The magistracy in Ceredigion

This year marks the 600th anniversary of the office of Justice of the Peace, or magistrates as they are more commonly known.

To commemorate the occasion, magistrates locally are organizing a special event at the National Library of Wales as well as a small exhibition about local justice in the community.

On Saturday, 8th October, the Association of Friends of the National Library of Wales and Ceredigion can also hold a very special day at the Library. The main attraction will be a presentation by Lord Morris of Aberfan, reminiscing about his time as a young lawyer in Ceredigion. Lord Morris is a former Attorney General, Secretary of State for Wales and Lord Lieutenant of Dyfed. The library holds the famous Penrhyn manuscript of the Laws of Hywel Dda, which will be on display.

Ceredigion Archives contains many interesting reports on local justice. A small exhibition being held at Ceredigion Museum in Aberystwyth between 11 and 29 October will feature selected items of special interest and notoriety drawn from local archives.

Records of Ceredigion's Justices of the Peace go back to 1749, the date of the first surviving order book of the Quarter Sessions. The Quarter Sessions were law courts, held four times a year, which dealt with both criminal and administrative matters in the county.

In England, the Act of Parliament which set the JPs to work at the Quarter Sessions dates back to 1761, but the system was only introduced to Wales after the Act of Union in 1836.

The surviving records of the Quarter Sessions are held at Ceredigion Archives, the county record office. They consist of 'Order Books' which show the Justices ordering payments and giving instructions for the better administration of the law in the country.

The Order books contain instructions on all manner of matters – the licensing of pubs, theatres and societies were amongst the duties of the magistrates, as was instructing repairs for county buildings such as bridges and the gaol.

Amongst the punishments at the magistrates' disposal was whipping, and one can see orders for men and women to be 'whipped through the town'.

More modern records also survive to show the work of the Justices. The Cambrian News reported in 1903 when the new science of fingerprinting was introduced to Ceredigion and its first success was in the prosecution of James Harris, who had stolen a bottle of whisky from 'The Falcon' at Llanilar. The fingerprint proved that – far from being a first offence as he might have claimed – Harris had seven previous convictions.

History has a way of repeating itself. The Presenting Justice of the Llanilar Petty Sessions and the licensees of the Falcons at the time have direct descendants who are present day members of the Ceredigion bench.

Independent and unpaid, magistrates have helped shape the development of the judicial process around today.