

Dorset History Centre – Guide to Sources

Quarter Sessions Records

What were the Quarter Sessions?

- The Quarter Sessions were the **local government of the day**. They were responsible for the civil administration and justice in each county
- The Quarter Sessions were run by **Justices of the Peace**, whose responsibility ranged from investigating crimes and punishing criminals, to dealing with removals of poor people, apprenticeship cases, bastardy cases, highway and bridge maintenance and the granting of licences
- The JPs were also responsible for supervising many of the duties carried out by the parish officials so you may find links between the parish records and the QS records
- The **QS sat four times a year** at Epiphany, Easter, Midsummer and Michaelmas. Each session was held at a different place in the county, but the business conducted did not necessarily relate to that area as the JPs had countywide jurisdiction
- The civil functions of the QS were transferred to the **new County Councils**, which were established following the Act of 1888, although the QS maintained responsibility for criminal justice and licensing until their abolition in 1971
- In addition to the countywide Quarter Sessions, **many boroughs held their own courts** and these records can usually be found at the local County Record Office together with the Quarter Session records

Records of the Quarter Sessions

Order Books

- Essentially they are a **summary of the business of the court** and of the judgements made
- The contents of the books vary over time, reflecting the various administrative and judicial duties taken on by the JPs
- The records for the early to mid 17th century are largely in Latin but thereafter you will usually find them in English. From 1731 the records are legally required to be in English
- Order Books are sometimes indexed on a subject basis
- Order Books record the **appointment of local officials**, such as a constable or tithingman
- Order Books record disputes between parishes over **settlement cases**, which would have been heard by the JPs. In the same way any disputes over maintenance in bastardy cases were brought before the QS
- Early Order Books also contain lists of **prisoners in the local jail** or House of Correction, together with details of the offences committed

Quarter Sessions Rolls

- Consist of bundles of all the paperwork generated by one sitting of the court
- Original presentments and witness statements for a case heard at the QS court may be included in the rolls

Jury Service

- Jury Lists record those **men aged between 21 and 70** who were eligible for jury service
- Listed parish by parish
- Qualification for jury service came through owning property of enough value to pay poor rate, the **name of the property may be given**

- During the 19th century the lists also give the person's business or trade

Calendars of Prisoners

- Early Order Books also contain **lists of prisoners** in the local jail or House of Correction, together with details of the offences committed
- Between 1785 and 1971 separate lists of prisoners, known as Calendars of prisoners, awaiting trial at Quarter Sessions or Assizes were printed
- Between 1785-1852 the Calendars provide the **name of the prisoner and the details of the offences**, although not all prisoners appear in these lists
- From 1854 the Calendars are a far more detailed, including the names of the prisoners, their county of origin, age, trade, whether they could read or write (until 1914) and details of the judicial process, including the nature of the offence, the verdict and the sentence. Some calendars note the details of previous convictions

Land Tax Assessments

- Land Tax was a tax based on an assessment of a **person's land and estate**
- Land Tax Returns were arranged by hundred and tithing
- Earlier returns are lists giving the **names of the owner and occupier** of each property in a tithing, where the value of the property is such that it is liable to tax
- From the 1800s onwards most returns began to include a description of the property

Poll Books

- Poll Books record the **elector's name and chosen candidates**. The books are usually arranged by hundred and within each hundred by parish
- The right to vote or not depended upon certain property qualifications and gender; **women were excluded from voting** until 1918
- The publication of Poll Books was authorised by an Act of 1696 and provided a record of how people voted in both county and borough elections
- Following the 1872 Act Poll Books were no longer published
- Not to be confused with Electoral Registers, which are lists of people eligible to vote and which begin in 1833

Bastardy Records

- The majority of information concerning bastardy issues can be found in the Order Books
- The Register of Bastardy Orders (surviving only for the period 1821-1832 for Dorset) is a register of all the bastardy orders issued by the Court
- Bastardy Orders were issued by JPs instructing the father of an illegitimate child to financially support his child. If the father refused to pay support he could be sent to prison
- Registers of Bastardy Orders are arranged **alphabetically by the parish** in which the child was born
- Registers of Bastardy Orders include the **name of the mother, name, residence and occupation of the father**, sex of the child, date of the order and the amount to be paid each week by the father
- Divisional Bastardy Returns (surviving only for the period 1844-1869 for Dorset) are lists of Bastardy Orders issued in the various divisions

