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# Everyday Offending in Plymouth 1880-1920

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SOLON Law, Crime and History

University of Plymouth

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**RESEARCH PROJECT REPORT**  
**EVERYDAY OFFENDING IN PLYMOUTH 1880-1920**  
***Iain Channing, Kim Stevenson and Judith Rowbotham***<sup>1</sup>

‘[Plymouth] must take the rough with the smooth’.<sup>2</sup>

## **Introduction**

The history of everyday offending in Plymouth is a prime topic for research; not least because from an academic perspective the history of crime in Plymouth remains a largely under-investigated and untapped resource. From a local and regional perspective it is important to develop the historiography as a means of informing and engaging with the public and local communities building on projects like *Our Criminal Past* as reported in the previous [special issue](#) of this journal. Such research is now achievable thanks to the availability of online digitised resources and digital tools. The idea of critically analysing *everyday* offending itself may not be a novel one but previously, comments on its potential importance were accompanied by caveats and warnings about the impracticality of any such investigation on any sustained level. Given that over 90% of all crime in the UK over the last 175 years at least is best characterised as everyday crime, in that it is summary rather than indictable crime that is prosecuted, the importance of studying such law-breaking is plain. This is why SOLON has decided to initiate a major research project on everyday offending, past and present, to help develop a better understanding of current law-breaking and crime management policies and their origins. It has been decided to focus on a period that encompasses both the contemporary realities of law-breaking and criminality, up to the very recent past, and dates back, chronologically, to the late nineteenth century when the foundations for the recognisable institutions associated with crime management were in place.

## **1 Why Plymouth?**

Why choose Plymouth as a Pilot Study? It is not, after all, historically associated with any notorious crime wave and was not even an Assize town; trials on indictment pertaining to

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<sup>2</sup> Hansard, HC Deb, 16 March 1886, vol.303 cc.987.

serious crimes were heard in Exeter. True, nearby Dartmoor Prison was constructed during the Napoleonic Wars period, to house prisoners of war, and Plymouth was the place where, before his departure for St Helena, Napoleon Bonaparte was held following his defeat at Waterloo in 1815. However, for most people, when one thinks of Plymouth's historic past and present, the events that spring to mind are those such as Sir Francis Drake's departure from Plymouth (allegedly after a game of bowls on the Hoe) to face the Spanish Armada and defend England in 1588. Or thoughts turn to the Pilgrim Fathers' departure from Plymouth in 1620 on their voyage in search of religious freedom, or to the explorations of James Cook after sailing from Plymouth across the Pacific (1768-1779) and to Charles Darwin's expedition to the Galapagos Islands (1831), again departing from Plymouth. These all demonstrate the significant contribution Plymouth has made to British history as a whole, though it has also had a substantial part to play in generating and directing its own local heritage in Devon. Most locales chosen for previous major crime research studies have been notorious already for their criminal past, especially London for example, but also major assize towns like York. The present project seeks to focus on towns without such associations, 'everyday' towns like Plymouth, which do not have the complication, in terms of the management of crime locally, of being Assize towns.

Without an Assize court the crime management focus in Plymouth was on the magistrates' courts, and on local policing. But what also makes Plymouth interesting and complex is the question of the effects that its predominantly naval and maritime roots have had on law-breaking locally. This was a factor which had both a national, as well as a local, impact. In the early 1880s, the then Liberal spokesman in the Commons for War, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, addressed the issue of increased crime and disorder in Plymouth that was reportedly due to the quantity of sailors and soldiers that resided in and visited the town. He reminded the local populace that they enjoyed considerable commercial prosperity because of their standing as a military port but needed to acknowledge that there was an associated 'troublesome' aspect of this which generated a greater propensity towards the commission of certain types of crime and criminality: in this respect Plymouth did receive the 'rough with the smooth'.<sup>3</sup> Therefore the aim of this pilot investigation of Plymouth is to examine just that.

This project is not intended simply as a piece of local history, remedying the lack of focused academic research into the incidence, policing and prosecution of everyday offending and crime in Plymouth. It has been conceived as a pilot for further local studies on everyday crime in provincial urban areas incorporating a range of towns as diverse as Birkenhead and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Scarborough. This research is, from the start, an interdisciplinary venture which incorporates academics from the fields of law, criminology, history, sociology and geography. While substantially based at Plymouth University, it will also involve expertise from other universities such as Kings College London (especially the Institute for Contemporary British History and the History and Policy unit), including in the area of digital humanities and oral history.

