

# A short guide to criminal ancestors

Criminal records can be useful, but can also be quite difficult to trace and data protection restrictions may apply to some of the more recent records. However, resources are available, providing information about crimes, trials and sentences.

## ◆ Quarter Sessions

- ◇ From the late fourteenth century to 1971, Justices of the Peace in counties and some boroughs met four times a year at Quarter Sessions. They dealt with administrative matters and also many crimes, excluding the most serious offences.
- ◇ Shropshire Quarter Sessions Rolls date from 1696, and include:
  - ◆ Indictments - written accusation or criminal charges
  - ◆ Presentments - jury's decision, with brief details of case
  - ◆ Recognizances - bond to attend court or to keep the peace
- ◇ An index to the Rolls (1831-1920) is available in printed volumes and on the public PCs. A name search can provide references to jurors and witnesses, as well as those accused of crimes.
- ◇ Quarter Sessions Order Books survive for 1638–1874. These contain court transactions and are summarised in printed volumes, available in the Search Room.
- ◇ Calendars of prisoners, 1786-1930, (Ref QS/10) give the names of prisoners in gaol awaiting trial. These can include age, occupation and alleged offence. Prisoners awaiting execution or transportation are also included.
- ◇ There are separate order books and other documents for some **Borough Quarter Sessions** of Shrewsbury, Ludlow, Bridgnorth, Wenlock and Bishop's Castle but survival is patchy.

## ◆ Petty Sessions

- ◇ The Petty Sessions courts dealt with more minor misdemeanours, such as petty burglary and drunkenness. Only a few records are held at Shropshire Archives, mostly from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and most are subject to data protection.

## ◆ **Assize courts**

- ◇ Assize courts dealt with the most serious criminal cases. Shropshire was part of the Oxford circuit. While Assize records are held at the National Archives, details of those awaiting trial at Shrewsbury Gaol can be found in the Calendars of Prisoners.
- ◇ In 1971, Assize courts, Quarter Sessions and Petty Sessions were abolished and replaced by the Crown and Magistrates' courts.

## ◆ **Other resources held at Shropshire Archives:**

- ◇ Prison charity records include aid to discharged prisoners (Ref 6001/3940-3950 and various other references in 6001).
- ◇ Newspapers often contain detailed accounts of crimes and trials, with the Shrewsbury Chronicle dating back to 1772.
- ◇ 'Penny dreadfuls' with sensationalised details of crimes and executions (Ref 665/4/592-609).
- ◇ Returns of prisoners, committed or bailed, 1880-1893 (Ref QS/11).
- ◇ List of debtors in prison, 1730-1785 (Ref QS 12/1-2).
- ◇ Shrewsbury Prison Records (Ref 6405) - subject to data protection.
- ◇ Census returns provide lists of those in prison at the time.

## ◆ **Other court documents**

- ◇ Great Sessions of Wales, 1730-1830 (National Library of Wales)
- ◇ Old Bailey, 1674-1913 ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org))
- ◇ Crown Courts (The National Archives)

## ◆ **Online resources**

- ◇ Some criminal registers and transportation records for England and Wales are available on the Ancestry website ([www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)).
- ◇ Information about tracing criminal ancestors is on the National Archives' website ([www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records)). Some records, such as licences to convicts, can be searched by name.

## ◆ **Further Reading**

- ◇ Hawkings, David T. Criminal ancestors; a guide to historical criminal records in England and Wales (364.942 Reading Room)

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