

London Metropolitan Archives

Information Leaflet Number 39

A brief guide to the Middlesex Sessions Records



Introduction

The Middlesex Sessions are a series of records that give us an insight into many aspects of everyday life over a period of more than 350 years. As with all counties, sessions were held by the Justices of the Peace, to enquire into all pressing judicial and administrative matters. In terms of size and content, the Middlesex records are unrivalled. It is the largest collection of such records in this country and dates back to 1549, much earlier than most other counties.

This guide is intended to give assistance to enquirers seeking a basic understanding of how the sessions worked and some of the more useful material contained within them. A much fuller comprehensive guide is available behind the counter in the Information Area.

Researchers interested in tracing their convict ancestors amongst the records of the Middlesex Sessions, should consult Information Leaflet No.42 "My Ancestor was a Convict"

Background

The Middlesex Sessions covered the area north of the River Thames, bordering the old City of London to the north, east and west. Stretching along the north bank of the River Thames from the River Colne in the west to the River Lea in the east, it excludes the City of London but includes the City of Westminster. This is the area of the old county of Middlesex, prior to the boundary changes in 1889.

Middlesex was like no other county in England. The proximity of the City had considerable effect upon the economic, social, agricultural, demographic and judicial development of the county. Middlesex developed no ancient incorporated boroughs. The nearest it had to real towns were Uxbridge and Brentford. However it did include a number of urban areas such as Stepney and Marylebone. As the city's suburbs expanded these areas became more and more densely populated. The majority of the county though, was a rural hinterland for the City, with agriculture and horticulture existing largely for the provision of the City's needs.

The difference between Middlesex and other counties was also reflected in its judicial system. Unlike other counties, Middlesex Sessions were not held quarterly. At first they were only to meet twice a year, but owing to the growth of the London suburbs and the resultant increase in activity, the sessions ended up meeting at least eight times a year. Another difference was that there were no Assize courts for Middlesex. Whereas in other counties the more serious criminal matters were dealt with in the Courts of Assize, in Middlesex they were dealt with at the Old Bailey in the Sessions of Gaol Delivery or at the Court of the King's Bench in Westminster.

The Middlesex Sessions records are the result of the judicial and administrative processes carried out by the Justices of the Peace and all those who worked under them.

The arrangement of the records has been largely based upon this fact.

The sessions were originally designed to deal with just judicial matters (records classified MJ), but by the sixteenth century they were also dealing with a number of administrative functions. These records relating to areas such as taxation, licensing, prisons, asylums, bridges and many other subjects, were deposited with the Clerk of the Peace and have been catalogued in the following series. Administration (records classified MA) Clerk of the Peace (MC) County Treasurer (MF) Enrolment Registration and Deposit (MR) and County Surveyor (MS).

The Records: Judicial (MJ and OB)

London Metropolitan Archives holds records of four different judicial sessions held for the county of Middlesex. These are the Middlesex Sessions of the Peace, The Westminster Sessions of the Peace, The Sessions of Oyer and Terminer and the Sessions of Gaol Delivery of Newgate, held at the Old Bailey. For a brief guide to the distinctions between each court the researcher is advised to consult Information Leaflet No.42 "My Ancestor was a Convict".

This guide is intended to explain some of the records that these courts produced and how they have been catalogued. The main thing to note is that the records for the Old Bailey 1754-1832 and for Westminster 1619-1860 have largely been catalogued in separate series.

Old Bailey Sessions (OB)

Records from the Gaol Delivery Sessions of Newgate, held at the Old Bailey, covering the period 1754-1832. Prior to 1754 Gaol Delivery sessions are found with the Sessions of the Peace and Sessions of Oyer and Terminer for Middlesex (MJ). After 1832 they form part of the records of the Central Criminal Court at the National Archives.

- Calendars of Indictments: OB/C/J

Printed lists arranged both chronologically and alphabetical showing all those indicted to stand trial. Note the number indicted corresponds to the session roll.