## **2 The Three Towns**

In developing the model, it is important to consider the local historical narrative. The rapid growth of towns and cities throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century was part of the national story. The growth of the urban saw towns and cities expand to incorporate what had once been separate villages and towns into a large metropolitan entity. Plymouth, unsurprisingly, partook of that urbanisation process during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Originally what is thought of as Plymouth today was made up of three separate towns: though only one, Plymouth, was a borough. Despite this, Devonport and Stonehouse managed to hold on to their own identity and their independence throughout the century. Strictly speaking, before 1914, Plymouth, along with Devonport and Stonehouse, constituted the Three Towns, co-existing in close geographic proximity with each other yet all valued their own independence and autonomy. The exception to this was Plymouth which had made several attempts to amalgamate the towns in order to create a larger Plymouth urbanization.<sup>4</sup> These attempts had been fiercely contested by Devonport. When Devonport, which had started its life as Plymouth Dock, became a town in its own right in 1825 there was rejoicing, holiday processions, and a public dinner. As the Three Towns grew in size during the nineteenth century, it became increasingly difficult to establish where one town ended and the other began - something that is very apparent in the local newspaper coverage of crime events in the Three Towns. For one thing, the problematic overlap was very noticeable on Union Street, world famous among sailors for its number of pubs and its associated drunken disorder: part of the street was policed by the Plymouth Police and the rest was under the jurisdiction of the Stonehouse Police. The Plymouth force was a borough police force, while the Stonehouse Police constituted H Division of the Devon County Police. As is indicated by a brief survey already undertaken of local newspaper reportage at the end of the nineteenth century, this could lead to complications on all sides.

Despite what were, to external eyes, clear advantages to a union between the three towns, the Amalgamation of the Three Towns did not occur until the borough of Plymouth had made

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<sup>4</sup> C. Gill, *Plymouth: A New History*, (David and Charles Limited: Newton Abbot, 1979) pp.170-1.

a resounding case for it in late January 1914. The borough's case was aided by the testimony of General Penton, who argued that in wartime (and there were ongoing fears of European war at the time), it would increase the work of the fortress commander who would have to deal with three different local bodies when managing men, munitions and morale. By the time that war broke out in August 1914, the amalgamation was under way and in October 1914, the Three Towns became formally the Corporation of Plymouth.

Not only did each of the Three Towns originally have their own police force, they also had their own fire brigades and magistrates' courts, as well as their own workhouses and Boards of Guardians. Utilities were equally separate: each town developed its own water supply network, gasworks and later, electricity generating stations. Plymouth and Devonport also had their own prisons maintained at local ratepayer expense. By the nineteenth century, social conditions in the Plymouth area were also particularly poor. For instance, Plymouth had significantly high pauper rates for much of the century, because so many of the wealthier middle class inhabitants had moved to more salubrious regions just outside the borough. A 1907 report by the Local Government Board claimed that, 'Plymouth was now by far the most pauperised of their urban unions in the West of England.'<sup>5</sup> Across the three towns, high levels of pauperism and of infant mortality (even higher than the 25% national average) were the results of the overcrowding, and poor standards of living accommodation that had become common features of Plymouth's social history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

Plymouth's economic prosperity largely relied on its importance as a naval port. For example, in 1906 accusations were made by the Local Government Board to the effect that Plymouth had been too generous with its poor relief while other West Country unions had reduced their expenditure. In response, the spokesman for the Board of Guardians, Mr Argall, insisted that Plymouth businesses had been particularly hit by the depression that had followed the end of the Boer War in 1902. The consequent withdrawal of wartime levels of soldiers and sailors had meant that not only were there fewer of those customers contributing to the local economy on a full pay basis, but also workers taken on to service the war effort had been discharged from the Dockyard. His case was that the majority of men who came before the Board were 'Bona fide working men'.<sup>7</sup> What this underlines is that at the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth centuries, Plymouth suffered regularly from economic instability that related to the fluctuations of the military economy. As

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<sup>5</sup> *Western Evening Herald*, 26 June 1907.

<sup>6</sup> Iain Channing, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Plymouth, 1900-1930: Guardians of the Poor or Guardians of the Ratepayers?*, unpublished MRes Thesis (2009) Plymouth University.

<sup>7</sup> *Western Morning News*, 13 July 1906.

newspaper reportage also evidences, they had to deal with the problems of policing large numbers of regularly itinerant servicemen and the associated disorder with the many drinking establishments across the Three Towns.

