

Petty Sessions

The Oxford and Banbury newspapers used to devote a lot of space to local legal proceedings. The *Oxford Journal* and *Banbury Guardian* usually carried comprehensive reports (often virtually the same) of the Petty Sessions at Deddington, almost to the exclusion of other local news.

Deddington was the centre of the Wootton North Division, which comprised the following parishes:

Aston, North
Aston, Middle
Aston, Steeple
Barton, Steeple
Barton, Westcott
Barford, Great
Deddington (including Clifton and Hempton)
Dun's Tew
Rousham
Sandford [St. Martin]
South Newington
Great Tew
Little Tew
Nether Worton
Over Worton

The Magistrates were drawn from the local gentry and clergymen. The only J.P. resident in Deddington was the Rev. W.C. Risley. The Clerk to the Justices in the 1850s was Samuel Field, the leading solicitor in the town, who was succeeded by his partner Henry Churchill in 1860.

The Bench sat monthly, until 1853 on Saturdays and then on Fridays. They met at the King's Arms Inn until 1860, when the Petty Sessions moved to a room at the Town Hall.

The nature of the cases before the Magistrates was highly varied, ranging from assault and drunken behaviour to trespass and paternity suits. Those convicted were usually fined, with sentences of hard labour reserved for more serious cases and non-payment of fines.

More serious criminal offences were dealt with at the county Quarter Sessions or Assizes. Civil debt claims were heard by the Woodstock County Court.

The other responsibilities of the Magistrates included:

- highways matters;
- approving transfers of licences for public houses;¹

¹ Beer houses were separately regulated, from 1849 to 1869 by the Excise Department of the Board of Inland Revenue.

- appointing parish officers (overseers of the poor, parish constables, highways surveyors);
- receiving parish officers' accounts and reports;
- hearing appeals against poor rates.

Licences of public houses were renewed at the annual 'brewster' session each September.

There was a steady incidence of window breaking, usually by disgruntled tramps. The relieving officer's house and the police station seem to have been the most vulnerable.

The descriptions of those brought before the Bench were sometimes somewhat tongue-in-cheek. For instance, on 11 November 1858 the report in the *Banbury Guardian* recorded:

Wootton North Division Petty Sessions. Reports on 4 cases. George Gibbs of Deddington, an individual whose wits do not appear to be the brightest, indicted for being drunk and disorderly. 7 Deddington boys, of greater or lesser dimensions, summoned for disorderly conduct in the churchyard during divine service, including throwing a stone on the church roof. Dismissed with severe telling off.

It appears that it was not necessary to resort to the Deddington stocks as a punishment during the 1850s. In December 1850, a Deddington man was fined 5s. for being drunk and disorderly at the Fox Inn, North Aston, and 1s. for having used profane oaths, in default of payment to be put in the stocks for six hours. In February 1858 six men from Great Barford were fined for being drunk and disorderly at Deddington, likewise to be placed in the stocks for six hours in default of payment. In both cases it appears that the fines were duly paid.

One of the tasks of the Deddington superintendent constable was to check the integrity of the weights and measures used by local shopkeepers. At the Petty Sessions on 30 September 1853, over 20 cases of short weights and measures were prosecuted, including at Deddington:

Wm. Whetton, grocer
 William Harris, baker and shopkeeper (Hempton)
 Wm. French, mealman
 Charles Churchill, grocer (considered a bad case, heavy fine)
 John French, butcher
 John Robinson, grocer
 William Chater, baker
 George Chater, butcher
 Joseph Woolgrove, baker
 Richard Gardner, shopkeeper

Not that Deddington policemen were always above reproach, or that relations with the volunteer parish constables were entirely cordial. In 1852 the four parish constables, aided and abetted by others, were charged by Daniel Harwood, superintendent constable, with having assaulted and beaten him. The 4 constables counterclaimed that Superintendent Harwood had been drunk and disorderly. After hearing the

evidence, two of the parish constables were fined, while Harwood was found to have greatly misconducted himself and was reprimanded. (*Banbury Guardian*, 30 September 1852.)

In 1857, the landlord of the Unicorn Inn, William Sturch, was charged with striking a youth with a fire shovel in the tap room when trying to get him to leave at a late hour, on the evidence of Superintendent Dixon. Sturch was fined and warned to close his house earlier in future.

Sturch also admitted to having a bagatelle table, which form of gaming was illegal. Superintendent Dixon was then called before the magistrates, and most severely reprimanded by the chairman for neglecting to report this. "He was told he had not done his duty, and was totally unfit for the office he held." (*Oxford Journal*, 21 March 1857.)

After much discussion, a house in Horse Fair was acquired in 1854 for conversion into a police lock-up house, including four cells and a residence for the superintending constable. Plans were drawn-up by J.C. Buckler, the well-known architect.

The Deddington lock-up house was not in a fit state to put prisoners, however, when in November 1855 a Ledwell cattle-dealer was apprehended for stealing a £100 Bank of England note.

Instead he was put in a bedroom in the superintendent's house, all his clothes being taken from him. This did not stop him escaping though the bedroom window at night in a state of nudity, making his way to his house at Ledwell for some more clothes, and riding off on his pony. (*Oxford Journal*, 24 November 1855.) In October 1858, there was reference at the Oxfordshire Quarter Sessions to the "present bad state" of the Deddington lock-up house.

There was a Deddington Association for the Prosecution of Felons and other Offenders, which appears to have been established in the 1780s. Samuel Field was treasurer and solicitor. In the 1850s the general annual meeting took place at the Unicorn or King's Head Inns in April each year. Membership was limited to a radius of 8 miles around Deddington, but following a considerable increase in membership in 1859, it was decided to extend the area covered to the whole of Oxfordshire.

The annual meeting seems to have been as much a social occasion. After the formal business at one o'clock, the members sat down to a substantial "Dinner at Two o'clock precisely", with "an abundant supply of wines and dessert".