

# Criminal Ancestors

If you suddenly discover that you have a black sheep in the family, please don't feel too bad! We all have them somewhere – even if they are still hiding from us! The best part about it from the family historian's point of view is that there should be paper trails, whether prison records, warrants, transportation records or even newspaper reports.

## A Little Bit of History

Back in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Quarter Sessions were instigated and were county courts held by the magistrates (also known as Justices of the Peace) four times a year in March, June, September and December. As well as crimes ranging from petty theft to the serious crime of rape, they were also responsible for such matters as licensing. Crimes more severe than these were referred to the Assize Courts. Although the name, address and occupation of the accused were recorded, these really need to be treated with caution and backed up with other source documents. Why? Well, both then as now, criminals were not that truthful and so you could be dealing with aliases and other false information!

## Where can you find the records?

Trial records of quarter sessions, petty sessions and magistrates' courts should be found in the Local County Archives.

Those records of the Supreme Court of Judicature and Central Criminal Court from 1834 should be found at the National Archives.

If you know approximately when your criminal ancestor went to court, it could also be worth checking both local and National newspapers of the day. Local newspapers may be found in the Local County Archives. The British Library Newspaper Archives website may also have details, which is pay per view. Please be aware that the British Library Newspapers at Colindale has now closed, and work is underway to move the Library's newspaper collections to a purpose-built Newspaper Storage Building (NSB) in Boston Spa, West Yorkshire. A Newsroom will open at the British Library St Pancras site in March 2014.

The local Police Archives may also have arrest records either in their own Archives or the County Record Office.

## What records will you find?

A prison nominal register in a Local Archives will have the following headings:

- Register number
- Name of the prisoner – both Christian name and Surname
- Summary of convictions, including date and place of committal
- Re-examination and Trial (if appropriate)
- Assizes and Sessions
- Offence
- Sentence
- Education
- Age, height and colour of hair

Trade or Occupation  
Religion and Birthplace  
Previous convictions  
Date of discharge  
Remarks

If you find the record of your criminal ancestor, do not expect the punishment to fit that crime using today's standards. At the age of 22 in 1837, Sophia Lawrence stole 6 pairs of stockings belonging to the Vicar of Shudy Camps in Cambridgeshire. She was transported to Australia for 7 years for this offence. Nearly one hundred years later, in 1914, John Smith was sent to prison for 2 weeks for threatening someone with a hayfork. Today, both of them probably would have been put on probation, fined or cautioned.

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If you are having problems in finding a particular record, someone else might be able to help you. Register for FREE at <http://www.genealogy-specialists.com/> and post details of the possible criminal that you are researching. The members will do their best to help you.

If you would like to discover more about Criminal Ancestors, listed below are some products that will certainly help you, and all of them are available from [www.parishchest.com](http://www.parishchest.com). Just pop the reference number in the website search box to see the details:

- Celebrated Criminal Trials in Scotland 1536-1784 Ref: ARB-1375
- A Rogues' Gallery Ref: HHT-10
- London Poverty Maps 1889 Ref: OHB-24
- The Criminal Ref: ANG-ARA 462
- New to Kew Reader's Guides (16) Ref: IOW-TNA12
- The Confessions of a Poacher 1890 Ref: OHB-13
- London's Underworld Ref: ANG-ARA 558
- Selling Sparrows Ref: JHD-01

If you are not able to visit the National Archives at Kew, others may be able to on your behalf. Parish Chest has a section that specifically covers the services of Professional Researchers. Visit the website and take a look.

Also, Parish Chest has a complete section dedicated to Law, Crime and Punishment, which is broken down by county. Take a look on [www.parishchest.com](http://www.parishchest.com), go to the Bookshop and you will see it.