

Glamorgan Archives

~RECORDS OF THE COURTS~

The Record Office holds records of the courts of Quarter Sessions and Petty Sessions, the lowest levels of a legal system that extended upward to the High Court and the House of Lords. Local courts were not, however insignificant – they could impose sentences which ranged from small fines to transportation or death.

Quarter Sessions

The origins of today's Magistrates' Courts can be traced to the court of Quarter Sessions and to the Justices of the Peace (lay judges) appointed by the Crown to act within each county. The Glamorgan Quarter Sessions covered almost the whole of the historic county of Glamorgan, and dealt with both judicial and administrative matters. Thus, in addition to criminal trials, the court was responsible (for example) for the upkeep of bridges and the county gaol, provision of care for lunatics, registration of electors and the county police force, and it acted as an appeal court for the Poor Law administered by the parishes. The court functioned as the government of the county for more than three centuries before the county council or any other local authority came into being.

Petty Sessions

The Quarter Sessions met only four times a year, but over the centuries had to deal with an ever-increasing load of legal and administrative business. As the eighteenth century progressed the workload of the Justices had grown to such an extent that it was necessary for them to hold extra sessions, meeting in small numbers in their own localities. In time these meetings became known as Petty Sessions.

During the nineteenth century the system of Petty Sessions became increasingly formalised, with magistrates holding their sessions more regularly. Laws were enacted requiring formal records to be kept of the proceedings.

The court was held before two or more magistrates but without a jury and dealt with minor cases such as drunkenness, poaching and vagrancy. More serious crimes would have been referred to one of the higher courts, either the Quarter Sessions or Great Sessions (replaced by the Assize Courts in 1830).

In 1889 Glamorgan County Council was created, and took over nearly all the administrative functions of the Quarter Sessions and Petty Sessions courts. From then on the role of Quarter Sessions was almost exclusively judicial. In 1971, the Petty Sessions and the Quarter Sessions were replaced by Magistrates' Courts and Crown Courts.

Quarter Sessions Records

Administrative Records

Minute books, 1719-1972

[Q/S/M]

These record the business of the court, including the decisions taken at meetings and hearings.

Order Books, 1729-1781

[Q/S/B]

The orders listed in the books relate to how the business of the court should be conducted, including the administration of bail, systems to deal with appeals against court decisions and the payment of court officials.

Committee Minute Books, 1874-1974

[Q/S]

In addition to the minute books of the Quarter Sessions, there are also minute books of various committees, for example, the licensing committee, the probation committee and the county magistrates' committees.

Crime Records

Sessions papers (Quarter Session Rolls), 1727-1971

[Q/S/R]

These are documents which the Clerk of the Peace would need during each session. At the end of the session the clerk would take all the papers and parchments that had accumulated and thread them onto a length of string. Documents may include:

- Lists of jurors
- List of officers in court
- Writs of summons
- Coroners' accounts.

The rolls have been flattened, guarded and bound into volumes up to 1804 and between 1889-1965. Outside these dates the rolls are in their original condition and difficult to use. Permission to consult these unflattened rolls must be sought from the Duty Archivist.

Indictments & Presentments, 1730-1793

[Q/S/I]

Indictments were the formal written charge brought against an individual, hamlet or town, usually for a minor or 'nuisance' offence such as assault, poaching or larceny. Volumes contain transcripts of the indictments dealt with at each session, and give details of the offence, and the names of the 'prosecutor' and the accused.

Calendars of Prisoners, 1850-1971

[Q/S/C]

The Calendars of Prisoners are lists of indicted persons held in the County Gaols and Houses of Correction (at Cardiff and Swansea) due for trial in the Quarter Sessions and Assizes. They were compiled by the Governor or keeper of the institution and forwarded to the Court for use during the proceedings. The lists contain the name of the accused and their age and occupation as well as the court's verdict and sentence.

Juvenile Convictions, 1847-1879

[Q/S/JC]

From 1847 juvenile offenders were treated differently from adult offenders. Persons under the age of 14 could be charged by two justices of the peace, in order to avoid juveniles being imprisoned for long periods of time. Forms recording juvenile convictions were sent to the Clerk of the Peace, and included

- Date of conviction
- Name and age of person(s) convicted
- Details of the offence
- Punishment
- Names of the presiding magistrates

Other Records of the Quarter Sessions

Land Tax Assessments, 1766-1831

[Q/D/LTA]

Although the Quarter Sessions was not involved with the assessment or collection of the Land Tax, (a rate according to the value of the land owned) duplicate copies of the assessments were deposited with the Clerk of the Peace in order to provide a list of those entitled to vote.

Rate books c. 1842-1881

[Q/F/R]

Rates were a form of property tax imposed by many organisations such as the parish, the poor law union, the School Board and the Quarter Sessions under the name of 'The County' to fund their work. They give the name of owners and occupiers for each parcel of land assessed.

