoration to its windows (Fig 7).

1.4 The County Court in the 20th Century

During the 1920s and 1930s purpose-built County Courts continued to be erected but the Tudor-gothic style was superseded by a more modern, functional style. These new buildings were exclusively created for the County Court and contained at least two courtrooms and public offices that were accessible from a single public entrance. Doncaster County Court (South Yorkshire) opened in 1936 and incorporated two courtrooms and a large office in a single-storey building. It was later extended and raised to incorporate more office and storage



Figure 8
The exterior of Doncaster County Court, 1935-6. From the inter-war years County Court designs followed contemporary architectural tastes and by the late 20th century were often located in modern office buildings.

space and when a new Crown Court was opened in Doncaster in 1989 no County Court accommodation was included (Fig 8).

There were attempts to create new, purpose-built County Court buildings during the late 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s. The County Courts in Leicester, and Hanley at Stoke-on-Trent, were cited as model court buildings in the *Consultative Memorandum on the Design of Courts* (1971). However, the most notable change that occurred regarding County Court accommodation during the second half of the 20th century was the use of rented space within multi-storey office blocks. Many County Court office and courtrooms are located in office blocks that offer modern facilities and increase the general standard of accommodation while offering value for money.

Purpose-built, combined County and Magistrates' Court buildings were also developed, such as at Worthing (West Sussex, 1967), Guildford (Surrey, 1976) and Staines (Surrey, 1976). At Worthing, the two court types are on separate floors whereas at Guildford and Staines the common entrance area is flanked by the two court blocks. Each court type has its own courtrooms and ancillary facilities, including public waiting areas and office accommodation. By the 1980s the combined court centre had been developed, incorporating courtrooms and office facilities for the Crown

Court and County Court. As with combined County and Magistrates' Courts, the civil and criminal jurisdictions are physically separated (Fig 9).

An extensive building programme at the end of the 20th century, especially in the Wales and Chester Circuit, created a distinctive, new, purpose-built County Court building type. Examples include Telford (Shropshire, 1988) and Torquay (Devon, 1996). The overriding feature that links these new examples is that they can easily be re-used once their life as a court has ceased. The courtroom furniture is moveable and the rooms themselves are just spaces in which the various activities take place. The mobility of the furnishings marks an unconscious return to the roots of the law court, when tables and benches would be assembled in a multi-functional medieval hall when a court was required to sit.



Figure 9
The interior of the county courtroom in the Combined Court Centre at Sheffield, opened 1996, by the Napper Collerton Partnership. By the late 20th century it was common to combine new facilities for County Courts with Crown Courts in combined court centres. The county courtrooms in modern buildings have simple, easily-moved furniture.

2 Coroner's Courts

The purpose-built Coroner's Court is designed solely for the holding of coroner's inquests. Its provision, form and numerical rise and decline have been closely related to the changing legislation governing the coroner's duties. The law regarding coroners was codified and standardised by the Coroner's Act 1887, which confirmed that their duties were primarily to look into the causes and circumstances of deaths. Coroners sat with a jury and it was mandatory to view the body before commencing an inquest. Therefore, it was desirable that a court should be close to, and preferably adjacent to a mortuary and the development of purpose-built inquest accommodation became closely connected with the provision of public mortuaries.

The principal requirement of the Coroner's Court was that the room should be of adequate size, be available at short notice, and increasingly that it should provide a suitably dignified location for the solemn task, rather than being held in a room in a prison or a pub. Court buildings, town halls and larger police stations were also employed for inquests and some coroners found other types of buildings satisfactory. At Liverpool and Birmingham the law courts contained courtrooms used for coroner's inquests, as there were mortuary buildings nearby. The town hall at Dudley (West Midlands; listed Grade II*) of 1926 contained courtrooms that were used by the Quarter Sessions and Petty Sessions, as well as a purpose-built coroner's courtroom with a separate entrance and attached retiring rooms for the coroner and jury. In 1910 the Bolton coroner, Samuel Foster Butcher, reported that he held inquests in a club or institute, and rarely in a public-house, although when he was appointed in 1889 all inquests had been held in pubs.

