

DORNEY AT THE QUARTER SESSIONS

There aren't many sources to shed light on Dorney around 1700, but one which does is the record of activity at Buckinghamshire's Quarter Sessions. This court was held four times a year, at places like Buckingham, Aylesbury or Amersham. Presided over by the county's JPs, the sessions dealt with a wide range of topics, some misdemeanours but many purely administrative.

The records for Bucks between 1678 and 1733 mention no fewer than 75 different men and 6 women living in Dorney. Most of these were working in agriculture, as farmers or labourers, but others included a victualler (ie innkeeper), a hatter, a shoemaker, a blacksmith, a gardener, and two maltsters.

One of the regular pieces of business at the Easter session was to confirm the appointment of the parish constable for the forthcoming year. Selected from among the better off members of the community, the constable was expected to maintain law and order in the village. 34 different men from Dorney held this position between 1679 and 1723. Examples of what they had to do included reporting Roman Catholics and other non-attenders at church to the Quarter Sessions, and being woken up in the middle of the night by the vicar to deal with an alleged assault only to be threatened by the perpetrator who said he would beat the constable's brains out.

Acting as constable was no impediment to being reported to the court yourself. William Barr served as constable in 1683 and again in 1689, but in 1686 was accused of making a ditch and a hedge in the highway between Maidenhead and Windsor. Thomas Goodchild was appointed constable in 1695, but the following year he and others were accused of assault.

Few of the offences reported from Dorney were of a serious nature. Bartholomew Langley, together with another man from East Burnham, was accused of breaking into a house and stealing 4 quarts of black cherry wine. Charles Palmer was fined for uttering an oath. There were several cases of alleged assault, but it is not clear whether these really amounted to much; the accused were generally bound over to keep the peace.

Another role of the court was to adjudicate on issues of settlement – an important aspect of the poor law, because the parish where a person was judged to be settled was then responsible for providing help in time of need

for him and his family. In January 1718, it was decided that Thomas Godard, his wife and children should be removed from Burnham to Dorney, because he had lived there for the required 12 months as a worker employed by a Dorney farmer. It's possible that Thomas and his family never made the move, as they feature in the parish registers for Burnham but not for Dorney.

Sometimes the records hint at other issues which are not spelled out. Henry Floyd was fined in 1696 for not taking an oath - the new oaths of allegiance and supremacy laid down by William and Mary when they came to the throne in 1688, but he was in good company, as Samuel Pepys, the Archbishop of Canterbury and many clergymen also refused to take this oath. At the same time, Henry and others had fallen out with the Rev Henry Atkinson and his wife Susan. It is not clear what status the Rev Atkinson held in Dorney, as officially the position of vicar was vacant in the period before 1699. Another enemy of Henry Floyd was the victualler, Joseph Street, who claimed Henry should be arrested for "*haveing uttered Treasonable words against the person of his most sacred Majestie King William the Third, and is a person disaffected to the Government as now established, and of wicked and dangerous principles.*" Furthermore, it was said that Henry "*privily lurks and hides himself in divers obscure places of this County not easily to be discovered.*" Whatever the truth of the matter, there must have been plenty to keep the village gossips busy.

Another interesting case occurred following a fire on 7 March 1707, which resulted in serious losses for maltster Humphrey Clarke. His losses were estimated at over £200 worth of structural damage, certified by bricklayers and carpenters, and more than another £200 worth of lost goods, as certified by 3 other maltsters. The court agreed to reimburse £10 of duty which he had already paid on malt destroyed, and to allow a notice to go out inviting donations to raise compensation. This was a frequent occurrence after fires or natural disasters. Three years' later, however, Humphrey's second wife returned to the court, complaining that he had left her without support. The local JPs investigated, and discovered that Humphrey had rented a farm in Dorney and Boveney worth £80 a year with stock worth more than £400. He had then made over his farm and stock to a son by a former wife, and voluntarily entered debtors' prison in London to avoid maintaining his wife and paying "*some few debts of hers*". Was Humphrey taking advantage of the generosity of people who had donated towards his losses in the fire and seeking to avoid his responsibilities? Or was he so unhappy in his second marriage (they had married in 1704, in St George's chapel, Windsor) that prison seemed a preferable way out?