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By R. F. Hunnissett

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The office of coroner was established in England in 1194; it has had an unbroken history, and has been exported to many countries, including the United States. At the zenith of his power, in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the coroner was concerned with many aspects of law and local administration, and with some of the most tragic and dramatic episodes of medieval life. Coroners - 'keepers of the pleas of the crown' - had to be knights or substantial landowners; they were required to hold inquests on victims of suicide or violent death, receive abjurations of the realm (ceremonial undertakings by felons in sanctuary to leave the country), hear appeals and confessions of felony, and legalise any exactions, outlawries or subsequent pardons. Their responsibilities included the arrest of suspects and the safeguarding of property subject to forfeit; the coroners' rolls contained the written records of many official proceedings.

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