Despite variations in practice across the country, satisfactory arrangements seem to have been reached by the early 20th century and there was little need to provide courts specifically for holding



Figure 10
The exterior of the former Coroner's Court. Reading, Berkshire. This coroner's court was adapted from a police court building of 1862, a building built in a 'Venetian Gothic' style mixing gothic and classical forms. Listed Grade II.

inquests. There were a few exceptions. A mid-20th-century building in Stoke on Trent, which may have been purpose-built, contained the Coroner's Court and chambers. Other courtrooms were provided in conversions. A Petty Sessions court and police station of 1862 in Reading (Berkshire; listed Grade II; Fig 10) became a Coroner's Court, and a building in Bournemouth (Dorset; listed Grade II) erected

in 1912-14 as a County Court, Quarter Sessions Court and possibly also Petty Sessions Court, was converted into a Coroner's Court in 1999. However, in London the particular administrative arrangements led to the development of a number of purpose-built coroner's courts.

2.1 London's Coroner's Courts

Between 1878 and 1915 29 coroner's courts were built within the Greater London area. Some courts were grouped with a mortuary or other buildings, while others were erected close to existing mortuaries. Dedicated inquest rooms were also provided in a converted house in Lambeth (1897), in the London Hospital (1905) and at a handful of town halls. Rooms in town halls and other public buildings in a number of other districts were also used for inquests, but were not designed for the purpose.

The origins of purpose-built courts can be traced back to the Sanitary Act 1866, which permitted, but did not compel, the London sanitary authorities to erect mortuaries and provide proper places for post-mortem examinations ordered by coroners. Some authorities provided inquest rooms or Coroner's Courts in association with mortuaries thereafter, although there was no legislation covering inquest accommodation until 1891. An inquest room was included in the mortuary buildings erected by the vestry of St Mary Islington in 1874 and a court was added to that group in 1878. The mortuary range built in 1877 by the Clerkenwell vestry contained an inquest room and in the following year the City's Coroner's Court was completed on a part of the site on which a mortuary had been erected in 1872. By 1891 a further eight coroner's courts had been erected, all of them in association with mortuaries.

Under the Public Health (London) Act 1891, the London County Council (LCC) became responsible for providing and maintaining inquest accommodation and was empowered to require sanitary authorities to provide post-mortem facilities. The provision of mortuaries,



Figure 11

The east elevation of former Limehouse Coroner's Court, Branch Road, Tower Hamlets, Greater London, 1896 by Charles Dunch. This is an example of a court design influenced by the LCC's Architect's Department model plans and elevations produced in 1892.

previously permissive, was made a duty, but remained the responsibility of the sanitary authorities. This legislation had the effect of increasing the pace of the provision of coroner's courts and mortuaries in London. Surveyors of the sanitary authorities designed 16 coroner's courts, the LCC's Architect's Department seven and architects in private practice six. In 1892 the Architect's Department produced a set of model plans and elevations of a court and mortuary group, signed by Thomas Blashill, and copies were sent to authorities interested in erecting such buildings (Fig 11). Between 1892 and 1902 15 courts were completed, six of them by the LCC, which also converted Arlington House, South Lambeth, to a court. Thereafter, courts were erected by the LCC at Greenwich (1904) and Poplar (London Borough of Tower Hamlets; 1911), and by metropolitan boroughs at Deptford (1908) and Southwark (1915).

During the 20th century demographic changes and modifications to the law reduced the annual average numbers of inquests in London from 7,516 in 1884-1900, to 4,629 in 1921-30 and 1,852 in 1955-64. Those held with a jury were far fewer, averaging just 738 per year in 1935-8

and 431 in 1955-8. In 1925 there were 31 courts within the County of London; by 1965, when the LCC's responsibility for them had passed to the GLC, the number had fallen to eight. Inquest accommodation erected since then has been in the form of courtrooms in other buildings, such as the Public Services Building, Milton Court, in the City (1966), the Law Courts Building, Croydon (1968), the Civic Centre, Uxbridge (London Borough of Hillingdon; 1977) and in a suite erected over the mortuary building at Hornsey (London Borough of Haringey; 1972).

2.2 The Location and Form of Coroner's Courts

The location of coroner's courts was conditioned by the siting of mortuaries. A survey of 1895 revealed that 28 of the 55 mortuaries stood in churchyards or disused burial grounds, and Coroner's Courts closely followed this pattern. The acquisition of alternative sites was made difficult by opposition from landowners and their tenants, who feared the devaluation of their premises due to proximity to a court or mortuary.



