

Anglo-Saxon Charters

These are the most numerous local and detailed documents for the period.

The earliest charters date from the 660s. They reflect the emergence of the idea of a written document being necessary to establish legal title to land (which came to be known as 'book land'). The development of charters is linked to christianisation, with both its written culture and widespread acquisition of lands. Some 1,600 charters survive overall, conveying land or rights from kings to senior churchmen, lay aristocrats or religious houses, or-at the next stage down- from an ecclesiastic or noble to his followers.

The majority of surviving charters date from the 9th, 10th or 11th centuries, and are often known only from medieval copies. Their language came to be latin, but the land grants (the crux of the matter) continued to be described in english.

Anglo-Saxon charters are a good example of those distant and complex document types which prove more accessible and useful than expected. They developed a recognisable standard form, with sections including an invocation and curse (on anyone breaking the charter terms), statements of the gift, parties and witnesses to it, and often a detailed perambulation of the bounds of the gift.

There are published lists of known charters and welcome guides to their authenticity (see [further reading and resources](#)). Forgery of charters and dubious provenance of copies are a major pitfall.

The effort of researching any local Anglo-Saxon charter is well worthwhile. In a period of few documents, they offer evidence of land distribution, power hierarchies and ownership, estate boundaries, early place-names and (in the some 840 charters with perambulations) descriptions of natural landscape features and man-made landmarks such as boundary banks, burial mounds and open-field strips. Charters can sometimes be linked to surviving landscape and boundaries, and a present-day group of Oxfordshire historians walk the county's Anglo-Saxon boundaries with charter texts in hand.