

Henry III Fine Rolls Project

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David Carpenter

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Hugh Doherty

The [Henry III Fine Rolls](#) [2] project has delivered a new on-line edition of the surviving fine rolls from the reign of Henry III, king of England (1216–72). The edition will also be published in book form, of which three volumes have appeared so far. (1) The earliest fine rolls survive from the reign of King John, but similar rolls were very likely in use during the reign of King Richard I and perhaps as early as the 1170s. Fine rolls continued to be made into the mid 17th century; the last surviving fine roll covers the 18th to 23rd regnal years of King Charles I (27 March 1642–26 March 1648). (2) The fine rolls record offerings of money and other gifts – palfreys, hawks, wine, even cartloads of lead – made to the king for certain, specified favours. We may class these offerings, just as the late 12th-century exchequer handbook, the *Dialogue of the Exchequer*, classed them, as offerings that were voluntary and those that were not. The voluntary offerings were made for immediate or future benefits – in the words of the *Dialogue*, for some privilege (*pro libertate aliqua*), for an estate or lease (*pro fundo uel pro firma*), for the custody of a ward (*pro custodia cuiusque, qui minor est annis*), even ‘for the sake of obtaining justice in respect of some farm or rent’ (*iustitie causa super fundo uel redditu aliquo*). The second type of offering were those ‘known at the exchequer as fines’ (*fines ad scaccarium dicuntur*) and treated ‘as if they were pecuniary penalties’ – making the plaintiff liable, in the laconic, yet effective, words of the *Dialogue*, to ‘be distrained in all things’. The *Dialogue* specifically cited reliefs as an example of such a fine, but the evidence of the fine rolls themselves suggests that a wide range of compulsory payments were classed as fines.

56 fine rolls survive from the reign of King Henry III. The fine rolls for the 21st, 22nd, and 24th regnal years (1236–7, 1237–8, & 1239–40) are now missing, lost it seems since the reign of King Richard II. The only previous attempt to edit the surviving rolls was undertaken on behalf of the Record Commission by Charles Roberts (1803–97), the future assistant keeper and secretary of the public records, in the early 1830s. His two-volume edition was first published in 1835; the second volume appeared in the following year. When compared with the edition of King John’s fine rolls, published by the industrious Thomas Duffus Hardy (1804–78) in the same year, Roberts’s edition seems by far the inferior of the two. While Hardy published the surviving rolls in their entirety, Roberts printed only a selection, what he himself recognised as ‘a small proportion of the whole’. Worse, his selection was made on the narrowest of grounds and with the narrowest of objectives, where they supplied ‘links in the chain of family descent’ and where they served as an aid to

the Record Commission's four-volume calendar of inquisitions *post mortem*, published between 1806 and 1828. Entries that did not meet these criteria or serve this objective – in fact, the majority – were not printed. The resulting selection very much served Roberts's own interests: when in 1865, within a year of his retirement, he printed his two-volume calendar of 13th-century genealogical detail, *Calendarium genealogicum*, he cited his printed *Excerpta* throughout.⁽³⁾ And so, despite the intensive mining of the original fine rolls of Henry III by successive generations of scholars and despite repeated calls by some of those scholars for a new edition, most vigorously expressed in 1947, the selection published by Roberts remained the only printed edition of the fine rolls of King Henry III. As late as 1911, for instance, the then deputy-keeper of the Public Records, Sir Henry Maxwell Lyte, could still declare that 'the fine rolls of the reigns of John and Henry III have already been dealt with by the Record Commissioners'.⁽⁴⁾ His view was surely decisive in explaining why the 21-volume calendar of medieval fine rolls, first published in that year and continued over the next 50, began with the succession of Edward I in 1272.⁽⁵⁾

At its simplest, the *Henry III Fine Rolls* project provides the first, comprehensive translation of the surviving 56 fine rolls from the reign of King Henry III. As is well known, the Record Commission used a typeface – the well-named 'record type' – that replicated the abbreviations of the chancery and exchequer enrolments; the Record Commission edition of the Fine Rolls was no exception. The Record Commission editors clearly shared a view that readers of their volumes would be both fluent and unchallenged at reading heavily-abbreviated Latin texts. Ours is a very different world, where Latin texts (not to mention technical abbreviations of Latin text) are now considered too exclusive and problematic an investment for scholars and students – not to mention, the ever-elusive general public desiring immediate dissemination and quantifiable impact. The project's website style-book is very clear on the preference for English translation over Latin text: 'the guiding principle in editing the Fine Rolls of Henry III has been to make them as intelligible as possible to as wide an audience as possible'. Providing translations – the scholarly equivalent of getting one's hands dirty – is often a tough and thankless task, and certainly no soft option. The project's translations are faithful, careful, and precise, and its style-book supplies a valuable commentary on the rules governing the project's method of translation and a detailed explanation of its conventions in regard to naming practices, ecclesiastical feast-days, formulae, money, land valuations, and other technical information.

