

Quarter Sessions Records

Introduction

The court of Quarter Sessions was established in 1362, and was held continuously until 1971. Sessions were held four times a year, usually in Taunton, Bridgwater and Wells, but occasionally in smaller towns such as Ilchester and Bruton. Cases were heard by Justices of the Peace ("JPs"), who were members of the local gentry, and by a jury. They were guided by the Clerk of the Peace, who was a trained lawyer.

Before County Councils were set up in the late 19th century, the Quarter Sessions 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 starts 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 (volumes 23, 24, 28 and 34, searchroom Quickref shelves).

Sessions Rolls (Ref. Q\SR) These date from 1607, although three earlier rolls exist for 1561, 1591 and 1597. From 1607-1639 the rolls were in two series. The first contained examinations of suspects and witnesses taken before Justices before the Sessions. The other contained draft orders, letters to the Clerk or Justices, petitions, memoranda, and bastardy orders. (Justices sitting out of Sessions dealt with bastardy orders, which aimed to get child maintenance for illegitimate children.) 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 listing the charges being brought against the accused. They can also contain lists of Justices and jurors, presentments at Assizes and recognisances.

Recognisance Rolls (Ref. Q\RLA) A 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 court 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.1644-1664.

Calendars of Prisoners (Refs Q\SCS and Q\SCA) There are separate calendars of prisoners to be tried at Sessions 1812-1882, and Assizes 1810-1905. Earlier calendars for Quarter Sessions prisoners appear in the Order Books. (See also DD\MK for Assize calendars 1796-1823 and Quarter Sessions calendars 1836-1915.)

Gaol Records (Ref. Q\AG) Somerset's County Gaol was at Ilchester until 1843, at Wilton until 1884, and at Shepton Mallet until 2013. 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 many local government matters before County Councils were created 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, 1817-1882, and reports and tenders, mostly for the 19th century, although those for the Bridgwater Division survive from 1698. There are also 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. Privately run asylums also existed, which the Justices were responsible for licensing and inspecting. Most of the surviving papers relate to the administration of the asylums rather than the patients.

Enclosure Awards (Ref. Q\RDE) Maps and accompanying awards were produced as the result of Parliamentary enclosure Acts. Sometimes plans show the whole parish and highlight the 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 between 1766 and 1832.

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

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. To prove it, they had to be witnessed taking Holy Communion by the vicar and churchwardens. These records are known as **Sacrament Certificates (Ref. Q\RRSC)** and were returned to the Quarter Sessions as evidence. From 1689, **Protestant Dissenters (Ref. Q\RRO)** 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. These give 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\RUAA) 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\RP) Some types of records 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.

Further Reading

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