- Calendars of Prisoners: OB/C/P

List of prisoners being held at Newgate awaiting trial at the Old Bailey

- Old Bailey Sessions Books: OB/SB

The minutes of the court proceedings

- Old Bailey Sessions Papers: OB/SP

A series of loose papers relating to the judicial business in court, contains documents such as affidavits, recognizances and statements relating to individual cases. These have been digitised by the London Lives project.

- Old Bailey Sessions Rolls: OB/SR

Contain the official documentation of the judicial procedure, kept by the Clerk of the Peace.

Middlesex Justices (MJ)

Records relating to the Sessions of the Peace until 1889, Oyer and Terminer and Sessions of Goal Delivery of Newgate prior to 1754.

- Calendars of Indictments: MJ/CJ

Printed lists arranged both chronologically and alphabetical showing all those indicted to stand trial. Note the number indicted corresponds to the session roll.

- Calendars of Prisoners: MJ/CP

Lists of prisoners held at the New Prison and Houses of Detention and Correction, Clerkenwell

- General Orders of Court: MJ/OC

From 1716 administrative business was dealt with on a particular day known as county day. This was recorded in volumes known as orders of court and latterly as county minutes. They include reports and orders relating to the building and repair of prisons, sessions houses, bridges etc. the appointment of county officers and management of lunatic asylums. They also include abstract accounts from the county treasurer. These records 1725-1800 have been digitised by the London Lives project.

- Court Bonds: MJ/R/P

Bail pieces and recognizance's from various individual cases, where somebody is either bailed to appear at a latter date or bound over to keep the peace. Possible to search for individual names using our computerised catalogues.

- Sessions Books: MJ/SB/B

Minutes of the court proceedings from both the Sessions of the Peace and Oyer and Terminer.

- Debt Cases: MJ/SD

Statements, requests and lists relating to individual debt cases, 1669-1813. Possible to search for individual names using our computerised catalogues.

- Sessions Papers MJ/SP

A series of loose papers relating to the judicial business in court, contains documents such as affidavits, recognizance's and statements relating to individual cases. It also contains a number of administrative papers.

You should be aware that documents relating to a particular case may be spread out within a month or over a number of months, they will not be grouped together

Most papers 1690-1796 have been digitised by the London Lives project.

Some types of records that would have previously been found amongst the Sessions Papers had become so bulky by the mid nineteenth century, that they became separate series. These records include:

- Coroners Papers MJ/SP/C

For a guide to Coroners' records for London and Middlesex please our information leaflet No.41.

- Examinations MJ/SP/E
- Transportation Documents MJ/SP/T
- Vagrancy Papers MJ/SP/V

It is possible to search for individual names using our computerised catalogues.

- Sessions Rolls: MJ/SR

Contain the official documentation of the judicial procedure, kept by the Clerk of the Peace. Rolls exist from the Sessions of the Peace, Sessions of Oyer and Terminer, Westminster Sessions of the Peace and Sessions of Gaol Delivery of Newgate at the Old Bailey, prior to 1754.

The Records: Enrolment, Registration and Deposit (MR)

These records did not stem from the normal sessions work, but were presented to the Justices of the Peace and kept with the sessions records. These records tended to

reflect the political and social concerns of the times, the development of travel and transport and 19th Century utility schemes for Gas, Water and Railways. Records mirrored the concerns of the governing classes. They were particularly interested in who was eligible to vote, the control of the growing influx of foreigners and the collection of tax. Many aspects of life were regulated by the requirement of a licence, all of which has increased the number of records of this type that have survived.

All in all there are 21 classes of records in this series, all with the prefix MR. These run from MR/A, records relating to the notification of foreign aliens, through to MR/WG, returns for corn prices.

This guide is not comprehensive but will pick out some of the more interesting and useful classes of records amongst this series.

Returns of Aliens: MR/A

An Act of Parliament in 1792 meant that all aliens arriving in the kingdom after January 1793 had to deliver an account of their names, ranks, occupations and addresses to a justice of the peace. Similarly householders who received aliens were required to do the same. Surviving records include original accounts signed by aliens, householders' notices and overseers' returns.