Figure 12
The exterior of the Bloomsbury Coroner's Court, Stukeley Street, Camden, Greater London, 1893 by George Wallace. At Bloomsbury a small two-storey building was erected, with the inquest room on the ground floor, and the mortuary and post-mortem room above.

Partly because of such hostility, those mortuaries not associated with burial grounds were generally in out of the way locations, away from street fronts. Further difficulties arose because the amount of land that could be obtained in more built-up areas restricted the size of buildings (Fig 12). The buildings at Clerkenwell (London Borough of Islington) stood behind a row of houses and the Finsbury courtroom was part of the mortuary group in a court off Whitecross Street.

The preferred style for mortuary buildings in London in the mid- and late 19th century was Gothic, and this was adopted for the coroner's courts erected during the 1880s, such as at St Pancras and Bloomsbury (Fig 13). During the 1890s and 1900s it became common to place the court building at the front of a site, with mortuary buildings to its rear, so that the bereaved and general public did not have to pass the mortuary when attending an inquest. The designs of the courts were then handled in a more ambitious and elaborate manner, and in a variety of styles, ranging from the French Renaissance / Jacobean of Westminster (Fig 14) to an Arts and Crafts inspired cottage-like building at Poplar. Some



Figure 13
The exterior of St Pancras Coroner's Court, Camley Street, Camden, Greater London, 1888 by Frederick Eggar. This modest, ecclesiastical-style building on the edge of St Pancras Gardens is now overlooked by the railway lines out of St Pancras International Station.



Figure 14

The east elevation of Westminster Coroner's Court, Horseferry Road, Westminster, Greater London, 1893 by G.R.W. Wheeler. This court in a vaguely French Renaissance style is in an unusually prominent location and has its court on the first floor rather than the ground floor. Listed Grade II.

of the designs made a feature of the courtroom by incorporating a large window in the front elevation. The buildings were of brick, with stone dressings, and varying degrees of ornamentation. The result of this kind of treatment was to produce some handsome facades, which not only gave the required dignity to the buildings, but also disguised their nature to some extent.

The typical layout of a purpose-built coroner's court building included a public entrance, a coroner's entrance, and, where the mortuary was on the same site, access to its viewing window. The courtrooms were the focal point of the buildings and were handsomely fitted out, typically with a panelled wooden dado, a fireplace, an open-timbered roof and oak or pitch-pine furnishings. Many courtrooms also contained the Royal Arms, but they were not universal, as was usual for courtrooms in other

kinds of jurisdiction. Courtrooms were placed on the ground floor wherever the site permitted. Although similar in character to those in magistrates' and county courts, the courtrooms in the coroner's courts were smaller, partly because comparatively little provision was required for counsel, solicitors and their clerks, the purpose of an inquest being solely to establish the cause of death. The courtrooms generally had a door for the coroner's use, giving access directly onto the railed-off dais on which the coroner's desk stood. In a few cases, such as at Deptford, Bethnal Green (London Borough of Tower Hamlets) and Southwark, a door led from the hallway to the public benches, in addition to that giving access to the body of the court. A peculiar feature of the courtrooms was the size of the jury benches, as they were installed when a coroner's jury consisted of between 12 and 23 jurors, before the Coroners (Amendment) Act 1926 reduced the number to between seven and 11. Public seating was placed at the rear of the room, facing the bench, usually at floor level (Fig 15).

The other rooms associated with the court were generally limited to a coroner's room and a waiting room. The coroner's room was commonly placed close to, if not adjoining, that end of the courtroom in which his desk was situated. This room also served as the jury's room when its members wished to retire to consider their verdict, although there was a separate jury room at Walthamstow (Essex) and one was arranged during alterations to the Westminster court in 1933. Residential accommodation for a caretaker was often provided, if there was none within the associated buildings. The lack of space for the coroner's offices became an increasing problem from the 1930s. One solution was to convert the residential accommodation or waiting rooms into offices, which was done at Poplar. At St Pancras in 1957-8, Southwark in 1962-4 and Walthamstow during the 1970s suites of offices were added to the existing courts, and the Southwark offices were rebuilt in the 1990s. The availability of suitable space for conversion or additions has been one of the factors that has influenced the choice of those courts that are retained in use.