### **3 Everyday Offending in the Three Towns**

The project will research the incidence, shifts and patterns in everyday offending across the Three Towns and so determine causations (or contemporary views on this), the outcomes and the dimensions of the crime management processes locally. It will also examine how law-breaking was reported, especially locally, to gain better insights into its impact locally. This will involve analysing the relationships between the police, the magistracy, the community and other local legal professionals, as well as the local press and other relevant community networks including the Boards of Guardians. It will also require specific attention to be paid to the interactions between the local community and its institutions and those of the service establishments in and around Plymouth, including a focus on local military personnel to ascertain opinions on both sides of the contribution made by soldiers and sailors to the crime profile of the civilian population. Predictably, findings from initial research demonstrate how the local police took very seriously various forms of 'immoral' conduct including drink-related disorder and prostitution on large scale as well as the use of bad language in public places. But there is also an indication that the temptations offered by the resources assembled by the military establishments encouraged local theft and frauds of varying kinds.

The policing of Plymouth, from the days of the Three Towns on, will be an important element in the crime mapping dimension to the project. At the chronological start of the project, the challenges of managing crime that did not automatically respect the boundaries between the three different forces will be a major focus. Drawing on crime figures and interviews, as well as media reportage, the current realities of crime and law-breaking in Plymouth will also be drawn on, and comparisons made – including research from the interwar period and the 1960s and 1970s – to begin to develop a methodological model which can be transferrable to other locales and their criminal pasts. Some work has already been done on the earlier period, where research has been substantially lacking. Kim Stevenson's focus on Joseph Sowerby, appointed to the Plymouth Borough Police in 1892 and believed to be the youngest Chief Constable ever appointed in the UK is illuminating.<sup>8</sup> Judith Rowbotham's work on the previous decade has also revealed some interesting practices and personalities

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<sup>8</sup> Kim Stevenson, 'The Youngest Chief Constable ever' Paper presented at British Society of Criminology Conference, Plymouth University, 30 June to 3 July

in relation to the prosecution of minor offences.<sup>9</sup> Together, this demonstrates the perceived scale of the 'immoral practices' in Plymouth, and the concern they were to rate-paying contemporaries in the Three Towns and to the local gentry in the surrounding hinterland. The emphasis under Sowerby's predecessor was on prosecutions featuring both bad language and drunkenness, and newspaper editorials made it plain that this was the aspect of law-breaking that was considered the most detrimental to the peace and stability of the urban area of the Three Towns. When Sowerby took up his post he had a clear agenda for the Borough Police, which built on those concerns and was endorsed by the willingness of rate-payers to provide the funds for police prosecutions, ones which prioritised tackling drunkenness, prostitution and gambling.

Sowerby was just 29 years old when he was appointed Chief Constable of the Plymouth Police Force. He became an active member of the Plymouth temperance movement and his style of monitoring criminal and civil disorders in Plymouth was an early example of zero tolerance policing.<sup>10</sup> He ordered his constables to be proactive filling the magistrates and petty sessions' registers with lists of offenders charged with minor offences such as drunk and disorderly, drunk and incapable, using profane and obscene language, keeping disorderly houses and harbouring prostitutes.<sup>11</sup> He also personally engaged in the recording of information on licensed traders in Plymouth and then instigated proceedings against 79 of them for offences such as unlawfully permitting drunkenness, opening premises during prohibited hours, permitting them to be used as an improper house, harbouring thieves and prostitutes. In a sense, though, Sowerby was simply more effective than his predecessor, Superintendent Wreford, in carrying through, systematically, the established concerns of the local community.

This underlines the prosopographical approach which will underpin the everyday crime project. The value of using a prosopographical approach, as outlined by David Cox who is also involved in the project,<sup>12</sup> to understanding the patterns of everyday offending and the

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<sup>9</sup> Judith Rowbotham, 'Merry Men and Solons: Plymouth and South Devon Magistrates c1880-1930', Paper presented at British Society of Criminology Conference, Plymouth University, 30 June to 3 July.