Building Surveyors' Records: MR/B

As part of the Building Acts of 1763 and 1774, newly built and altered houses, should be examined by a surveyor who could then make a statement on oath, whether the building conformed to the terms of the act. The affidavits of the surveyors MR/B/C are particularly useful for those interested in patterns of building. Surviving records cover the period 1765-1846. They list both the name of the street in which the work was taking place, as well as the name of the builder and can be searched using our computerised catalogues. Surveyor's registers, MR/B/R also exist and include similar details to the affidavits as well as the numbers of the house built and the owners of that property.

Enclosure Awards and Maps: MR/DE

Awards made by commissioners under local acts, for the enclosure and allotment of open fields, commons and wastes; accompanied by a map and a schedule of owners and allotments numbered to correspond with the map.

Plantation Work Agreements: MR/E

By an order of a Privy Council committee of 1682, persons who had volunteered to serve on plantations, could be examined and 'bound by indenture' before one or more Justices of the Peace. The surviving records are the agreements (indentures) of persons willing to serve in the plantations of America and the West Indies. The documents include the name, age, occupation and place or origin of the volunteer and

the name and address of the person to whom the volunteer was being bound. Also included was the number of years a person was being bound for and details of the ship on which they were to go. Records survive for 1683 and 1684. All of these documents are searchable by name of volunteer using our computerised catalogues.

Jury Lists: MR/F

After an act of 1696 regulating the summoning of jurors, constables were required to return annual lists to the sessions of all persons qualified to serve on juries. MR/F/B is a list drawn up by the clerk of the peace of those eligible to serve, from information sent in by parish officials. The records cover the period 1696-1789. MR/F/R are constables returns from the year 1845 and 1848, these give the name, age, rank and occasionally the address of a prospective juror.

Licensing: MR/L

Various categories of occupation needed a licence in order to practice their trade, these included:

- Butchers: MR/L/B

Butchers were licensed by bonds to ensure that they did not kill or prepare meat during Lent.

- Gamekeepers: MR/L/G

After an Act passed in 1710, Lords of Manors were required to appoint only one gamekeeper who might kill game as their deputy. The names had to be registered with the Clerk of the Peace.

- Music and Dancing: MR/L/MD

After an Act passed in 1752 regulating places of public entertainment, houses used for music, dancing or other public entertainment in London and the surrounding area, were required to have a licence from the Justices. A number of documents survive in amongst this series including, licences, applications and petitions. Please see information leaflet No.47 for a detailed guide.

- Printing Presses: MR/L/P

In order to prevent the printing of seditious and treasonable literature by societies, control over printers was attempted by the Seditious Societies Act of 1799. Owners, makers or sellers of printing presses and types for printing were obliged to send notice to the Clerk of the Peace. The surviving records are mainly these individual notices, although two registers also survive.

- Victuallers Records: MR/L/V

The 1552 Alehouse Act stated that no-one was allowed to sell beer or ale

without the consent of the local Justices of the Peace. Please see information leaflet No.3 for a detailed guide to these records.

Militia Records: MR/ML

The records of the Middlesex militia in the sessions records are lists of those serving and their property qualifications, certificates of having taken the oaths of allegiance and supremacy and notices of officer appointments. It is also worth consulting the records of Lieutenancy (L) in binder 128.

Electoral Records: MR/PEO and MR/PER

Please see information leaflet No.10 for a detailed guide to these records.

Land Tax: MR/PLT

Assessment books exist for each parish and contain names of owners and tenants of houses and land and the amount that they would have to pay in tax. A land tax was imposed regularly from 1692. From 1745-1832 duplicate copies of the assessments were supposed to be deposited with the Clerk of the Peace. The majority of our records exist from the period 1780-1832. Please see information leaflet No.9 for a detailed guide to these records.

Religion: MR/R

These records derive from the prevailing fear of the central government that all persons who did not conform to the established religion of the Church of England were potential enemies of the crown or state. Most of the records date from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and include registration documents relating to Roman Catholics and Jesuits, lists of convictions and lists of those taking oaths.

Societies: MR/S

Records relating to annuity societies, building societies, savings banks, literary and scientific societies as well as records of charitable donations.

