

WHY THE HERTFORDSHIRE QUARTER SESSIONS?

THE RECORDS

The Society has transcribed the Quarter Sessions at Hatfield between the dates 1588 to 1619. This covers the period from the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and the accession of King James I and VI of Scotland. This period also includes the introduction of the Elizabethan poor law and the reinforcement of settlement rules.

The sessions were held on the quarter days of Epiphany, Easter, Midsummer, and Michaelmas. They were presided over by magistrates, men of some standing in the county, normally appointed as Justices of the Peace.

Quarter Sessions dealt with a great many petty matters that required a jury and an indictment from the Petty Sessions. These would include poaching, the maintenance of highways, drunkenness, vandalism, theft and attendance at church. There was a wonderful variety.

Quarter Sessions had no jurisdiction to hear the most serious crimes, in particular capital punishment. These would be sent after indictment to the Assize court.

For each Quarter Session, a clerk was appointed named the Clerk of the Peace. He kept the rolls and the records. He also retained the fees charged by the court.

WHY IMPORTANT FOR FAMILY HISTORY

The records mention the names of many people who would otherwise remain unknown. They spotlight society of the time in detail like no other source. The unpopularity of the enclosure of common land and the blocking of footpaths are common misdemeanours together with the strict rules on hunting and the possession of hunting dogs.

Why would anybody dig up the highway to put a rim on a wheel? How many times does a man have to be told to scour his ditches? Then there is the butcher who dumps his waste on the public highway to the great annoyance of passers by and the beer seller who conducts his trade during divine service and encourages drunkenness and games of chance.

If you did not attend church, you would be up before the magistrates. You could be a dissenter or a closet follower of the Church of Rome. These were troubled times for the established church.

Everything is in the form of PDF files. The transcription itself is over 900 pages. The variable spelling of the names of persons mentioned has been collated into a separate document to make searching easier. There is an index over the whole document which can be used to search for anything you fancy. Some of the legal terms are explained.

If you are looking for someone in this period, it is a good place to look. Otherwise, it is a fine piece of social history.