

# The Power of Petitioning in Early Modern England (1573-1799)

Sharon Howard

26 August 2022

## Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The Power of Petitioning project</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Data creation</b>	<b>2</b>
Source choices and sampling . . . . .	2
Transcriptions . . . . .	3
Post-transcription processing . . . . .	3
<b>The collections</b>	<b>4</b>
Quarter Sessions (QS) . . . . .	4
House of Lords (HOL) . . . . .	6
State Papers (SP) . . . . .	6
<b>The data</b>	<b>6</b>
Collection prefixes . . . . .	6
Data tables . . . . .	7
Formats . . . . .	7
Petitions . . . . .	7
Petitioners . . . . .	11
<b>Data version</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Licence</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Citation</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Credits and acknowledgments</b>	<b>13</b>

## Introduction

This dataset is derived from 2847 early modern English petitions from selected local and central institutions, transcribed and published by **The Power of Petitioning in Seventeenth-Century England** (TPOP) project. It includes information about archival sources, dates, petition topics, petitioners and administrative responses.

The full edition of the transcribed petitions is available at British History Online, where each volume of petitions also has an editorial introduction with further background and source information. The dataset may be used independently of the BHO transcribed petitions or as a supplementary resource and finding aid. Please note that the dataset does not include the transcriptions.

## The Power of Petitioning project

The Power of Petitioning project research team consisted of:

- Dr Brodie Waddell (Birkbeck, University of London) - Principal Investigator
- Professor Jason Peacey (University College London) - Co-investigator
- Sharon Howard (Birkbeck) - Research Associate

Further information:

- Project website: <https://petitioning.history.ac.uk/>
- BHO edition: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/search/series/petitions>

Contacts:

- general questions related to the project: [b.waddell@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:b.waddell@bbk.ac.uk)
- specific questions about the dataset: [sharon.howard@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:sharon.howard@sheffield.ac.uk)

## Data creation

The bulk of data collection and processing took place during 2019-2020, with some supplementary data work in 2021.

## Source choices and sampling

Wherever available, the project used existing catalogues and resources to determine selection of records. The archival collections were selected to represent three institutions (Parliament, Crown, county) and four regions (London, south-east, midlands, north-west), with a particular focus on series that contained surviving late 16th-century petitions.

A number of the collections were too large for the project to be able to transcribe every surviving petition and these were sampled; sampling strategies were pragmatic and depended on the size and distribution of each archive.

## Transcriptions

Gavin Robinson and Tim Wales transcribed the petitions from photographs of the archival documents. As the transcriptions are not included in this dataset, the transcription conventions are not documented in detail, but key features for subsequent data processing are noted below.

Basic metadata was recorded at the transcription stage for every petition, including:

- full archival reference, repository and collection
- document year (derived from archival context if the petition itself was undated)
- document date if the petition itself contained a date (many do not)

The transcriptions were made in plain text with some XML-style tagging used to mark up key features that the project wanted to record.

Most original spelling, punctuation, etc was retained, but the transcriptions were not diplomatic and no attempt was made to represent the materiality of the documents. For example, abbreviations were silently expanded, proper names were always capitalised and capitalisation in general was modernised. Line breaks and paragraph breaks were retained.

Paratext (anything added in a different hand from the main body of the petition) was tagged as such. Subscribed names were also tagged.

## Post-transcription processing

The key elements of manual work undertaken to enhance basic archival metadata consisted of:

- collation of available catalogue metadata (Brodie Waddell)
- assignment of topics and subtopics (Brodie Waddell, Jason Peacey, Sharon Howard, Anna Cusack)
- writing abstracts for petitions where these weren't available from catalogues (Brodie Waddell, Sharon Howard)
- assignment of response categories (QS petitions only) (Sharon Howard)

Sharon Howard wrote R scripts to add further information to the data, including:

- extracting metadata and tagged content from the transcriptions
- extraction of data from catalogues (particularly for the House of Lords petitions) and other resources
- identifying petitioner names, assigning gender, and associating them with locations and statuses

Sharon Howard was also responsible for the final compilation and documentation of the public release of the data.

## The collections

The petitions are organised in seven volumes on British History Online (<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/search/series/petitions>).

### Quarter Sessions (QS)

The five separate county volumes of Quarter Sessions petitions have been collated into a single QS collection (1728 petitions).

