Quarter Sessions
Part 2: Other Records

In addition to their roll in trying criminal cases (see Part 1), the Quarter Sessions had many administrative functions. These changed over time depending on the prevailing political situation but many are the types of roles which we still associate with JPs and local councils today:

- Management of weights and measures
- Issuing licenses for pubs and alehouses
- Registering guns
- Registering gamekeepers
- Keeping plans for railways and canals

Others may seem less familiar:

- Records of the local militia such as compensation to the families of men whilst they were serving
- Records of Oaths of different types.
    - In less religiously tolerant times, many members of the community were required to take oaths to show their adherence to required religious practices or loyalty to the Crown
- Licences for non-conformist meeting houses
- Taxation
    - As payment of taxes was linked to the ability to vote, Quarter Session records may include details of, for example, Land Tax and Hearth Tax records.

The Quarter Sessions also played a role in the administration of the Poor Law – particularly where there was some form of dispute involved. Two types of case were most common: bastardy cases and removal cases. These would generally start in the parish records – see The Parish Chest. However, in some cases a decision of the court was required, for example, in a case where the father refused to support his illegitimate child or if two parishes couldn't agree on the settlement of a family. These records can be particularly valuable to family historians as they may include a lot of useful information not found elsewhere. It may also be that the parish records of such cases no longer survive, making the Quarter Session records the only surviving source of information.

Documents

Key documents relating to the administrative records of the Quarter Sessions are as follows:

- Minute, process or sessions books
  - Records or the day-to-day activities of the court, in date order
- Order Books
  - Record of decisions of the Court
- Sessions rolls or files
  - Miscellaneous documents associated with the court adjudications.

Locating 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.

Example – Removal Order for John and Ann Cruddas

From the Northumberland Quarter Session Order Book (Ref. QSO/35, Michaelmas 1856-Easter 1856), held at Northumberland Archives.

On the 7 January 1857 a case took place between the township of Black Callerton in the parish of Newburn and the township of Murton in the parish of Tynemouth.

This was an appeal case contesting an earlier order to remove John Cruddas (alias Cruthers) and Ann his wife from Murton to Callerton.

The removal order was confirmed and the Callerton church wardens were ordered to pay the church wardens of Murton £4/10/2 costs and £2/13/- for the maintenance of John and Ann.

 John and Ann were, presumably, physically removed to Callerton.

One useful item in this case is that it confirms John's two surnames: Cruddas and Cruthers.

Hints and Tips

- Before 1733 records will be in Latin.
- Many Quarter Session records are NOT available online. To use them will require a visit to the appropriate County Record Office
- Levels of indexing vary – check the catalogue for the County Record Office to determine if names of individuals are included. If not, a manual search of the records may be required.
- Newspaper reports may point to there being a mention of an ancestor in the Quarter Session records or may include additional information which does not survive in the court records.

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.