

Quarter Sessions

Quarter Sessions was the administrative body which ran the county for many centuries. It did not function like modern local government, but was in fact a court of law; the magistrates of the county met four times a year (hence “Quarter” sessions) to transact business and carry out justice on local villains at the same time. Oxfordshire Quarter Sessions covers the old pre-1974 county of Oxfordshire, but not the Vale of White Horse.

No one is certain when Quarter Sessions started; it is often said that it dates “from time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary”, which in legal terms is 1189. Certainly it dates from the early mediaeval period, though few counties have Quarter Sessions records dating back anything like that far – in Oxfordshire, the earliest record is 1687. The power of Quarter Sessions was drastically reduced by the creation of County Councils in 1889, and it ceased to exist entirely in 1974.

The central records of Quarter Sessions are the rolls or bundles. These are the documents which were brought to the court or scribbled down by the Clerk of the Court while business was being transacted. They were tied up together once the session was over, labeled with the name of the particular session (Epiphany, Easter, Trinity, Michaelmas) and the year, and filed. Rough minute books were kept of the business of the sessions (**QSM**), and in the mid-19th century committee minutes emerged briefly covering particular aspects of Quarter Sessions such as Highways or Police (**QSC**).

The rolls include papers relating to criminal cases, including depositions, examinations and indictments. Quarter Sessions dealt with relatively minor cases; serious criminal matters which might even carry the death penalty were transferred to the Assizes – the court of justices from London, who took the records of the cases they tried with them when they left. The Assize records are held in [The National Archives](#) .

One of the main tasks of Quarter Sessions was overseeing the Poor Law. Many documents in the bundles relate to this.

The rolls also include lists of officials and jurymen, petitions, and loose papers relating to the administrative business of Quarter Sessions. However, this administrative business created subcategories of records in its own right by the later 18th century, in addition to which various documents were deposited with Quarter Sessions (the QSD class) to give them legal validity. The major groups of records are as follows:

Bridge papers (QSB): papers and plans relating to the building and repair of bridges in the 19th century.

Enclosure Awards (QSD/A): the formal awards and maps by which Enclosure took place were deposited with Quarter Sessions as a legal record.

Charities (QSD/C): schemes and accounts of charities in the county for the 19th and early-20th century.

Papists' Estates (QSD/E): records of land held by Catholics in the first half of the 18th century.

Land Tax Assessments (QSD/L): lists of people paying land tax in each parish from about 1785 to 1832.

Public Utilities (QSD/P): accounts of gas and coke, canal, water, drainage, etc, companies for the 19th and 20th centuries.

Printing Presses (QSD/Pr): declarations as to the ownership of printing presses in the first half of the 19th century.

Friendly Societies (QSD/R): rules, etc, of friendly societies from about 1750 to 1850.

Turnpikes (QSD/T): accounts of turnpike companies 1822-1878.

Victuallers' Recognizances (QSD/V): register of innkeepers 1753 to 1822.

Quarter Sessions Estates (QSE): papers and plans of police stations, lockups, etc, mid-19th century.

Highways (QSH): orders and reports on highways under the Acts of 1862 and 1878.

Lunacy papers (QSL): papers, certificates, returns of insane persons, and plans relating to asylums 1828-88.

Calendars of Prisoners (QSP): the lists of prisoners tried, their offences, and the outcome 1778 to the 20th century; the earliest volume consists of broadsheets published about individual villains and crimes.

Rating papers (QSR): papers on the making of the county rate subsequent to the Act for making an Equal County Rate for the County of Oxford (1813).

Weights & Measures (QSW): Acts, correspondence, recognizances and other papers relating to various measures concerning weights and measures, poisons, adulteration of food, etc, 19th century.

Elections (QSX): orders and papers regarding polling districts 18th to 19th century; significant papers relating to the disputed 1754 election.

Interesting Examples

In 1692 Sarah Pearpoint, a specialist in stealing the linings out of gentlemen's coaches, sent a petition to Quarter Sessions from her prison, showing how survival itself was difficult without help from outside the gaol, as "having neither friends nor means whereby to subsist, and having nothing allowed her whereby to live upon, I was forced to sell my clothes off my back." She begged to be allowed money for food – not something the gaol provided as a matter of course – but was refused.

Where are these records?

The Quarter Sessions records for Oxfordshire have all been deposited at the History Centre.

Where is the catalogue?

This is one of the oldest catalogues in the History Centre, and is only available on index cards at the Centre itself. There is also an 11 volume calendar of the Quarter Sessions bundles 1687-1830 by Canon Oldfield, which has been digitized by the Oxfordshire Family History Society and is available on DVD from the History Centre or the Society.

Catalogues of some of the post-1830 bundles are accessible [on Heritage Search](#)

[Visiting and contacting the Oxfordshire History Centre.](#)