### Cheshire

Dates covered: 1573-1798

Sampling: one year in ten

Number of petitions: 613

Number of petitioners: 644

Number of subscribers: 1352

Notes on data collection:

- transcribed all surviving 16th-century petitions and 17th/18th-century petitions from 1 year in 20 (years ending in -8) (292 petitions)
- added extensive metadata for petitions from the intervening years ending in -8 (321 petitions)

Further information: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/petitions/cheshire/introduction>

### Derbyshire

Dates covered: 1632-1770

Sampling: all surviving petitions that could be dated

Number of petitions: 94

Number of petitioners: 94

Number of subscribers: 151

Notes on data collection:

- transcribed every surviving petition that could be dated to within a decade
- 121 petitions which couldn't be dated were excluded

Further information: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/petitions/derbyshire/introduction>

## **Staffordshire**

Dates covered: 1589-1799

Sampling: one year in ten

Number of petitions: 239

Number of petitioners: 288

Number of subscribers: 632

Notes on data collection:

- transcribed all surviving petitions from 1 year per decade (years ending in -9)

Further information: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/petitions/staffordshire/introduction>

## **Westminster**

Dates covered: 1620-1799

Sampling: all surviving usable petitions

Number of petitions: 424

Number of petitioners: 435

Number of subscribers: 349

Notes on data collection:

- transcribed all surviving petitions except a few early illegible/damaged ones
- 44 petitions can only be dated to within 20 years (1620-40) and some others to a decade
- there is a large gap in the archive between 1646 and 1688

Further information: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/petitions/westminster/introduction>

## **Worcestershire**

Dates covered: 1592-1797

Sampling: all surviving usable petitions

Number of petitions: 360

Number of petitioners: 346

Number of subscribers: 1047

Notes on data collection:

- transcribed all surviving petitions except a few early illegible/damaged ones
- there are large gaps in the middle of the 17th century

Further information: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/petitions/worcs-quarter-sessions/introduction>

## **House of Lords (HOL)**

Dates covered: 1597-1696

Sampling: selected years

Number of petitions: 732

Number of petitioners: 844

Number of subscribers: 2367

Notes on data collection:

- transcribed every surviving petition 1597-1620 and then selected years across the 17th century:
- 1597-1620 (13), 1621 (65), 1624 (78), 1640 (80), 1648 (80), 1661 (104), 1671 (71), 1679 (88), 1689 (80), 1696 (73)
- the selection aimed to produce as even a survey as possible, given that Parliament did not meet every year
- 1640 and 1689 are exceptionally voluminous years and so collection was limited to the first 80 petitions (as filed)

Further information: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/petitions/house-of-lords/introduction>

## **State Papers (SP)**

Dates covered: 1600-1699

Sampling: up to 4 petitions per year

Number of petitions: 387

Number of petitioners: 433

Number of subscribers: 602

Notes on data collection:

- transcribed the first four surviving petitions for each year from 1600 to 1699 (based on the Calendar of State Papers Domestic)
- less than four petitions survived in some years, especially towards the end of the period

Further information: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/petitions/state-papers/introduction>

## **The data**

### **Collection prefixes**

- QS: Quarter Sessions
- HOL: House of Lords
- SP: State Papers

## Data tables

For each collection there are two tables:

- petitions
- petitioners

## Formats

The dataset is provided in three formats to cater for varying levels of technical expertise and preferred workflows:

- Excel spreadsheet, containing all six data tables
- CSVs (one file per table, as a zip archive)
- SQLite database, containing six tables

## Petitions

The main petition-level metadata. With the exception of the 321 supplementary Cheshire petitions, the full text of the petitions is available on British History Online and can be located there using the collection name (and county for QS), date and archival reference.

column	collections	description
petition_id	HOL QS SP	a unique identifier for the petition within the dataset (added because not all archival references are unique; <i>not</i> part of the BHO edition)
year	HOL QS SP	year of petition; often assumed from archival context, eg the date of a session file, as many petitions are not dated. A few are approximate, but most to within a decade.
date	HOL QS SP	date of petition (a date written on the petition itself; many are undated)
county	QS	county, for QS petitions: Cheshire, Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Westminster, Worcestershire
topic	QS SP	one of a number of broad topics assigned by TPOP; see below for details of the topics
subtopic	QS	adds further detail to the topic; looser and less comprehensive than topics
topic_detail	SP	a slightly more detailed version of the broad topic
themes	HOL	up to three topics or themes have been assigned to each HOL petition. Where more than one, a list of items separated by a pipe “ ” symbol.
named_petr	HOL QS SP	count of named petitioners

column	collections	description
subscribers	HOL QS SP	count of named subscribers
petition_type	HOL QS SP	based on the number/type of petitioner. Values: single, multiple, collective (not individually named) + “behalf” for petitions made on behalf of someone other than the named petitioner
petition_gender	HOL QS SP	a summary of the gender of the petitioners. Values: f, m, fm (mixed), u (unknown); left blank for collective petitions
sub_gender	HOL QS SP	similar summary of the gender of subscribers
response_cat	QS	some petitions have responses annotated on the petition; see below for list of possible values
petitioner	HOL QS SP	the individual petitioner(s) name or collective title
addressee	SP	person or institution to whom petition was addressed (in SP this can be quite varied)
abstract	QS	short summary of the contents of the petition; some have been written by TPOP and others sourced from archives catalogues and they vary in level of detail
description	HOL	description of the petition taken from the Parliamentary Archives catalogue
request	SP	a very short summary of the nature of the request
repository	HOL QS SP	the archival institution that currently holds the records
collection	HOL QS SP	the archival series or collection in which the petitions are located
reference	HOL QS SP	the archival reference of the document. In HOL and Westminster QS these are not all unique identifiers
ll_img	QS	some Westminster QS petitions are online at London Lives ( <a href="http://www.londonlives.org">www.londonlives.org</a> ). This identifier can be used in LL’s reference search to find the document.
bho_transcribed	QS	was the petition transcribed for the BHO online edition? “y” (yes) or “n” (no). Most are “y”, but some Cheshire QS petitions have abstracts only.

