



PRESS RELEASE

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Magistrates – Past, Present and Future

The idea of trussing up a defendant and tossing them into a duck pond to see if he floated would hardly have a place in our courts of law today but in Anglo Saxon times reliance on divine providence was at the heart of the law.

The development of the judicial process that is around today, particularly with regard to Justices of the Peace or magistrates as they are more commonly known as today, was a very gradual one and the Magistrates' Association are highlighting the changes along the way in their celebrations of 650 years since the office of Justice of the Peace was confirmed in 1361.

Exhibition

From 3 – 19 May 2011, an exhibition including a time line is being held in Westminster Hall, virtually the spot where the statute was enacted by King Edward III in a Parliament held at Westminster. Panels for each century depict key changes and stories of the time and illustrate how closely the magistracy is interwoven with the history of the time. For example, as the religion of the country switched in the sixteenth century, justices found themselves monitoring church attendance and enforcing the Book of Common Prayer under King Henry VIII's Reformation and Edward VI's extreme Protestantism but then under Queen Mary who returned the country to Catholicism, zealous JPs played their part in burning 273 Protestants.

For many centuries the justices tackled a huge range of responsibilities, much of what is now local government administration. As well as controlling hunting rights, their authority extended to apprenticeships, controlling sales of commodities such as grain and butter, inspections of bridges and organising road repairs and suppressing such activities as Morris dancing and Hocktide gatherings. With the 1572 Poor Law, magistrates had to levy poor rates and provide work for the able bodied poor.

The unpaid endeavours of the justices adopted and adapted as time went on before arriving in the 20th century when major change took place. The first was the removal of the property qualification by the Liberal government in 1906 so breaking the link between the magistracy and the landed gentry. The second was the appointment of female magistrates once the Sex Disqualification Act was passed in late 1919. Since then there have been a number of radical changes. The Magistrates' Courts Act 1952 was an attempt to consolidate the jurisdiction, practice and procedures of the magistrates' courts. This Act repealed the Summary Jurisdiction Act 1897 which has stated that a defendant should be found guilty as a matter of course unless he could prove otherwise.

PATRON: Her Majesty the Queen
PRESIDENT: The Lord Chief Justice

CHAIRMAN: John Thornhill JP

DEPUTY CHAIRMEN: John Fassenfelt JP & Malcolm Richardson JP

HONORARY TREASURER: Mike Dodden JP

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR & ASSOCIATION SECRETARY: Patrick Cracroft-Brennan
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History has a habit of repeating itself – in the early 19th century justices were severely criticised for their administration of licensing and in 1830 Parliament removed their licensing powers, resulting in an enormous surge of drunkenness. By the mid –century urban areas were full of gin palaces and taverns with people drinking all hours. In 1869 and 1874 powers were given back to the justices to regulate the sale of alcohol. Interesting to note that licensing powers were removed from magistrates only a few years ago coinciding once more with concern over excessive and binge drinking – however powers have yet to be returned to the magistrates.

Leading the anniversary events

The Magistrates' Association, set up in 1920, has played an important role and led the way representing the magistracy to government, organisations, the media and the general public. Instigating training and information exchange soon after its formation, sentencing guidelines in the 1960s and its own public education programmes for the past 20 years the Association is leading the national celebrations marking this important anniversary. Magistrates locally are organising a huge variety of events such as open days, exhibitions about local areas, competitions, even well-dressing to raise public awareness about the role that magistrates play in their communities, administering justice.

Notes for editors

More historical details can be found on the Home Page of the Magistrates' Association www.magistrates-association.org.uk

Information on access to the exhibition can be found here www.parliament.uk/visiting/exhibitions-and-events