

1 No.	2 Date of Order.	3 Name or Names of Justice or Justices by whom Order made; and if made out of Petty Sessions, or if entry in this Book made from a Certificate, same to be here stated.	4 PARTIES—COMPLAINANT AND DEFENDANT. (The Christian and Surname, Rank, Occupation, or other addition, and Residence, stating Parish and Townland, to be given, and the parties to be distinguished by prefixing their appellation—Complainant or Defendant.)		5 Names of Witnesses examined, and whether for Complainant or Defendant.	6 CAUSE OF COMPLAINT as set forth in Summons.
			Complainant.	Defendant.		
5	1911 Jan'y 23 <sup>rd</sup>	J Payne RM Col. B. O'Connell M J Hughes. R. O'Connell R. English of G. O'Connell M. G. O'Connell	Michael Hughes Athlone	Thomas Usheran Templeboy Co Sligo	R. Blaw. P. H. Usher.	That on the 24 <sup>th</sup> Decr 1910 at Dublin Gate Street Athlone in said district and county you being quarrelsome & disorderly on the licensed premises of the Compt did unlawfully refuse to leave such licensed premises on being requested to leave by the Compt or his duly authorized Manager
						Malicious injury — 287 <sup>th</sup> Case That on the 24 <sup>th</sup> Decr 1910 at Dublin Gate Street Athlone

# How a dodgy past can prove a bonus for the family tree

Finding out that your relatives have 'form' can help unlock family secrets, writes **Ronan Abayawickrema**

**Y**ou decide to research your family history. Like thousands of other Irish people, you register with one of the growing number of family history websites, so you can peruse official records online. Or

perhaps you take the free route, trawling through brittle, yellowing documents at the National Archives' reading room.

You're excited. What will you find? Perhaps your great-grandfather was besieged in the GPO with the 1916 rebels? Or was he onboard the ill-fated Titanic as it set sail from Queenstown, now Cobh?

Err, no. He's there in the official records, all right, but that's because he was arrested for being "drunk while in charge of an ass". Or perhaps he was up before the courts for "tippling in a shebeen"? No, wait, he was charged with "malicious injury to a bicycle".

All this petty criminality might not be exactly what you had in mind when you set out to research your family tree, but it turns out it's actually a good thing, at least in family history terms.

"The great thing about having ancestors

who broke the law is that they left records," says Brian Donovan, CEO and co-founder of genealogy company Eneclann.

And the website findmypast.ie, a joint venture between Eneclann and Brightsolid Online Publishing, has recently released 1.2 million records of Ireland's Petty Sessions court, dating from the 1820s until the foundation of the Free State, when it was replaced by the district court.

These records join the Irish Prison Registers from 1790 to 1924, which are already available on the site.

And this is just the first batch of the Petty Sessions records. Mr Donovan says all of the records should be available on the website by early summer, some 20 million of them.

To put that in context, that's more than the number of surviving births, marriages and deaths records in Ireland. The Petty Sessions records are "a great, untapped resource" for family history research, says findmypast.ie, and a particularly welcome one given that many valuable records, including 19th century censuses and many wills, were destroyed in a fire in the Four Courts during the Civil War.

"The Petty Sessions was the lowest court of the land, and that's the one people would

have interacted with most," says Mr Donovan.

"They weren't necessarily criminals... it could be as victims of crime, witnesses or parties to civil disputes."

It's the court depicted in the popular 1980s TV series "The Irish RM", starring Peter Bowles, and looking at the actual records, you get the impression that the spats between neighbours and drink-related misdemeanours that pepper the show's story lines are not too far from the truth.

Indeed, 33pc of the cases tried before the Petty Sessions related to drunkenness.

Mr Donovan describes each of the cases as "micro-stories", and there are some fascinating ones. Each of the three Petty Sessions cases described at the start are genuine - it was Michael Downey of Athlone, Co Westmeath, who was charged with being "drunk while in charge of an ass and cart in a public street", in January 1911.

Other cases were more serious. In 1898, Joanna Maher of Templemore, Co Tipperary, brought a complaint against her brother, Patrick, claiming he had threatened her life after accusing her of witchcraft, and denouncing him as a "dangerous lunatic". The court ordered that he be confined to