Hearth Tax: MR/TH

As a way of increasing state revenue, an act was passed in 1662 that meant every householder was required to pay a tax of 2s p.a. for every fire hearth in his occupation. Lists of householders and numbers of hearths were to be delivered by petty constables to the Justices of the Peace. The returns give, listed by parish and ward, the names of all householders as well as the number of empty houses in Middlesex and Westminster. The 1664 list also shows those householders who were exempt.

Utilities: MR/U

Under various acts of parliament, papers, financial accounts and property agreements of improvement schemes and undertakings for public utilities, companies and turnpike trusts were required to be deposited with the Clerk of the Peace. Please note that this series includes a large amount of uncatalogued material.

Parliamentary Deposited Plans: MR/UP

Under a standing order of the House of Commons in 1792, plans accompanied by books of reference had to be deposited for all schemes of public utility such as canals, bridges, railways and gas works. There are 1,614 plans covering the years 1793-1889 for Middlesex.

Other Classes of Records

After the records of the Gaol Delivery sessions at the Old Bailey and prior to the judicial records of the Middlesex Justices, there are four series of administrative records. The catalogues of the other series of records listed below can be found after the catalogues of the records of Enrolment, Registration and Deposit (MR).

Administration (MA)

Records found in this series include those relating to the administration of County Lunatic Asylums, Prisons and Bridges. They include County deeds and plans, printed reports and committee minutes.

See also the general orders of court books, latterly known as county minutes (MJ/OC). They include reports and orders relating to the building and repair of prisons, sessions houses, bridges etc. the appointment of county officers and management of lunatic asylums.

The Clerk of the Peace (MC)

Miscellaneous registers of documents including lists of justices, poor law officials, high constables and parish officers, as well as correspondence and clerk's fees and accounts.

County Treasurer (MF)

Financial accounts relating to many aspects of the justices' work including rates, maintenance costs and special collections. These include the Middlesex Tontine to raise funds for a new house of correction and Family Relief for men serving in the Militia.

The County Surveyor (MS)

Papers of the county surveyor, relating to bridges, highways and public undertakings.

MJP

Documents relating to the Justices of the Peace including, lists of justices and sworn oaths of office

Summary Jurisdiction: MSJ

Most of the records in this series relate to the period after 1855, when Summary Jurisdiction was established on a clearly defined basis. People charged with thefts of a low value and other minor offences could be convicted by two justices in an open court or one metropolitan police magistrate. The records include calendars of convictions, returns of fines and fees and bastardy returns. The actual convictions were returned to the Middlesex Sessions and after 1855 can be found on the sessions rolls. Depositions (sworn statements of witnesses) were also filed on the sessions rolls until December 1872. The depositions 1873-1889 (MSJ/C/D) are uncatalogued and require 48 hours written notice.

Middlesex Sessions post 1889: MXS

These records cover the years 1889-1971. In 1889 the formation of the London County Council and Middlesex County Council saw major changes to the jurisdiction of the Middlesex Sessions. All the post 1889 records only cover the same area as that of the Middlesex County Council. This means that all areas of Middlesex that now came under the jurisdiction of the London County Council, such as St Pancras, Stepney, and Bethnal Green, were no longer covered by the Middlesex Sessions, but came under the jurisdiction of the County of London Sessions established in 1889. The records continue until the Middlesex Sessions were finally abolished in 1971. A large portion of these records require 48 hours written notice to our enquiry team. However some material, including the following, is available using the normal ordering procedures: Sessions Rolls MXS/B/02, Calendars of Prisoners MXS/B/03, Registers of Appeals MXS/B/17, Administration MXS/C and County Licensing MXS/D.

The Westminster Sessions 1619-1860: W

Although technically part of Middlesex, there were separate Westminster Sessions. With regard to the records, many will be found in and amongst the relevant Middlesex series. This is noticeable particularly with regard to the Sessions Rolls post 1640, all of which will be found listed in the binders MJ/SR. There is however a series of printed transcripts of the Westminster Sessions Rolls covering the period 1619-1640, available on the open shelves, WJ/SR.

Other series have survived in their own right amongst the Westminster Sessions and they follow much the same pattern as those amongst the Middlesex records.

- Administration: WA
- Judicial material including sessions papers: WJ
- Enrolment Registration and Deposit, including licensed victuallers: WR

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