Figure 15
Interior of courtroom, Westminster Coroner's Court, Horseferry Road, Westminster, Greater London, 1893 by G.R.W. Wheeler. This first-floor court is located in the

block at the rear of the street frontage, allowing it to be top-lit, as well as having windows in its gables. Listed Grade II.

Coroner's courts had been built to ensure that appropriate accommodation for inquests was available at short notice. The number in use fell during the 20th century following legislative changes permitting the coroner to sit without a jury in most cases, the easing of restrictions on

the jurisdiction within which a case was heard, and because fewer notifications of death required public inquests. The reduction in the need for such courts means that many of the purpose-built courts in the capital have been demolished, leaving only a handful still in use.

3 Civil Courts Today

Civil courts have faced similar challenges and pressure to those experienced in the criminal law. Implementation of new Information Technology was recognised as a priority by the Government when it published *Civil Justice 2000: A Vision of the Civil Justice System in the Information Age* and in 2001 the Court Service published *Modernising the Civil Courts A Consultation Paper*. Its aim was to extend the services of the civil courts into the wider community and several pilot projects were instigated. The latter proposed creating a clearer separation between the administrative offices and the hearing centres, with the Royal Courts of Justice being the flagship hearing centre, with further primary hearing centres and a network of smaller civil justice venues. These would be supported by regionally based business centres conducting the administrative work. In some communities hearings might be heard in Magistrates' Courts, but increasingly the County Court would be co-located with the Crown Court in combined courts centres in major towns and cities.

The reforms of criminal and civil courts include an emphasis on improving access to courts and the justice system. The Disability Discrimination Act of 1995 prompted the Court Service to ask the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR) to review the access to courts for disabled people. The existing estate was examined and an implementation strategy developed to meet the requirements of the Act by 2005. Inevitably smaller, older court locations proved more complex and more expensive to adapt to modern access requirements and new IT and therefore inevitably many of these have closed during the past decade.

Although there has already been considerable reform of both the criminal and civil court system, there had been little change to the Coroner's Court system until the trials of Beverley Allitt and Dr Harold Shipman, combined with the Alder Hey Inquiry and handling of the *Marchioness* disaster, highlighted the need for major reforms to the process of death certification and the Coroner's inquest. The Home Office appointed a Coroner Review Group, which published its proposals in August 2002. Central to its recommendations is the end of the independent role of the coroner. Instead they would become part of the general judicial system with superior courts being used as an avenue of appeal.

In recent years the work of the civil law, as in the criminal legal system, has become focused in fewer, larger and more modern facilities. In 2016 HM Courts and Tribunal Service, which was established in 2011, confirmed a major round of courts closures, 86 of the 460 courts and tribunal hearing centres, being earmarked to shut by 2017. This program is expected to yield savings to the £500m annual cost of the courts estate, but will inevitably lead to justice

being geographically further away from the public. Among the closures are the Combined Court Centre at Chichester (West Sussex) and the two Crown Courts at Barnstaple (Devon) and Dorchester (Dorset). Two Combined Crown Courts and Magistrates Courts, and a dozen combined Magistrates Courts and County Courts will also close, along with 42 Magistrates' Courts, 17 County Courts and around a dozen tribunal, office and miscellaneous legal centres.

4 Further Reading

There are many general books on the history of the law or parts of it, ranging from books on the assizes and the mediaeval county court to works about modern branches of the law. For instance, James Cockburn wrote *A History of English Assizes 1558-1714* (1972) and in the same year Sir Basil Nield penned his *Farewell to the Assizes* (1972), a lament for a system that was replaced in that year by the Crown Court. Robert Palmer published a study of *The County Courts of Medieval England 1150-1350* (1982) and more recently Patrick Polden has published *A History of the County Court, 1846-1971* (1999), a detailed study of the modern County Court. A different angle on the law is to look at the practitioners and Esther Moir published *The Justice of the Peace* (1969) as well as a detailed examination of their work in Gloucestershire during the late 18th century.

