

Elstow Courts

The upper room of The Green House, now known as Moot Hall, was built to accommodate several forms of court hearings.

“Piepowder Courts” These were held during Elstow’s fairs, to provide swift justice for people who were not permanent residents. ‘Piepowder’ probably comes from the French *‘pieds poudrés’*, which refers to the dusty feet of travellers and vagabonds.

Piepowder courts dealt with matters such as trade disputes & theft.

The chairman would usually be the Abbey’s steward and three or four men would act as ‘justiciars’.

Punishments might include fines; being held in a pillory; or being drawn in a tumbrel (a 2 wheeled cart) to humiliate the offender.

“Manorial courts” consisted of all Elstow manor’s tenants and were arranged at a few days notice, as and when the need arose. The lord of the manor, or a steward, would act as chairman, with 12 men acting as a jury and the parish clerk recorded proceedings on a “Manor Court Roll”.

Manorial courts came in several forms:

“Courts Baron” dealt with free* tenants' rights and duties, changes of occupancy, and disputes between tenants.

“Courts Leet” were, effectively, magistrates Courts and dealt with minor offences. They were permitted to elect constables or other officials.

“Court customary”, or “Halmote court”, was the equivalent of the Court Baron for the lord's unfree** tenants.

*Free tenants held land, in return for which they carried out predetermined services, mostly agricultural, for the Lord of the Manor.

**Unfree tenants could be called upon to perform any sort of service for the Lord and their status could be considered as almost akin to slavery.

As the distinction between free and unfree tenants gradually disappeared, the use of Courts Baron declined and Courts Customary became the predominant form.