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Punch, *Zero Tolerance Policing*, Policy Press: Bristol (2007) pp. ix-x. Punch describes it as a 'diffuse label' comprising different components that although lauded as an innovative 'tough on crime' approach in practice it was necessarily more tempered because such policing strategies often conflicted with express human rights principles. He concludes that it was more a rhetorical device than a major policy shift, in the US 'a crude restatement of a traditional crime control model that fitted into a wider shift towards punitive criminal justice' whereas in Holland and the UK it arguably provided 'a catalyst for a more assertive style of policing' reinforcing the "service and consent" paradigm.'

<sup>11</sup> 'Plymouth News' *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post* 17 June, 6 September, 23 September 1893; Petty Sessions Register

<sup>12</sup> David J Cox, 'Prosopography and Criminology: Fellow travellers on A Research Voyage?' Paper presented at British Society of Criminology Conference, Plymouth University, 30 June to 3 July

attempts to manage such offending in a particular locale or region is considerable, in that it provides the basis for a practical methodology to take the initiative forward. It also offers an opportunity to understand the perspectives and personal agendas behind the management of the local criminal justice process and, when a comparative perspective is used, helps to reveal both the commonalities of approach adopted by those involved in the process and the extent of any local idiosyncrasies. Prosopography is a system for organising and co-ordinating, often via database methodologies, scarce biographical data in a way that adds to its significance because it reveals connections and patterns that otherwise are in danger of remaining hidden. As Christophe Clarke has commented, '[prosopography] compiles its own statistical data from a wide range of sources, independent of the official discourse and accompanying statistics'.

The aim of a prosopographical approach is to identify a group of people linked in some way by some activity or social quality. For students of crime, this provides a way of researching figures who are not usually susceptible to the collection of biographical and other related data in detail – whether the individuals are criminals, police or magistrates, as in the case of this project. There is, in other words, no need for the target group for any such study to be a sociological group in the accepted way. Here, as well as providing the basis for at least some quantitative analysis, it will aid a qualitative analysis for our understanding of, for example, police practices and how these developed and changed over time, as well as the links with previous preoccupations for the community and the police locally. Other figures involved in or exerting influencing on the criminal justice process at work in Plymouth will also benefit from a prosopographical approach. This will include the local magistracy (including the county as well as Plymouth borough magistrates), members of the borough Watch Committee, the Boards of Guardians and eventually figures like Police Court Missionaries and probation workers who will also be investigated in this way.

Resources for this will include media reportage, as well as oral testimony relating to the last half century. In terms of media reportage, this will also go beyond the local media. Sowerby's reputation, for instance, went beyond the boundary of the Three Towns and articles relating to his operations as Plymouth Chief Constable stretched as far as Birmingham, Nottingham and Aberdeen.<sup>13</sup> These stories may have been published in such disparate and far reaching regions by the local press because the newspaper owners there may have had an agenda to encourage their respective Chief Constables to adopt aspects of Sowerby's moral crusade against drunkenness, gambling and vice.

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<sup>13</sup> For examples see *Birmingham Daily Post*, 30 March 1893; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 19 April 1894; *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 10 March 1910.



The media, including newspapers, provide a vital resource for data collection for this project. However, the Plymouth pilot project reminds the investigators that there are still practical problems to overcome. For instance, two major local resources, the *Western Evening Herald* and the *Western Morning News* are yet to be digitised.<sup>14</sup> Yet, as the two major local newspapers that were printed in Plymouth at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century, they are indispensable resources. However, there are digital versions of Plymouth's neighbouring regional papers such as *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, *Royal Cornwall Gazette* which provide some crucial information which can be a guide to when to focus and sample the undigitised press. Where digitised resources are available, any reliance on keyword searches in newspaper databases, such as *British Newspaper Archive* and *19<sup>th</sup> Century British Newspapers*, for instance, has led to the potential of missing articles which might be important through poor keyword search recognition engines. While these dual problems may not have affected the quantity of data relating to Sowerby whose reputation extended beyond Plymouth, lesser known individuals such as Joseph William Holland and Elizabeth Evelyn Latham who were court missionaries during the twentieth century make it harder for Jill Annison who is investigating this aspects of Plymouth's past to research. There are relatively few 'hits' for them when attempting different keyword searches. Yet, one article recalls that Latham received an MBE for her later work as a probation officer.<sup>15</sup> An initial trawl focusing on the 1880s of the undigitised Plymouth newspapers has already revealed the significance of these resources, and work on them will have to be factored in, even at the cost of extending the originally envisaged time frame for the pilot.

