

## Quarter Sessions

### Part 1: Criminal Records

The Quarter Sessions were roughly equivalent to modern magistrate's courts, although depending on the date the sentences handed out could be much more severe – up to and including the death sentence. Their name comes from the fact that they were traditionally held four times a year or Quarterly.

The functions of the Quarter Sessions can be divided into two categories: criminal and administrative. Both these may have generated records which include your ancestors.

In this first session, the judicial activities of the Quarter Sessions will be reviewed. The records left by the Quarter Sessions administrative functions will be looked at in Part 2.

The Assizes were the higher court – the equivalent to the Crown Courts – and these will also be looked at in a later article.

Key documents relating to the criminal cases of the Quarter Sessions are as follows:

- Order Books
  - Record of activities of the Court in date order
- Indictments
  - Details of the charge against the defendant
- Recognizances
  - Bonds to appear in the court. These could be made for a range of parties in the case including the defendant, victim, and witnesses
- Depositions
  - Statements by people involved in the case
- Calendar of Prisoners
  - Details of persons to be tried in the Court session.
  - There may be versions from after the trial with details of the verdict and sentence.

Newspaper reports are also a valuable source of information on ancestors caught up in criminal cases and may be the first sign that an ancestor was involved with the law – whether as villain, victim or witness.

The following case of Robert Ranson is an example of reviewing a case in the Quarter Session records and the type of information which you might find.

*Note: All the records referred to in this example are held at the Northumberland Archives.*

## The Case of Robert Ranson

On Saturday 10 January 1857, a report appeared in the Newcastle Guardian of the trial of Robert Ranson. Robert was charged with assaulting a police officer, Thomas Green, at a public house in Longbenton run by Mr Wheatley<sup>1</sup>.

The following reference to Robert appeared in the Order Book for the Epiphany Quarter Session of 1857<sup>2</sup>:

*At the present Quarter Session Robert Ranson convicted of assault upon Thomas Green was sentenced to 6 calendar months in the gaol at Morpeth and also to pay a fine of £5 to Her Majesty the Queen and that he be further imprisoned until the fine be paid.*

Robert was No. 6 in the record of Indictments. He pleaded Not Guilty but was found Guilty

There were a number of Recognizances listed in respect of this case:

No. 4	
Thomas Green of Dudley, Longbenton, Police Officer, £20 <sup>3</sup>	To prosecute Robert Ranson. Assault upon a constable
No. 5	
John Wheatley of Dudley Colliery, Longbenton, Innkeeper, £20	To give evidence against Robert Ranson. Assault upon a constable
No. 6	
Joseph Brown of Dudley Colliery, aforesaid, shoemaker, £20	To give evidence against Robert Ranson. Assault upon a constable
No. 7	
Luke Anderson of Dudley Colliery, aforesaid, Banksman, £20	To give evidence against Robert Ranson. Assault upon a constable
No 8.	
Mary Hetherington of Dudley Colliery, aforesaid, single woman, £20	To give evidence against Robert Ranson. Assault upon a constable
No. 9	
Robert Ranson the younger of Murton Colliery, Dalton-le-dale, Durham, Pitman, £40 and Robert Ranson the elder of the same place, engineman, and David Adamson of Pittington, Hall Garth, Durham, Waggonway man, £20 each	For said Robert Ranson the younger to appear and answer for an assault upon a constable.

From the last entry, it may be deduced that Robert's father was also Robert.

Within the additional documents associated with this trial was the following which provided additional information on Robert's case - in particular that he faced three different charges<sup>4</sup>:

Prisoner's Name	No.	Offences and Causes	Remarks	Decisions of the court
	6	<u>Misdemeanour</u> - for having at parish of Longbenton on 3 <sup>rd</sup> October 1856, unlawfully and	Imprisonment with or without hard labour not	Plea - Not Guilty

<sup>1</sup> British Newspaper Archive. [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk) 14/5/2015

<sup>2</sup> QSO/35 Quarter Session Order Book Michaelmas 1856 - Easter 1858

<sup>3</sup> £20 in 1860 would have been worth ca. £1,182.58 in 2017 (TNA Currency Converter - <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/>) 29/5/2020

<sup>4</sup> QSB 147/1

Reg <sup>5</sup> . vs. Robert Ranson	maliciously inflicted upon one Thomas Green certain <u>Grievous Bodily Harm</u>	exceeding 3 years (14 & 15 Vict, Cap. 19, Sec. 4)	Verdict - Guilty of Common Assault. To be imprisoned in the Gaol for 6 Calendar Months. To pay a fine of £5 to the Queen and to be further imprisoned until the fine be paid.
	2nd count - for an assault upon a constable whilst acting in the due execution of his office	Imprisonment with or without hard labour not exceeding 2 years. The court may also fine the offender and require him to find sureties to keep the peace (9 Geo. IV, Cap. 31, Sec. 25)	
	3rd count - for common assault	Fine or Imprisonment, or both, the Imprisonment not to exceed 2 years	

Thus, considering the options, it would appear that Robert got off comparatively lightly since he was convicted of the lesser charge of common assault rather than GBH, as is shown from documents discussed later.

