

Sheriff's Bills of Cravings

Anna Cusack

Sheriff's bills of cravings are the annual claims for reimbursement of money that a sheriff spent during their appointment. These bills do not belong to the sheriffs of the modern imagination, from wild west films and tv shows. Instead, they belong to legal officials who were responsible for a shire. The most well-known in popular culture is perhaps the Sheriff of Nottingham from Robin Hood tales. The word sheriff is a contraction of 'shire reeve' (Old English *scírgeréfa* and Middle English *scyrreve*) and the Oxford English Dictionary traces the words to c.1034.¹ Before the Norman Conquest the sheriff represented royal authority, presiding over the shire-moot and upholding the law and administration of the royal demesne.

The role of a sheriff continued after the Conquest although many of their responsibilities changed, and they ended up less powerful than Justices of the Peace, holding roles more akin to policing. Many famous people in the early modern period had connections to sheriffs. John Evelyn noted in his diary on 3 November 1633, 'this year was my Father made sheriff the last (as I thinke) who served in that honorable office for Surrey & Sussex befor they were disjoyned'.² In Pepys's diary, there are accounts of him going for dinner with his friend who was the sheriff and visiting a friend who would be sheriff in the next year.³

¹ "Sheriff, n." OED Online, www.oed.com/view/Entry/178002. Accessed 1 October 2022.

² J. Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn* [G. de la Bédoyère, ed.] (2004), 23.

³ All references to Sheriffs in Samuel Pepys's Diary can be searched [here](#).



Louis Rhead, *Bold Robin Hood and His Outlaw Band: Their Exploits in Sherwood Forest* (1912), 129.
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Cravings are a fascinating source of information. Sheriffs often ran county gaols and as such kept records of individuals confined there. Maintaining prisoners before trials, execution expenses, and escorting prisoners to transportation and into prison hulks, all appear in the cravings. They claim amounts for carrying out whippings, and as the historian Simon Devereaux noted, 'systematic review of these records suggests much about the changing character and proportion of public, physical punishments in Hanoverian England, as the sheriffs were obliged to distinguish between the amount claimed for a 'common' whipping and that claimed for a whipping 'at the cart's tail' along a specified route'. Until 1779 £1 could be claimed for 'common' and £2 for 'cart's tail' whippings, they were thereafter tripled to £3 and £6.⁴ The costs for gibbeting individuals after their executions are also in the cravings. The average gibbet cost £16 but some cost more than £50.⁵ It was an expensive practice, and the cravings show the cost incurred from hiring the smiths to measure an individual criminal while alive, so they fit their gibbets perfectly, to the erection and transportation of a body to a gibbet site and the security needed while the act was performed.

⁴ S. Devereaux, 'The Abolition of the Burning of Women in England Reconsidered' *Crime, History & Societies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2005), 83.

⁵ P. King, *Punishing the Criminal Corpse, 1700-1840 Aggravated Forms of the Death Penalty in England* (2017), 101.

84.

London for An Account of mony laid out and expended for the use of his majesty King George the 2^d. in the Shire of Middlesex by Michael Perry Esq^r. and St. John Satter Knight Sheriffs of the City of London & County of Midd^x for one year commencing from the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel 1734. & ending the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel 1735. Given an allowance as follows To wit

Paid the usher of the Court of Kings Bench for Repair and other necessaries ab ^t . the same Court as by receipts appear	2	1	6.
Paid for a years fuel for the Court of Kings Bench as by Certificates and Receipts appear	163	9	10
Paid Justices wages for the year more than the Sheriffs come to	158	12	10
for making a great many Copies of Letters from the Agents for Taxes relating to the Land Tax and distributing them	5	0	0
Paid for a new Sledge for carrying Catherine Tracey & 2 others 3 Coyneers to be burnt at Tyburn	7	17	6
Paid for haggells brushers Reeds posts blocks Churns Guards and attendance for burning them	10	16	0
Paid for erecting a gallows in the Strand for the execution of W. Williams for murder and for breaking up the pavement & making good the same	7	0	0
Paid for the execution of the R. Williams	2	2	0
Paid for making a gibbett & setting up the same on Turnham Green and hanging Williams in chains and taking him down from thence by order of his majesty and hanging him up upon Hounslow Heath	15	17	0
for Guards and attendance on the execution of the said Williams and hanging him in chains and also in taking him down and hanging him up on Hounslow Heath	14	14	0
for a set of chains for the said Williams and plating the tree	6	5	0
Paid for the special execution of Richard Rose Saunders & Walker Guards and attendance	7	7	0
Paid for making and putting up gibbets in Dogswave Road and for hanging up the said 4 persons in chains thereon	16	10	0
for 14 Suits of Chains for the R. Richard Rose Saunders and Walker and plating the gibbets	25	0	0
Paid for the special execution of Samuel Gregory and hanging him up in chains Guards and attendance	5	5	0
Paid for putting up a gibbett in Dogswave Road and hanging the said Gregory up in chains thereon	8	5	0
Paid for a suit of chains for the said Samuel Gregory and plating the tree	6	5	0

Sheriffs' cravings, 1735-1739. TNA, T 90/147. With kind permission of The National Archives.

If a craving was signed by the Chancellor, the reimbursement was secured. Sometimes claims were made by widows or children of a deceased sheriff. Sheriffs' cravings are a neglected source in many ways, only recently receiving attention from scholars. Maybe because they are stored 'in the Treasury records rather than in the court archives and had therefore been missed by most criminal justice historians'.⁶

⁶ King, *Punishing the Criminal Corpse*, 80.

The records do not systematically inform researchers on ages, occupations, nor other details of an offender but occasional glimpses are possible, and as the reimbursements were produced annually by the Exchequer of the Treasury in London, they can easily be cross referenced with Assize records.

The cravings are mostly housed at The National Archives at Kew in a subseries within E 197. Three books cover 1724-1733, and 1800-1806. The original bills for the years 1746 to 1785 are in T 64. The entry books 1733-1822 are in T 90 and for 1823 to 1959 in T 20.⁷ They are indexed by shrievalty. Up until 1849 all books were examined by the Exchequer Seal Office, and some contain the reports from this office. Local tradesmen and some newspaper advertisements have been inserted into these books for reference as well.

The 1887 Sheriff's Act can be viewed in its entirety online [here](#). Today, a sheriff or high sheriff is merely a ceremonial county or city official.

Further References and Resources:

J. McGovern, *The Tudor Sheriff: A Study in Early Modern Administration* (2021)

Myron C. Noonkester, 'Power of the County: Sheriffs and Violence in Early Modern England' in J. P. Ward, ed., *Violence, Politics, and Gender in Early Modern England* (2008)

For more on gibbets and Sheriffs Cravings see: S. Tarlow, *The Golden and Ghoulish Age of the Gibbet in Britain* (2017) which is [open access](#).

⁷ [Bills of Sheriff's Cravings | The National Archives](#). Accessed 1 October 2022.