- Divisional Bastardy Returns offer more limited information than Registers of Bastardy Orders. The name of the mother is given but the father's name is only noted if an order was granted. You rarely find the name or sex of the child included

Vagrants' Examinations and Passes

- Most of the business relating to the poor was entered in the Order Books
- Vagrants' Examinations are records of the **examination of a vagrant** in an attempt to find out their last legal place of settlement
- The examinations usually identify the parish of birth and any other parishes in which the examinant has lived
- The examinations may also provide information concerning apprenticeships and employment, such as the **names of masters and employers**, the length of service and wages. In effect the examinations often provide a 'potted biography' of the examinant
- A Vagrants' Pass is essentially an order to the parish constable to convey the vagrant into the custody of the constable of the neighbouring parish. He would then continue to pass the vagrant on until he or she reached the place of their legal settlement. Vagrants' Passes in Dorset survive for the period 1740-1791

Recognizance Registers

- JPs were responsible for the licensing of those **people who wished to keep alehouses or inns**
- Early order books include presentments against people who were keeping "disorder in their houses" and they also contain details of licences granted
- By the 18th century special sessions were held for recognizances. These are recorded in separate registers (which survive for the period 1714-1770 for Dorset)

- The registers give the **names of those people entering into a bond with the JPs** that they will keep true measure and good order in their houses. Each person had to provide two sureties for their good behaviour and each of the two parties would then bind themselves in a certain sum of money to observe these conditions. The money was only paid if the condition were infringed
- You will usually only find the name of the person and their abode but you may also find a description of the status ie tippler or innkeeper
- From the 1750s onwards it is usual to find the sign of the inn noted

Records of Dissenters

- JPs had a role in ensuring that the established religion was followed and that any form of dissent from the Church of England was controlled
- You may find entries in the order books or session rolls, relating to **dissenters' meeting houses**, which had to be certified from 1688. They often include the names of those people active in a group of dissenters
- Registers of Papists, from 1717-1776, contain the names **of any Roman Catholics in the County**, the land they held and the details of any property leased out to others

Militia Papers

- Before the establishment of a regular standing army our national defence was arranged at a local level
- The Lord Lieutenant for each county was responsible for arming, training and **mustering able-bodied men**
- When the Militia was raised, each county was given a quota of men and the Lord Lieutenant would allocate this number between the hundreds in his county

- Lists of able-bodied men between 18 and 50 (after 1762 the age was lowered to 45) in each tithing were drawn up and from these lists the **names of those who were to serve in the militia** were selected by ballot
- The Militia Lists usually give the **man's name, occupation or rank and any exemptions or infirmities**. Lists from 1789 include more detail, including the man's height and details of wife and children
- Ministers of Religion, apprentices, doctors and parish officers were exempt from militia service

Registers of Game-Keepers

- Those wishing to kill game had to be licensed and game-keepers were issued with certificates from the JPs
- Registers of those licensed were kept by the Quarter Sessions (surviving for the only the period 1784-1807 for Dorset) and contain a variety of information
- The entries record the **names of gamekeepers**, their abode and the name of the manor or land to which the licence related. Other entries in the register will be for the keepers appointed by the lord of the manor to act within his estate. This means that you may be able to trace how long a person worked at a particular estate

Registers of Inspections of Private Asylums

- JPs were also responsible for the inspection of private lunatic asylums in the county
- Registers of Inspections (surviving only for the period 1774-1858 for Dorset) provide **basic information about the asylum**, including the name of the house, number and **names of inmates** and any observations they may have had about the asylum conditions
- Between 1825 and 1858 for Dorset however much more detailed information was recorded for each inmate, including their **name, age, marital status, date of admission**, date of certificate of insanity occupation, place of abode, and any date of discharge or death

- Medical records for individual patients, irrespective of their age, may be subject to restricted access because of their sensitive nature

Deposited Plans

- Plans and Reference Books for major public undertakings, including; Railways, Turnpike Roads, Tramways, Canals, Docks and Harbours, Gas, Water and Electricity