



Somerset Archive and Record Service

Information Leaflet

Quarter Sessions in Somerset

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QUARTER SESSION RECORDS

Introduction

The court of Quarter Sessions was instituted in 1362 and was held continuously until the Beeching reorganisation of the court system in 1971. Sessions were held four times a year usually in Taunton, Bridgwater and Wells, and occasionally in smaller towns such as Ilchester and Bruton.

Prior to the establishment of County Councils in the late 19th century, Quarter Session dealt with all matters of civil concern as well as any criminal case that did not go to Assizes.

The Records

Order Books (Ref. Q\SO) These began in 1560, but have large gaps until the main series started in 1613. They contain court orders relating to cases heard by Justices, as well as some information also found in the Sessions rolls, such as jurors' lists, calendars of prisoners and petitions. Until 1810 civil and criminal orders were in the same volume, but from 1810 they split into two series. The Somerset Record Society has published order books for James I - Charles II, containing administrative or civil function orders only. (Vols 23, 24, 28, 34).

Sessions Rolls (Ref. Q\SR) These date from 1607, although three earlier rolls exist for 1561, 1591 and 1597. From 1607-39 the rolls were in two series: one containing examinations of suspects and witnesses taken before Justices prior to the Sessions; the other containing draft orders, letters to the clerk or Justices, petitions, memoranda, and bastardy orders. Justices sitting out of Sessions dealt with the latter. From 1649-1725 the rolls largely contain examinations. From 1725 nearly everything is in the same series, and after 1750 highway stopping up orders and sacrament certificates are included.

Indictment Rolls (Ref. Q\SI) These are usually small parchment slips detailing charges being brought against the accused. They may also contain lists of Justices and jurors, presentments at Assizes and recognisances.

Recognisance Rolls (Ref. Q\RLA) Recognisance is a bond or obligation, and most of those found in Quarter Sessions are of alehouse keepers. The keepers and their sureties had to enter into a bond with the Sessions to promise to keep orderly houses.

Petition Rolls (Ref. Q\SPET) Petitions to the Justices are mainly found in the Sessions rolls, but there are a few petitions in a separate series for the period c.1644-64.

Calendars of Prisoners (Refs Q\SCS and Q\SCA) There are separate calendars of prisoners to be tried at Sessions 1812-82, and Assizes 1810-1905. Earlier calendars for Sessions prisoners appear in the Order Books. (See also DD\MK for Assize calendars 1796-1823 and Sessions calendars 1836-1915.)

Gaol Records (Ref. Q\AG) Somerset's County Gaol was at Ilchester until 1843, at Wilton until 1884 and is now at Shepton Mallet. Records include registers of prisoners, plans of the buildings, applications to be turnkey or gaoler, rules, regulations, chaplains' notebooks and Governors' letter books. Justices were responsible for inspecting gaol conditions and the Sessions rolls contain their reports until 1877.

Local Government Responsibilities

The Quarter Sessions were responsible for much local government prior to the creation of County Councils in 1889. The following list describes the main records produced as a result of these duties.

Bridges (Ref. Q\AB) The sessions records contain indictments for repair of bridges, 1817-82, and reports and tenders, mostly for the 19th century, although those for the Bridgwater Division survive from 1698. There are two volumes of bridge plans, 1874.

Shire Hall (Ref. Q\AC) In 1853 it was decided that Taunton Castle's Great Hall was no longer suitable for holding Assizes, and Shire Hall was built as a new Assize Court and administrative centre for the county. Plans, specifications, reports, correspondence and financial material survive relating to the building.

Lunatic Asylums (Ref. Q\ALU) The County Pauper Lunatic Asylum opened at Wells in 1848, but privately run asylums also existed, which the Justices were responsible for licensing and inspecting. The majority of the surviving papers relate to the administration of the asylums rather than the inmates.

Enclosure Awards (Ref. Q\RDE) Maps and accompanying awards were produced as the result of Parliamentary enclosure acts. At times plans show the whole parish and distinguish lands affected by the award, but sometimes only the area affected is shown. The earliest award is dated 1720 and the latest 1913.

Land Tax Returns (Ref. Q\REL) Tax returns were arranged by Hundred and then by tithing within the Hundred. For most places the returns survive for 1766-7 and 1800-32.

Jury Lists and Electoral Registers (Refs Q\RJL and Q\RER) There are 18th century jury lists arranged by Hundred and electoral registers from 1832 for most constituencies.

Security of the Realm

Quarter Sessions also administered various Acts of Parliament relating to National Security.

The Test Act of 1673 stated that all persons holding public office had to be members of the Church of England and the fact that they had taken communion had to be witnessed by the Minister and Churchwardens. What were known as **Sacrament Certificates (Ref. Q\RRSC)** were returned to the Quarter Sessions as evidence of this conformity. **Protestant Dissenters (Ref. Q\RRO)** from 1689 had to take oaths of allegiance to the Crown and these were returned to the Quarter Sessions. Roman Catholics or Papists were considered the greatest danger in the late 17th-18th centuries, and lists of "**Papists Estates**" (Ref. Q\RRP) were drawn up giving fairly detailed information including names of estate owners, occupiers, rents and field names. **Friendly Societies, Freemasons, and scientific societies (Refs Q\RSF, Q\RSM and Q\RSL)** had to register with the Quarter Sessions and deposit a copy of their rules and regulations.

Company accounts (Q\RUA) Private companies responsible for some undertakings, such as harbours, had to deposit their accounts with the Quarter Sessions. The earliest accounts for Somerset are those of the Conservators of the River Tone, 1699-1870.

Deposited plans (Ref. Q\RUP) Some types of record had to be deposited with the Quarter Sessions by law. These included plans for public undertakings, such as railways, canals, tramways, electric and gas lighting schemes, docks and harbours. There are 676 of these plans from 1791-1836.

Useful Books

C A Beard, *The Office of the Justice of the Peace in England: In its Origin and Development* (1904, reprinted 2000)

F G Emmison and I Gray, *County Records: quarter sessions, petty sessions, clerk of the peace and lieutenancy* (Historical Association pamphlet 62)

Jeremy Gibson, *Quarter Sessions Records for Family Historians* (1995)

Bertram Osborne, *Justices of the Peace 1361-1848* (1960)

S and B Webb, *The Parish and the County* (English Local Government vol.1, 1963)

Quarter Sessions Records for the County of Somerset, James I 1607-25,

Somerset Record Society vol.23; Charles I 1625-39 vol. 24;

The Commonwealth 1646-60 vol.28; *Charles II 1666-67* vol.34.

T G Barnes, *The Clerk of the Peace in Caroline Somerset* (1961)

D Lilly, *Lilly's Listings of Somerset Settlements 1747-1800* (1996)

G R Quaife, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives* (1979)

A J Webb, *Index to Somerset settlement and removal cases in Quarter Sessions* (1997)

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