In a prosopographical approach, the information on individuals that can be gleaned from census information, for instance, can be invaluable. So in addition to the newspaper archives, websites such as [Ancestry.co.uk](http://Ancestry.co.uk) and [FindMyPast.co.uk](http://FindMyPast.co.uk) have also started to be used. This gave us access to the Leeds Police Force's recruitment files which provided a physical description of Sowerby when he joined the force as an 18 year old as well as his previous employment, who recommended him and when he joined. The census returns have also provided information on where he lived when he was in Plymouth and the fact that his father was a publican, which may account for his early temperance vehemence. Yet, these websites also have their faults and limitations. For example, it is too easy to presume you have the right person without solid evidence, and that confirmation is not always available. In these cases we need to err on the side of caution and only include information that we deem

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<sup>14</sup> However, there is limited availability of the *Western Morning News* which largely falls outside of our initial period of research. The current digitisation of this title only covers May-August 1894 and 1921-1950.

<sup>15</sup> *Western Morning News*, 9 June 1949.

as completely reliable. This goes beyond identification of the 'right' person to acceptance that mistakes are sometimes made in the recording of data for censuses and that additional resources can be needed and can even supersede the genealogical data when it clearly does not provide a consistent record.

The Plymouth and West Devon Record Office also hold information that will be utilised by the project including records relating to the Plymouth Police, the borough Watch Committee, Plymouth and Devonport Quarter Sessions, petty session or summary court proceedings as well as the Plymouth Prison register, the Prison Visiting Committee Reports and the Plymouth and Stonehouse Vigilance Association amongst others. This by no means extensive listing of the resources available demonstrates the potential and scope of the project's ambitions. Exciting finds have already been made at the Friends of Devon and Cornwall Constabulary Heritage and Learning Resource at Okehampton to illuminate the Devonport and Stonehouse police history including Sowerby's handwritten General Orders.<sup>16</sup>

As well as recording the lives and role of those involved in a local criminal justice system, the project's prosopographical approach also aims to map the lives of those who were subjected to it. Where possible, case studies of offenders will be studied in a 'cradle to grave' approach, providing us with an understanding of individual experiences of crime, sentencing and recidivism. This aspect of the research will largely be directed by following leads where possible, as initial research in this area has led to many dead-ends. The information provided in newspaper reports and court records is not always sufficient to identify an individual in census returns or other records available. This is improved with details such as a street name and/or age, but there can still be problems with tracking people down. Also, the name of the offender itself can significantly increase the difficulty of finding an offender in genealogy records if it is a common one. Similar research on the lives of offenders has been conducted by Barry Godfrey, David Cox and Stephen Farrall.<sup>17</sup>

A large section of the research has also led to the creation of an Excel spreadsheet which provides a database of court verdicts in the Three Towns/Plymouth as recorded by the local press. This provides the same difficulties as mentioned above. Data collection here is being conducted by systematically going through the pages of the local press on microfiche in search of the Police Court reports. We have selected a three month period to be recorded

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.fdcchl.org.uk/> the team wish to express their gratitude to Carmen Talbot, project assistant Policing Past Community Present and the archives former collections officer Angela Sutton-Vane.

<sup>17</sup> B. Godfrey, D. Cox and S. Farrall, *Criminal Lives: Family Life, Employment, and Offending*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford. 2007).

for every decade in our time period. Although time consuming, the information will allow us to map continuity and change in sentencing and crime prioritisation in media coverage and police responses. Where possible, the cases covered in the local press will be analysed against the magistrate court summary convictions held at the Plymouth and West Devon Record Office in order to ascertain what crimes fit the itinerary for local media coverage in terms of the newspapers agenda and public interest.

Although still in its infancy the project is starting to gather significant pace and promises to yield interesting results which will provide us with a greater understanding of everyday offending.<sup>18</sup> This will include battling with questions such as, what demographic, socio-cultural and environmental factors contribute to everyday offending? What is the level of local consciousness of problems and (how) does this change over time? How do communities perceive and react to everyday offending and visible law enforcement? How has the media influenced public perceptions/ understandings of everyday offending? What is the nature of the relationship/ implied contract between the community and the agents of criminal justice? These are challenging questions which require a focused response for a truly interdisciplinary research team. Yet, although this report has highlighted significant challenges to the collection of data, like Plymouth in the late nineteenth century, researchers must also take the rough with the smooth.

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<sup>18</sup> The team will be presenting a small exhibition of work undertaken to date and case examples at the ESRC annual Festival of Social Science, Plymouth City Museum, 14 November 2015.