

Local Authority Records

Note: This guide does not cover the records of manors or estates and makes only partial reference to ecclesiastical parishes, all of which played their own part in local government, especially prior to the nineteenth century. See separate guides to these sources.

For further information on local authorities, the following books may be useful:

- *Sources for English Local History*, W B Stephens (1981)
- *English Local Government*, S & B Webb (1903-29)
- *Local Government in England and Wales*, W E Jackson (1959)
- *English Local Government in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, B Keith-Lucas, Historical Association (1977)
- *Understanding Local Government*, J Stanyer (1976)
- *County Records*, F G Emmison & Irvine Gray, Historical Association Helps for Students of History, no.62 (1987)
- *Town Records*, John West (1983)
- *Village Records*, John West (1982)
- *Exploring Urban History Sources*, S Porter (1990)

Boroughs and Town Councils

Royal charters creating boroughs date from the 11th century; these may include descriptions of privileges given to towns to hold markets and fairs, to hold courts, and to have their own seals. From the 16th century many held their own Quarter Sessions, and from around 1800 they gained the right to collect rates. All boroughs were replaced by town and district councils in 1974. Their records can include minutes, accounts, reports, lists of officers, charters, ledgers and contracts, as well as papers concerning subjects as varied as ports, weights and measures, byelaws, cemeteries, etc.. The North Devon Record Office holds the records of the Borough and Town Councils of Barnstaple (refs. BC, 2654, B1, B144, B242), Bideford (ref. 2379), Great Torrington (refs. 2558, 2860) and South Molton (ref. 3058).

Quarter Sessions

From the 16th century commissions of the peace met in county towns four times a year. These 'Quarter Sessions' were authorised to try lesser criminal offences and make preliminary investigations into more important cases. However, Quarter Sessions records reflect a broad spectrum of jurisdiction, both civil and judicial; these include order books and sessions rolls which record the business of the court in session, presentments for public works, jury lists, papers regarding the upkeep of bridges, removal orders, enrolments of conveyances, gamekeepers' deputations, alehouse keepers' licence books, copies of charity rules, and order books. Quarter Sessions also acted as repositories for various documents, including, in the later stages of their history, County Treasurer's and Surveyor's annual reports. From 1839, Quarter Sessions were able to create police forces (though this power rested jointly with Quarter Sessions and County Councils from 1888), and from 1848 were required to establish lunatic asylums. Although many of their civil functions passed to the County Councils after 1888, Quarter Sessions continued as law courts until 1971. The records of the Devon Quarter Sessions are held at the Devon Heritage Centre, Bittern Road, Sowton, Exeter, 01392 384253, but the North Devon Record Office holds Quarter Sessions records for the boroughs of Barnstaple (refs. B1, 2654, 3835), Bideford (refs. 46, 1064), Great Torrington (ref. 2558) and South Molton (refs. 1190, 1872).

Highways

From 1555, parishes had been responsible for their own roads, through the work of the highway surveyors, or waywardens, who employed statute labour and raised money for local roads by levying a highway rate. From 1835, however, Quarter Sessions were able to unite several parishes into Highway Boards which took on much of the work of maintenance and construction of roads until the formation of County Councils in 1888. County Councils were responsible for all public roads from 1894. Records of local ecclesiastical parishes may contain highway surveyors' rate books and other papers, while the papers of Quarter Sessions and District Councils may contain Highway Board records. Also of interest are the records of Turnpikes, which although businesses rather than local authorities, were responsible for the upkeep and building of many new roads from 1706 to 1888, when the new County Councils took over much of their work. The records of Turnpikes can be found by checking the North Devon Record Office subject index (under COMMUNICATIONS: roads, or ACCOUNTS: turnpike trusts) and place index (under 'transport'). The North Devon Athenaeum also holds a large collection of turnpike records.

Schools

School Boards were elected local bodies, dating from c.1870 to 1903, with responsibility for the provision of local education. Records generated by School Boards may include minutes or accounts, which relate to the boards themselves, or records relating specifically to schools under their supervision, such as log books and admission registers. The records of School Boards held at the North Devon Record Office can be found by checking the Office's 'Lists of Collections' or subject index (under EDUCATION: schools). In 1903, the responsibility for local education passed to County Councils as Local Education Authorities. The North Devon Record office also holds some records of the County Council's North Devon Divisional Executive (refs. 2844, 3072), which include minutes, reports and files on various aspects of education, and of the Barnstaple Divisional Education Authority, 1805-1973, including committee minutes, accounts, teachers' registers, school circulars and the records of individual schools (ref. 1903).