Details on Robert Ranson in the Calendar of Prisoners in the Gaol at Morpeth:

No.	6	
Name	Robert Ranson <i>Admitted to bail 20th December 1856</i>	
Trade		
Degree of instruction		
Name and Address of Committing Magistrate	B. B. Sanderson & G. C. Atkinson Newcastle	Esqs.
Date of Warrant	20th December 1856	
When received into custody		
Offence as charged in the commitment	Unlawfully assaulted and beat one Thomas Green, a constable, in the execution of his duty, at Longbenton, on the 3 <sup>rd</sup> of October, 1856	
When tried	A true bill	
Before whom tried		
Verdict of the jury	Guilty of common assault	
Sentence of order of the court		

There were also 6 recognizance documents in the case of Robert Ranson<sup>6</sup>:

No. 4

Recognizance of Prosecutor

Thomas Green of Dudley in the Parish of Longbenton in the said County of Northumberland. Police Officer £20

...Robert Ranson on the 3rd October 1856 in Longbenton did...

...unlawfully assault and beat the said Thomas Green being then and there a Peace Officer, to wit, a constable and in the due execution of this duty as such constable then and there being, against the form of the statute in such case made and provided and against the peace of our Lady the Queen, Her Crown and Dignity

<sup>5</sup> Reg. = Regina (the Queen)

<sup>6</sup> QSB 147/2

No. 5

Recognizance of Witness

John Wheatley of Dudley Colliery in the Parish of Longbenton in the said County of Northumberland. Innkeeper  
£20

No. 6

Recognizance of Witness

Joseph Brown of Dudley Colliery in the Parish of Longbenton in the said County of Northumberland. Shoemaker  
£20

No. 7

Recognizance of Witness

Luke Anderson of Dudley Colliery in the Parish of Longbenton in the said County of Northumberland. Banksman  
£20

No. 8

Recognizance of Witness

Mary Hetherington of Dudley Colliery in the Parish of Longbenton in the said County of Northumberland. Single  
Woman  
£20

No. 9

Felony

Recognizance of accused and bail

Northumberland

Be it remembered that on the twentieth day of December in the year of our Lord One Thousand Eight Hundred and Fifty Six Robert Ranson the younger of Murton Colliery in the parish of Dalton-le-Dale in the county of Durham, Pitman, and Robert Ranson the elder of the same place, engineman and David Adamson of Pittington in the parish of Hall Garth in the said county of Durham, Waggon way man, personally appear before me the undersigned one of Her Majesty's justices of the Peace for the said County of Northumberland and severally acknowledged themselves to owe to our Lady the Queen the several sums following, that is to say the said Robert Ranson the younger the sum of Forty Pounds and the said Robert Ranson the elder and David Adamson the sum of twenty Pounds each of good and lawful money of Great Britain to be made and levied of their goods and chattels, lands and tenements respectively to the use of our said Lady the Queen, her Heirs and Successors if the said Robert Ranson the younger fails in the **condition** indorsed.

Taken and acknowledged the day and year first above mentioned at the Moot Hall in the County of Northumberland before me.

The "condition" was that Robert would appear in court for his trial – i.e., this is his bail notice.

The depositions (statements) taken in respect of this case are also part of the Quarter Session records. They include a detailed statement from Thomas Green the victim and prosecutor, and statements from the four witnesses.

Robert Ranson, late of the parish of Longbenton, pitman, however, when presented with the charge is only noted as "makes no reply".

A summary of the events as reported in these various depositions is as follows<sup>7</sup>:

*On Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1856 Constable Green went to Wheatley's Public House in Dudley Colliery, Longbenton, in order to collect Dog Tax. He was in the kitchen when a man called John Leightley came into the kitchen from the Tap Room*

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<sup>7</sup> QSB 147/2

*saying that he had lost his watch and blaming one of the rest of the company. At the request of Leightley and Wheatley, Green went to the Tap Room and asked the men there if they would be willing to be searched. Several of the men agreed to this but when Green approached a man called George Gascoigne he objected and a scuffle ensued. During the scuffle Green saw a man called Robson strike Wheatley's son in the passage outside the Tap Room whilst Wheatley was trying to throw Robson out of the pub. Green went to intervene and was then hit over the head with a poker by Robert Ranson. Green fell to the fall bleeding severely. After this single blow Ranson fled out of the pub by the passage.*

*Luke Anderson washed and dressed the wound although in his deposition he admitted that he "thought the man was done"*

*Green was off duty under the care of a doctor for a month.*

The above provides a fascinating window into an incident in the life of Robert and the other people involved in the story.

Naturally, Robert can be found in other records including the censuses. In the 1871 census, his wife and three children were living in Hetton le Hole and Robert's wife, Anne, gives a snippet which could lead to another story on this family: "husband in America" ...

### [North East Quarter Session Records](#)

County Durham: Records are held at Durham Record Office and date from 1596.

Northumberland: Records are held at Northumberland Archives and date from 1580.

Newcastle upon Tyne Quarter Sessions: Records are held at Tyne & Wear Archives and date from ca. 1553.

### [Hints and Tips](#)

- Before 1733 records will be in Latin.
- Imprisonment is a comparatively new form of punishment. In earlier times punishments were more "direct" – death, transportation, whipping, branding, etc.
- The Quarter Sessions were named after the old quarter days:
  - Epiphany
  - Easter
  - Midsummer
  - Michaelmas
- Many Quarter Session records are NOT available online. To use them will require a visit to the appropriate County Record Office

*Disclaimer: This document is intended as a guide to get you started with researching your family history. It is not intended to be comprehensive and Cameo Family History does not accept responsibility. for errors and omissions.*