While books on the history of the law may be plentiful, fewer address the buildings in which the law was practised. Clare Graham completed her doctoral thesis *The Development of the Law Court as a Building Type in England Before 1914* at the University of Sheffield (1997) and used it as the basis for her book *Ordering Law: The Architectural and Social History of the English Law Court* (2003). Following a national survey of prisons, *English Prisons an Architectural History* (2001), English Heritage also produced a report for the

Court Service, entitled *The Law Court 1800-2000: Developments in Form and Function* (2002). This study is available in the Historic England library in Swindon. Most recently the architecture of justice has been tackled by Linda Mulcahy in *Legal Architecture: Justice, Due Process and the Place of Law* (2011) and in *Architecture and Justice: Judicial Meanings in the Public Realm*, edited by Jonathan Simon, Nicholas Temple and Renée Tobe.

As one of the largest and most prestigious buildings in any town, law courts often figure prominently in local histories, volumes of *Buildings of England* series ('Pevsner') and are particularly well documented in the volumes of the Victoria County History. The histories of courts and their buildings are also described in major works of architectural history such as Howard Colvin's landmark *The History of the King's Works* (1963-82) and Christopher Chalkin's *English Counties and Public Building 1650-1830* (1998). Courts also feature prominently in other works on public buildings such as Colin Cunningham's book on *Victorian and Edwardian Town Halls* (1981). The same author also published with Prudence Waterhouse a book on the work of the leading Victorian architect *Alfred Waterhouse 1830-1905* (1992), while David Brownlee published *The Law Courts The Architecture of George Edmund Street* (1984).

4.1 Contact Historic England

East Midlands

2nd Floor, Windsor House
Cliftonville
Northampton NN1 5BE
Tel: 01604 735460
Email: eastmidlands@HistoricEngland.org.uk

East of England

Brooklands
24 Brooklands Avenue
Cambridge CB2 8BU
Tel: 01223 582749
Email: eastofengland@HistoricEngland.org.uk

Fort Cumberland

Fort Cumberland Road
Eastney
Portsmouth PO4 9LD
Tel: 023 9285 6704
Email: fort.cumberland@HistoricEngland.org.uk

London

1 Waterhouse Square
138-142 Holborn
London EC1N 2ST
Tel: 020 7973 3700
Email: london@HistoricEngland.org.uk

North East

Bessie Surtees House
41-44 Sandhill
Newcastle Upon Tyne
NE1 3JF
Tel: 0191 269 1255
Email: northeast@HistoricEngland.org.uk

North West

3rd Floor, Canada House
3 Chepstow Street
Manchester M1 5FW
Tel: 0161 242 1416
Email: northwest@HistoricEngland.org.uk

South East

Eastgate Court
195-205 High Street
Guildford GU1 3EH
Tel: 01483 252020
Email: southeast@HistoricEngland.org.uk

South West

29 Queen Square
Bristol BS1 4ND
Tel: 0117 975 1308
Email: southwest@HistoricEngland.org.uk

Swindon

The Engine House
Fire Fly Avenue
Swindon SN2 2EH
Tel: 01793 445050
Email: swindon@HistoricEngland.org.uk

West Midlands

The Axis
10 Holliday Street
Birmingham B1 1TG
Tel: 0121 625 6870
Email: westmidlands@HistoricEngland.org.uk

Yorkshire

37 Tanner Row
York YO1 6WP
Tel: 01904 601948
Email: yorkshire@HistoricEngland.org.uk

5 Acknowledgements

Images

© Historic England

Front cover: DP133717

Figure 1: AA006577

Figure 2: AA028522

Figure 3: p_g09142_012

Figure 4: p_g09142_004

Figure 5: AA028521

Figure 6: AA006579

Figure 7: AA006796

Figure 8: AA012696

Figure 9: AA006738

Figure 10: AA82_00158

Figure 11: BB88_07012

Figure 12: BB90_02473

Figure 13: BB90_02505

Figure 14: BB90_02483

Figure 15: BB90_02491

Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders and we apologise in advance for any unintentional omissions, which we would be pleased to correct in any subsequent editions.



Historic England

We are the public body that looks after England's historic environment. We champion historic places, helping people understand, value and care for them.

Please contact
guidance@HistoricEngland.org.uk
with any questions about this document.

HistoricEngland.org.uk

If you would like this document in a different format, please contact our customer services department on:

Tel: 0370 333 0607
Fax: 01793 414926
Textphone: 0800 015 0174
Email: customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk

All information and weblinks accurate at the time of publication.

Please consider the environment before printing this document

HEAG141
Publication date: August 2016 © Historic England
Design: Historic England