

SHAUNA HICKS

Title

Bring Your Ancestors to Life - Using Court of Petty Session Records

Summary

It is the small crimes that our ancestors committed that help us to really get to know them. These include crimes such as cattle stealing, drunkenness, disorderly conduct, using obscene language, assault, wife and/or child desertion, hawking goods without a license, theft, forgery, false pretences, insanity, and ill treatment of animals. This presentation highlights where to look for court records and personal case histories will illustrate why everyone should look for these records.

Abstract

It was Eve McLaughlin who first talked about bringing 'ancestors to life' in her 1987 book *Family History from Newspapers* and she was referring to court cases reported in local newspapers. The widespread digitisation of newspapers and their availability online today is allowing more researchers to discover petty crimes committed by ancestors. Crimes such as cattle stealing, drunkenness, disorderly conduct, using obscene language, assault, wife and/or child desertion, hawking goods without a license, theft, forgery, false pretences, insanity, and ill treatment of animals can all provide more information on our ancestors' lives. However researchers still need to go back to the original records in state archives as there may be more information than what was published in the newspaper. Quite often there are signatures on deposition documents and this may be the only example of an ancestor's handwriting. Not all court appearances were reported in the newspaper and these additional cases are overlooked if original records are not consulted. This presentation will focus on how and where to look for archival court of petty session records and how to use them. Personal case histories will be used to highlight the wide variety of personal information that can be obtained from court of petty session records. Attendees will be inspired to look for their own petty criminal ancestors.

Audience

All levels