



VCH Oxfordshire Texts in Progress

Spelsbury parish

Local Government

Manor Courts

Courts for Spelsbury manor were held by the 13th century, when the lord claimed view of frankpledge, waifs and strays, forfang (the right to seize stolen cattle), and the right to gallows.¹ By the late 14th and 15th century two to three courts were usually held each year,² surviving rolls (from 1476) dealing with admission of tenants, agricultural regulations, failure to maintain buildings, and general nuisances. Agricultural orders continued until enclosure in 1803, and courts ceased around 1822. Manorial officers included a steward, warrener, woodward, reeve, constable, and a tithingmen for each hamlet (including Chadlington Eastend). The Ditchley tithing ceased by c.1540, presumably because the hamlet was by then largely depopulated.³

Dean's medieval lords had their own manor court (responsible also for Chalford in Enstone), but owed suit to Chadlington hundred.⁴ The 1484 court was held by the treasurer of Oriel College, though later courts were held by a steward twice a year.⁵ By the early 18th century court business chiefly comprised tenancy transfers,⁶ and courts ceased presumably at or before Dean's enclosure in 1779.

Ditchley and Spelsbury's woodland continued to be treated as part of Wychwood forest until 1641, despite the Spelsbury woods north of Grim's Ditch being supposedly excluded in 1298–1300.⁷ Swanimote (or forest) courts were held at 'Fenny Chapel' in the Ditchley woodland in the 16th century, attended by representatives from Spelsbury and

¹ *Rot. Hund.* II, 746.

² BL, Harl. Rolls B.31, 35, 36, 38, 41, 42; OHC, E36/2/2/F1/1–16.

³ OHC, E36/2/2/CR/1–144; E36/2/2/F1/1 and 4–5; J. Jordan, *A Parochial History of Enstone in the County of Oxford* (1857), 55–6.

⁴ M. Lobel, *The History of Dean and Chalford* (ORS, 17, 1935), p. 8; *Rot. Hund.* II, 741–2; TNA, SC 2/197/20; *ibid.* LR 2/189, ff. 109v., 111; above, Enstone, local govt.

⁵ Lobel, *The History of Dean and Chalford*, p. 68; OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 74/4/27.

⁶ Oriel Coll. Arch., DLR 5 (court rolls 1693–1737); *ibid.* S II L 16; S II I 1–3.

⁷ *Oxon. Atlas*, 49; B. Schumer, 'The 1298/1300 Perambulations of Wychwood Forest – and after', *Oxoniensia* 69 (2004), 2, 5, 8, 12–13; Schumer, *Oxon. Forests*, pp. 129, 136, 159, 188–9; TNA, C 133/86, no. 1; *ibid.* C 1/3/52; *VCH Oxon.* XIX, 27, 250–1; OHC, E36/1/1/D/8; E480/D1/3 (1638).

Ditchley and from several other places on the forest's east side. Business encompassed matters related to woodland, overgrazing and unscoured watercourses.⁸

Parish and Vestry Government

Spelsbury had two churchwardens (or 'church reeves') by 1447, responsible for administering the church estate and other income, and assisted in the 1520s by keepers of the bells and of the church's various lights. In the mid 16th century some men paid a fine to be excused from office. Sidesmen were mentioned in 1605, and tithingmen for individual hamlets collected communion money, while in later periods the vicar's and parishioners' churchwardens were elected in the usual way. Other parish offices, held usually by the larger tenant farmers or millers, included that of overseer of the poor's stock, mentioned from 1596.⁹

By the 19th century, when the vestry usually met in the Chequers inn, there were overseers and waywardens for each hamlet, along with assistant overseers.¹⁰ A parish council was established under the 1894 Local Government Act, dominated at first by farmers and millers, and chaired until 1907 by Alfred Neild of Dean House. Other members included the master of the council school Ernest Conduct, the vicar Thomas Tanner (chair 1917–24), and local landowner Kathleen Dillon's companion Elsie Corbett of Spelsbury House (chair 1939–40). Business included footpath and road repairs, and overseers and their salaried assistants continued to be appointed in the early 20th century.¹¹ A parochial church council was established after the First World War despite initial opposition, and in 2024 both that and the parish council met in the memorial hall in Spelsbury.¹²

⁸ OHC, E36/6/CR1/1–11; E36/CR2/1–3; VCH Oxon. XIX, 27, 291. For Fenny Chapel (site of an abandoned medieval hermitage), above, relig. hist. (relig. life: Middle Ages).

⁹ OHC, PAR246/4/F1/1 (chwdns' accts 1525–1703), transcribed in *ibid.* PAR246/10/X/1, and (to 1575) in F.W. Weaver and G.N. Clark (eds), *Churchwardens' Accounts of Marston, Spelsbury, Pyrton* (ORS 6, 1925), 35–64; above, relig. hist.

¹⁰ OHC, PAR246/2/A1/1–2.

¹¹ *Ibid.* PC246/A1/1–5.

¹² Gore's Visit., 284; OHC, PAR246/2/A1/2; PAR246/3/A/1–3; local information.