The potential limitations of this reliance on translations are more than compensated for by the project's most remarkable feature: a facility that allows the user to examine high-quality digital images of the original rolls themselves. With some minimal scrolling and with a simple click on a link, the user is taken – the gods and gremlins of broadband permitting – to a high-quality digital image of the original entry on the original membrane of the original fine roll. Here the project really comes into own. Users can now explore, examine, check, compare, and transcribe individual entries from the comfort of their own desks – or wherever they happen to have access to the web. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this facility. Occasionally, for instance, the sight of the original roll provides a distinctive and memorable insight into the workings of the king's chancery and the wider dynamics of his government. A glimpse, for instance, at the fifth membrane of the fine roll for the eighth regnal year (1223–4) underlines the scale of the crisis precipitated by Falkes de Bréauté, one of the leading figures in the military establishment of King John (recently upgraded from 'military adventurer' to 'soldier and royal favourite'), whose defiance both unsettled and united leading representatives of the minority government. During the subsequent siege of his castle at Bedford, valiantly and violently held by Falkes's brother, William, entries reporting the despatch of numerous writs commanding different clusters of sheriffs to seize the chattels of Falkes, William, and their men were squeezed into a small body of space after the compilation of the roll. This detail is described in the printed edition of the roll, but only when the membrane itself has been viewed online can the user appreciate the burden of bureaucratic confusion created by the crisis. The value of such a resource as a teaching aid – as a tool, for instance, for the teaching of diplomatic, palaeography, political history, even material culture – requires little emphasis.

The scope of the *Henry III Fine Rolls* project extends well beyond the 56 surviving rolls. There survive eight duplicate rolls, all made in the first decade of the reign, while Richard Marsh was chancellor. The making

and use of duplicate rolls appears to have been consciously abandoned – so it is cogently and compellingly argued here – following the death of Richard Marsh in May 1226 and the succession of his talented and industrious deputy, Ralf de Neville (*d.* 1244), as chancellor later that same month. Since these duplicates were usually copied from the fine rolls, the variations between the two sets of rolls are often scribal in nature and therefore trivial in detail. The project nevertheless notes where variations between the rolls and these eight duplicates occur, which is of some importance when the duplicate roll – very likely Ralf de Neville’s own roll as chancellor – replaces the marginal references to counties found on the fine roll with marginal references to subject and persons.

The *Henry III Fine Rolls* project also offers, in effect, a very usable guide to the originalia rolls. At distinct terms in the exchequer year, the chancery clerks compiled extracts from the fine rolls for the use of their colleagues in the exchequer and copied these extracts on to single membranes, which they then delivered to the exchequer; marginal entries in the fine rolls – such as ‘from here it is to be sent to the exchequer’ (*hinc mittendum est ad scaccarium*) – indicate the process and timing of this copying and delivery. At the close of the exchequer year, the individual membranes were collected together to form what became known as the originalia roll. The project not only notes the discrepancies between the fine and originalia rolls, but also uses the relevant originalia rolls to fill the three regnal years for which the fine rolls are missing.

Given the narrow basis of selection used by the Record Commission edition, the *Henry III Fine Rolls* project easily eclipses its Record Commission predecessor in terms of its store of new information. Take, once more, Falkes de Bréauté. The Record Commission edition printed 12 fines concerning Falkes; the *Henry III Fine Rolls* project supplies 88. And what is true of Falkes is true of so many others who played a part in his career: not simply his boy-king, Henry III, or his wartime opponent, Louis of France, or his subsequent rival and nemesis, Hubert de Burgh, but equally his brother William, his wife Margaret fitz Gerald, their victims, the monks of St Albans, and their personal rival, Henry of Braybrooke, whose dishonest interference and subsequent capture precipitated the terrible clash at Bedford. The subject index – non-existent in the Record Commission edition – can now take you to castles, dower, and prisoners (all, of course, subjects close to Falkes’s heart) as well as abduction, executions, and exile (subjects no less relevant to his career, as he discovered in dramatic and bitter circumstances). There is still room for improvement with the subject index: the entry for ale directs the user to the entries for food and drink which only redirect the user – to the immense disappointment of this reviewer – back to the entry for ale. The entry for wine, listing 25 different references, is far more satisfying. At a time when the editors of the curia regis rolls no longer provide subject indices to their volumes, the editors of the *Fine Rolls* project are to be applauded for preserving and persevering with theirs. It should be stated, too, that the new store of information on offer in the project and through its various indices is not only greater in quantity, but now more easily accessible. Where before the interested reader would be required to shift between the index and the listed page numbers, now the reader, with one click of the mouse, is taken directly to the relevant entry.