Poor Law Unions

From the 16th century to the early 19th century the parish overseers of the poor were responsible for the care of the poor of their parishes and were empowered to levy a poor rate: the North Devon Record Office holds overseers' account books for many north Devon parishes. Overseers' records often also cover such subjects as apprenticeship, settlement and removal of individuals between parishes, and illegitimacy. From 1834, parishes were required to come together in groups to form Poor Law Unions, although some Unions had existed prior to this date. Poor Law Unions were responsible for the care of the poor in their area, and their records include Board of Guardians minute books and workhouse registers. The duties of Poor Law Unions were transferred to County Councils in 1929, and many workhouses became infirmaries. Lists of Poor Law Union records are kept at the North Devon Record Office under the heading 'PLU'; other records relating to Poor Law Unions and the parish poor may be found by checking the North Devon Record Office subject indexes (under LOCAL GOVERNMENT: Poor Law Unions) or by looking at the lists of records of ecclesiastical parishes for the papers of the overseers of the poor.

County Councils

County Councils were set up under the 1888 Local Government Act. They took over many civil responsibilities formerly carried out by County Quarter Sessions including highways and bridges, asylums, byelaws, weights and measures, the issue of licences, as well as shared control of the constabulary; other responsibilities (also often shared) included education, Poor Law Union Boards of Guardians, and town and country planning. Since 1972, County Councils

have been responsible for highways (except trunk roads), police, planning, weights and measures, social services and education. County Council records are mainly kept at the Devon Heritage Centre, Great Moor House, Bittern Road, Sowton, Exeter, but the North Devon Record Office holds the records of the following County Council departments: the County Surveyor (Northern Division) (ref. 1925), including plans, accounts and correspondence; the Chief Executive (ref. 2863), including papers on harbours and shipping, charities, land charges, economic development, tourism, the environment, highways, and some manorial records; the County Engineer (ref. 2681), including papers on the Lynmouth Flood Disaster of 1952; the North Devon Divisional Executive (refs. 2844, 3072), including minutes, reports and files on education, civil defence, public health, etc, and the Planning Department (North) (ref. B289), consisting of planning application display boards.

District Councils

In the early 19th century, public health, sanitation and care of the poor had been the responsibility of the Poor Law Guardians and Improvement Commissioners; much of the work of both was taken over the Sanitary Authorities in the 1870s, and then by the District Councils. Urban and Rural District Councils date from 1894, with the inherited responsibilities of Sanitary Authorities and the same boundaries as the Poor Law Unions. They were initially responsible for sanitation, highways, public health, housing, local rates, etc.. From their amalgamation into the new larger District Councils in 1974, their responsibilities have not only remained with housing and public health (including refuse collection), but have also included environmental issues, council tax and electoral registration. The records generated by District Councils can include minute books, local enquiry files, committee agendas and reports, registers of plans, registers of licences and correspondence. The North Devon Record Office holds the following District Council records: Holsworthy UDC (ref. 2588), Ilfracombe UDC (ref. 2458), Lynton UDC (ref. 2654), Northam UDC (ref. 3978), Barnstaple RDC (ref. 3057), Bideford RDC (ref. 2414), Holsworthy RDC (ref. 3977), South Molton RDC (refs. 2407, 3058), Torrington RDC (ref. 2460), Broadwoodwidge RDC (ref. B317), and (from 1974) North Devon District Council (ref. 3760) and Torridge District Council (ref. 3966).

Parish Councils

Civil parishes were set up in 1894, and their work covers various areas of local concern such as the upkeep of footpaths and rights of way, bus shelters, schools and playing fields. Their records include minute books, rate books, valuation lists, accounts, correspondence, byelaws and parish almanacs. The North Devon Record Office's 'List of Collections' gives the names of all parish councils for which records are held, with their reference numbers.

Water Authorities

Courts of Sewers were responsible for seawalls, dykes and drainage from 1531 and were transformed into Catchment Boards in 1930, River Boards in 1948 and Water Authorities in 1974. The North Devon Record Office holds the minute books of the Chulmleigh Sewer Authority 1866-1872 (ref. R2407A/Z2) and records of former water authorities such as the North Devon Water Board and Barnstaple Water Company (ref. B234).

Postscript

Local newspapers represent a mine of information on the proceedings and activities of all types of local authorities. **The North Devon Journal** from 1824, **North Devon Herald** from 1870 and the **Bideford Gazette** from 1856 are the main sources held by the North Devon Local Studies Centre.

Catalogues of many of the sources listed in this guide can now be accessed on the Access to Archives website at www.discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/.

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