Deposited Plans, 1792-1970

[Q/D/P]

Plans of public undertakings such as canals, docks, tramways, railways and gasworks were deposited with the Clerk of the Peace. They date from 1792 and are often the earliest large-scale maps of the areas they cover. With the plans are lists of landowners and occupiers who would be affected by the proposed development.

Petty Sessions

Petty Session Divisions

Petty Sessions divisions were based on the groups of parishes known as Hundreds. The court sat at several of the larger towns in the division:

Division	Reference	Sitting at
Caerphilly Higher	PSCAEHI	Pontlottyn, Gellygaer, Merthyr
Caerphilly Lower	PSCAELO	Caerphilly, Bargoed
Cowbridge	PSCOW	Cowbridge
Dinas Powis	PSD	Barry, Penarth
Kibbor	PSK	Whitchurch
Miskin Higher	PSMHI	Aberdare, Mountain Ash
Miskin Lower	PSMLO	Llantrisant, Pontypridd, Porth, Ystrad
Newcastle and Ogmore	PSNEW	Bridgend, Maesteg

The Courtroom was often located in a police station and so the courts were also known as police courts. As well as dealing with minor cases and committing cases to higher courts, these courts also:

- Dealt with the licensing of public houses
- Recorded the final step in the process of the adoption of children

Records of the Petty Sessions

	Minute Books	Court Registers	Juvenile Court Registers
Caerphilly Higher	1840-1972	1919-1960	1933-1958
Caerphilly Lower	1874-1947	1892-1981	1933-1968
Cowbridge	1880-1889	1885-1970	1933-1964
Dinas Powis	1920-1922	1889-1970	1933-1970
Kibbor	1908-1973	1915-1974	1933-1972
Miskin Higher	1897-1961	1853-1964	1933-1959
Miskin Lower	1925-1953	1902-1977	1933-1984
Newcastle & Ogmore	1836-1859	1832-1983	1933-1983

Crime Records

Minute Books, 1840-1973, record the business dealt with at the petty sessions, and often provide detailed information about cases heard.

Court Registers, 1832-1981, provide lists of persons appearing in the courts.

Juvenile Court Registers, 1919-1984, lists of young offenders appearing before the justices.

Records of the Licensing Court

Licensing Registers, 1872-1974

Registers of clubs, 1902-1962

Other Records of the Petty Sessions

Adoption Records, 1927-1949, petty sessions heard and recorded the final stages of the adoption process. These records contain sensitive information about individuals, access to them is therefore restricted.

Committee Minutes, 1840-1973, including licensing committees and probation committees.

Year Books, 1902-1990, which included lists of Justices of the Peace.

Matrimonial court minute books and registers, 1941-1983, which refer to matrimonial cases heard at the Petty Sessions.

Borough Courts

By royal charter Cardiff and Merthyr Tydfil were permitted to hold Quarter Sessions for the borough separately from those of the county. This right was exercised only sporadically until the nineteenth century. Unfortunately no records from Merthyr Borough Quarter Sessions survive.

Cardiff Borough Quarter Sessions Records

QSCBO

Order books, 1730-1772, containing the orders of the court.

Recognizance books, 1776-1809, Recognizances were bonds to appear to give evidence of prosecute a case.

Presentments books, 1779-1809, Presentments were charges laid before the jury before a trial could begin.

Borough Petty Sessions Records

PSCBO, PSMBO

	Minute Books	Court Registers	Juvenile Court Registers
Cardiff Borough	1846-1904	1846-1979	1919-1962
Merthyr Tydfil Borough	1908-1920	1895-1964	1933-1964

Magistrates' Courts

In 1971, Quarter Sessions and Petty Sessions courts were replaced by the Magistrates' and Crown Courts. The Records of the Magistrates' Courts can be found as continuations of the Petty Sessions collections.

The collection for the Vale of Glamorgan (PSVG) and Dinas Powis and Cowbridge (PSDPC), however, relate only to the period following the establishment of the Magistrates' Courts.

	Court Registers	Juvenile Court Registers
Dinas Powis & Cowbridge	1970-1974	1970-1973
Vale of Glamorgan	1974-1980	1974-1981

Records in other repositories

The court of Great Sessions, a higher court than the Quarter Sessions, was introduced into Wales at the same time, but it dealt with more serious cases and was in many ways equivalent to the Assize Courts in England. In 1830 Wales came under the jurisdiction of the Assize system and the court of Great Sessions was abolished.

Records of the Great Sessions are in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, but the Glamorgan Archives holds photocopies of the 'Black Books', 1726-1830, which are lists of indictments.

The National Archives hold records of Assizes and other higher courts.

For further information, please contact:

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