



## Wells City Archives Database Petty Sessions Papers, 1850-1874

Petty Sessions were local courts and were the lowest level in the court system. They took place before magistrates or justices of the peace. Above them, for more serious cases, were the Quarter Sessions and the Assizes. Petty Sessions have been held in some counties (though not all of them) since the Tudor period. They dealt with minor offences, such as vagrancy, assault and drunkenness, and also decided whether a case should be referred to the Quarter Sessions. From 1872, they took on responsibility for approving licences for the sale of alcohol.

Wells City Archives has an extensive collection of papers relating to the Petty Sessions court held in Wells during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (WCC/3287-3310C). They are unusually comprehensive in their range; they date from 1822 right up to 1899, covering all but five of the intervening years. They are also unusual in another way. Looking at England as a whole, it appears that most surviving Petty Sessions papers are either court minutes or registers. By contrast, this Wells collection is made up predominantly of "Informations", which are statements made by a plaintiff, accusing somebody of, or complaining against somebody for, a criminal offence. It appears to be rare that this quantity of "Informations" has survived.

These Wells papers are a superb source for family historians, local historians and social historians. This database makes available a summary of the Wells Petty Sessions papers dating from 1850 to 1874.

- **Introductory Notes**
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### Introductory Notes

1. This database makes available online a summary of the Wells Petty Sessions papers dating from 1850 to 1874 (Wells City Archives, WCC/3294A-3299). You will be able to use this for family history and local history. The records will also allow you to learn about crime in Victorian Wells.

You can, for instance, find a named person in the database and find out what role they took in a case, the nature and date of the crime with which the case deals, possibly information on where the person lived and their occupation, and perhaps the outcome of the case.

2. Those of our ancestors mentioned in the records were not necessarily criminals; they may have been victims, wronged parties, witnesses or officers of the law.
3. The columns contain the following information:
  - Plaintiff: Surname followed by forename of the person who is bringing the case.
  - Defendant: Surname followed by forename of the person who is being accused.
  - Date Case Initiated: The date on which the first document related to the case - or the earliest document available in the archives - was raised. The date of the actual incident which gave rise to the case may have been several days or even months earlier. The cases are shown in date sequence.
  - Crime/accusation: A brief description of the crime or accusation is given, and alongside it, the type of crime is denoted by a capital letter or group of letters. The complete list of offences and accusations, and the letters used for classifying crimes, are given in the document "List of Offences / Charges", also available online. This list has been drawn up with specific reference to these Petty Sessions records. It does not necessarily match any published classification of offences / crimes.
  - Notes: A summary of further information about each case is given here. Where available, details of an individual's employment, place of residence and age are given (the latter being rarely available). Although for each case the focus is upon the plaintiff(s) and defendant(s), in some instances, there is also reference to witnesses, and sometimes the names of the individuals involved in law enforcement are given. Names of streets and of buildings such as pubs where incidents are alleged to have taken place are included when available. The outcome of the case is also given, where known. Unfortunately, for many cases, there is no indication of the outcome.
  - Document Ref. No.: This column gives the within-year case reference number, which should enable researchers to request to see the original documents. The indexes maintained within the City Archives identify the specific box number to which any particular reference relates.
4. City Archives volunteers (members of the Box Listing Group) listed the case papers and created the case summaries, which were digitised by a City Archives volunteer, all with support from the City Archivist. This was done as part of Wells City Archives' *Petty Sessions Project*.
5. Since this 1850-1874 database was completed, City Archives volunteers and the City Archivist have continued with the project by extending the date range covered by the database. A summary of the entire 19<sup>th</sup>-century Petty Sessions collection held in Wells, covering 1822 to 1899, is now almost complete. It is planned to make this available online for free. This rare collection of papers was previously uncatalogued.
6. We created an exhibition entitled "Crime and Punishment in Victorian Wells" which showed some of our findings from our detailed listing of the Petty Sessions papers dating from 1850 to 1874, along with material from the *Wells Journal*. It was displayed in 2016 at Wells Town Hall and in 2017 at Wells & Mendip Museum.

## **Historical Notes on the Wells Petty Sessions Papers**

1. In Wells, the Petty Sessions, along with the Quarter Sessions and the Summer Assizes, were held in courts at Wells Town Hall. The Town Hall had a gaol for the temporary confinement of prisoners.
2. The Wells Petty Sessions papers are of different types, though they are largely "Informations before the Borough Justices". Illustrations are shown below of an "Information" form, an "Information and complaint" form and a "Summons" form.



City and Borough of Wells, The Information of

IN THE  
County of Somerset.

Charles Bong, Sergeant of Police

taken upon *his* Oath, before me the undersigned, one of Her Majesty's  
Justices of the Peace for the said City and Borough, this *18*  
day of *May*, 186*5*

Who on *his* Oath saith as follows:—

was on duty in St. John Street last Monday  
afternoon, the 15<sup>th</sup> inst. I saw Frederick Ball  
driving a Horse drawing a Cart up it from  
Louthover into South Street. He drove the  
horse furiously, and it was dangerous  
to passengers in the Street in consequence  
of Ball's driving—

*Chas. Bong*

Taken and sworn }  
before me —

*J. W. Bennett*

An example of an Information form.

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City and Borough  
of Wells in the  
County of Somerset.