Accompanying the translations and images of the fine rolls is an extensive apparatus of commentary. This apparatus includes a valuable historical survey of the reign of King Henry III; a detailed introduction to the fine rolls, originalia rolls, and their respective function, form, drafting, duplication, and historical interest; and an essay exploring the many and complex digital and technological issues raised by the project. Two other sections of this apparatus deserve particular notice. The first is the essay dealing with the ornate designs of roll headings and with the drawings of three heads found in the margins, all, interestingly, of women (Mabilia, daughter of Elijah the Jew of Gloucester, Hilary Trussebut, and a third unidentified woman). The essay is accompanied by excellent images of the headings and of the drawings. The second section is the very interesting collection of commentaries published during the active and continuing life of the project as fines of the month. Here, again, Falkes de Bréauté is ably served, with two very interesting discussions on the identity of his supporters in 1224 and on the fortunes of his wife following his exile and death in Rome. These fines of the month constitute a significant contribution in their own right. Here users can find immediate, vivid, and compelling insights into markets, ransoms, sheriffs, and widows, into the battle of Lincoln in 1217, the murder of an Essex knight in 1225, and a duel fought in Kent in 1228, into the impact of Magna Carta on the post-war government, the personal grievances of Peter des Roches, bishop of

Winchester, and the powerful interaction of faith, prejudice, and politics that shaped the king's response to the alleged crucifixion of a Christian boy in Lincoln in 1255. Most conference proceedings would struggle to replicate the quality and range of such a collection of essays.

The website of the *Henry III Fine Rolls* project is easily navigable and attractively designed – not to mention, it is worth placarding in these penurious times, entirely free. The rather insignificant and subjective detail that the present reviewer preferred to read the introductions and the fines of the month either on the published or printed page rather than on the computer screen is more likely to confirm his luddite credentials than in any way qualify the achievement of this project, especially as the entries on the website are easily and quickly printable. The *Henry III Fine Rolls* project represents a serious and substantial contribution to the study and knowledge of the reign of King Henry III and his kingdom as well as a valuable resource for the delineation of the broader, powerful forces – economic, legal, military, religious, and social – that shaped that king's fortunes and those of his subjects. All those responsible for this project, individuals as well as institutions, deserve to be warmly praised for their vision, hard work, and continued engagement with its maintenance and improvement. The AHRC should surely be congratulated for supporting and sustaining so useful and so rewarding an intellectual endeavour. The sponsors, editors, and critics of the Record Commission (perhaps even Charles Roberts himself) would have been impressed.

Notes

1. *Calendar of the Fine Rolls of the Reign of Henry III Preserved in the National Archives 1: 1 to 8 Henry III 1216–1224*, ed. P. Dryburgh and B. Hartland (Woodbridge & London, 2007); *Calendar of the Fine Rolls of the Reign of Henry III Preserved in the National Archives 2: 9 to 18 Henry III 1224–1234*, ed. P. Dryburgh and B. Hartland (Woodbridge & London, 2008); *Calendar of the Fine Rolls of the Reign of Henry III Preserved in the National Archives 3: 9 to 18 Henry III 1234–1242*, ed. P. Dryburgh and B. Hartland (Woodbridge & London, 2009).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Chancery, Fine Rolls, 18–23 Charles I, pt 2, C60/553.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. C. Roberts, *Calendarium Genealogicum. Henry III and Edward I* (2 vols., London, 1865).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Calendar of the Fine Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office 1: Edward I AD 1272–1307* (London, HMSO, 1911), p. ix.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Calendar of the Fine Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office*, (21 vols., London, 1911–61).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5415>

[2] <http://www.finerollshenry3.org.uk/home.html>

[3] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>