THE INFORMATION and COMPLAINT of

*Henry Phelps, Toy maker*

made and exhibited before me the undersigned, one of Her Majesty's Justices of the Peace in and for the said City and Borough, this *22<sup>nd</sup>* day of *April* 18*65* upon his Oath, duly administered to him, and who upon his Oath saith that

*George Francis, Haulier*

did within Three Calendar months last past, and on the *21<sup>st</sup>* day of *April* in the Year of our Lord, 18*65*, at the *Parish* of *St. Cuthbert* in the said City and Borough, unlawfully assault the said Complainant, and did then and there

*Strike him several times with his fist*

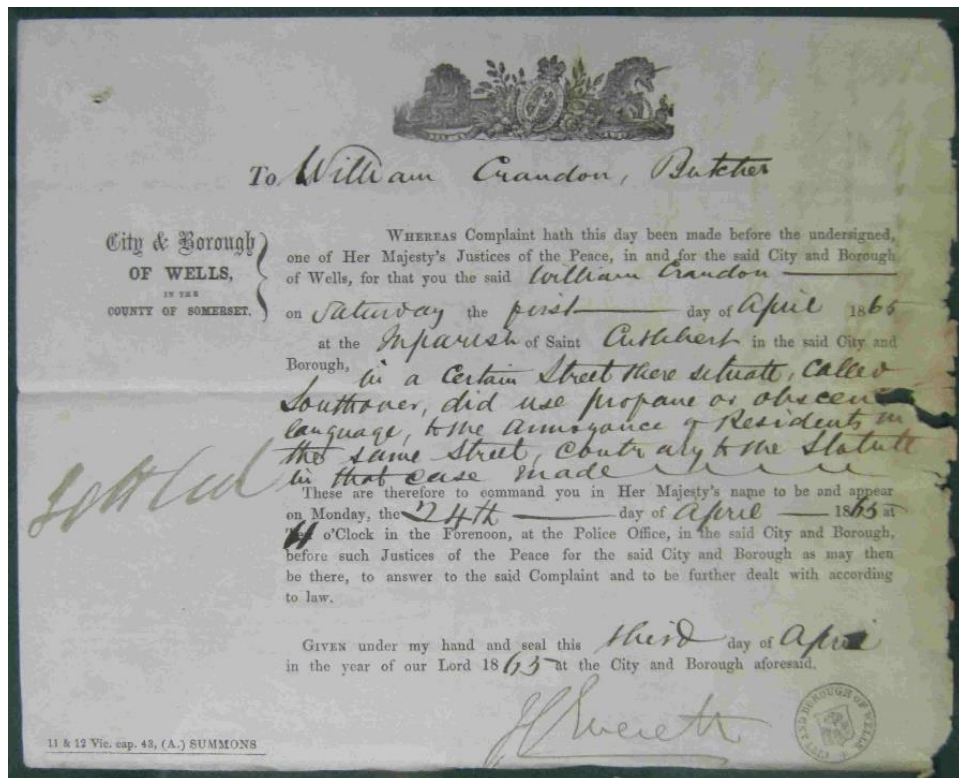
against the Peace of our said Lady the Queen, and contrary to the form of the Statute in that case made and provided.

Taken and Sworn before me,

*J. Henry Shillier*  
*J. [unclear]*

An example of an Information and Complaint form.

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An example of a Summons form.

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3. These Petty Sessions papers can be divided into two main categories. Firstly, there are cases which were publicly prosecuted by constables, inspectors and officials because of behaviour which contravened laws and statutes. These include drunkenness, violence and 'traffic offences' (such as obstructing the highway, or riding/driving without proper control). There are also many cases about cruelty to animals, especially donkeys and horses. Finally, there are cases about breaking pub licence laws, or not giving correct weights or measures (especially with bakers, butchers and, again, publicans).

Secondly, there are private cases between individuals – often about violence, fights and quarrels. Sometimes these also include stealing and cruelty.

Assault appears to be the most frequent type of case that was brought to the Wells Petty Sessions during this period. Private prosecution for assault appears to be the norm. In assault cases, the victim appears to receive compensation in the form of the fine levied upon the guilty party.

The Wells Petty Sessions dealt with a large range of types of case. If you wish to see a complete list of the offences and accusations, open the document "List of Offences / Charges".

4. There appears to have been a basic fee of 4/6d for an individual to bring a prosecution.

## How to Use this Resource

1. Choose which of the three files of the database will be most useful to you. Each one covers a different date range: 1850-1859, 1860-1869 and 1870-1874. If you're searching for an ancestor, it's worth searching each of the files.
2. Click on the name of that database. It will open a searchable PDF. Use the + button at the top of the screen to enlarge the text to the size you want.
3. Search the database for the term you want to find (e.g. name of a person or street) by doing this:
  - Select **Edit | Find** (OR click the icon of a magnifying glass at the top left of the screen OR type CTRL + F). A search dialogue will open.
  - Type your search term (e.g. your family's surname) into the search box. A message will appear in the search dialogue which tells you how many exact matches there are.
  - Click anywhere on the screen, then click **Next** in the search dialogue OR click the down arrow in the dialogue. The first occurrence of your search term will be highlighted.
  - Continue clicking **Next** or clicking the down arrow to find each further occurrence of the search term.
4. If you want any further information or need any help, or wish to arrange to see an entire document, please contact [archives@wellsmuseum.org.uk](mailto:archives@wellsmuseum.org.uk). We'll be delighted to assist.
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