## Topics/themes

### QS

Each QS petition was assigned a single topic from the following list, designed to cover the most common and significant broad categories of concern to QS petitioners. The project aimed to be as consistent as possible to enable comparative analysis. Nonetheless, the topics are a limited tool; some petitions might have fallen into more than one category, in which case an editorial decision was made as to which was the primary concern of the petitioner. Many petitions also have subtopics, but these were assigned rather less systematically and are not documented here.



topic	description
alehouse	petitions to do with licences for alehouses, inns, taverns, victualling houses
charitable brief	petitions for certificates to allow the petitioners to collect charity in response to personal calamities such as house fires
cottage	petitions concerning licences to build cottages on 'waste' lands
dissenting worship	applications for licences to establish nonconformist places of worship (following the Toleration Act of 1689)
employment	petitions to do with service, apprenticeship, wages and other disputes between employers and employees
imprisoned debtors	applications for release from imprisoned debtors (18th century)
litigation	broad category for uses of and encounters with the legal/criminal justice system (eg request for prosecution, request for mercy or discharge)
military relief	petitions from wounded soldiers/sailors or their widows/wives for military pensions
officeholding	petitions concerning local officials, mainly constables, eg trying to get out of serving, or seeking compensation for expenses
other	miscellaneous petitions that didn't fit into the other topics
paternity	petitions concerning financial support for children, mainly bastardy cases
poor relief	petitions concerning relief or removal under the poor law system
rates	petitions (mainly) attempting to impose or avoid payment of various communal rates, levies or taxes

## SP

Each SP topic was assigned a single topic from the following list, which again was designed to reflect the distinct concerns of petitioners to the Crown.

topic	description
charity	almshouse, hospital, etc.
church	ecclesiastical office or jurisdiction
crime	mercy, pardon or, conversely, punishment for alleged illegality, including homicide, libel, treason, theft, etc.
diplomacy/travel	diplomatic aid, passports, ambassadorial office, etc.
infrastructure	harbours, bridges, sewers, bridges
land	property inheritances, natural resources, tenancies, etc.
lawsuit	ongoing litigation, arbitration, legal offices, etc.

topic	description
military	army and navy, including wages, pensions, supplies, quarterage, etc.
monetary grant	financial allowance or pension
other	miscellaneous
other royal office	park-keeper, household service, Cinque Ports, Exchequer, sheriff, Jewel House, etc.
school/university	scholarships, educational licences, appointments, etc.
tax	customs, poll tax, ship money, etc.
trade	commercial privileges, privateering, piracy, etc.

### *HOL*

A much larger and looser set of themes was used for the House of Lords petitions, up to three per petition. They are listed here for information, but it is not possible to document them in any detail.

---

#### themes

---

advowson; algerian slaves; alimony; arbitration; army;  
arrears; arrest; assault  
baptists; bishops wars  
charitable uses; charter; church government; church lands;  
church politics; church repairs; clemency; clerical living;  
clerical livings; coat and conduct; college of physicians;  
colonies; compounding; concealed lands; conspiracy;  
contempt; conventicle; corruption; courts of justice; customs  
danby; debt; debts; defamation; delay; delay hearing;  
diplomacy; divorce  
elections; employment  
fees; fen drainage; fishing; forests; forgery; fraud  
hackney carriages  
impeachment; imprisonment; indemnity; industry; irish  
rebellion  
jacobite; judgment  
land; leg; legislation; libel; license to stay in london;  
licenses; litigation; livery companies  
matthew parker tomb; monopolies  
naturalisation  
oates; office; office / official duties; official duties; other;  
overseas trade  
pardon; patent; patents; pay; peerage; pension; petitioning;  
plantations; plot; plunder; poor; popery; popish priest;  
prerogative courts; priests; printing; prisons; priv; privilege;  
prizes; process; property; protection

---

themes

---

records; recusancy; recusants; regicide; relief; religion; river navigation; romish priest; royalist soldiers; rye house plot salary; scotland; seditious words; sequestration; service; ship money; slander  
testamentary; tobacco; toleration; trade; trade regulation; trading companies; treason; trusts  
war; words

---

## Responses

Responses have been categorised for the QS collection only (so far).

category	description
granted	request granted in full
grant_part	request partially granted
grant_cond	request granted on condition of doing something
referred	request referred for further investigation or mediation
nothing	“nil”, “nothing”, or similar wording, with no further reason given for rejection
rejected	request rejected, usually with some kind of reason
absent	request rejected because the petitioner was absent
uncertain	there is an annotation which may be a response, but its meaning is unclear (due to damage, illegible writing, etc)
no_response	no response of any kind is recorded on the petition

## Petitioners

Supplementary data about petitioners and subscribers named in petitions: the names of petitioners (including those petitioned “on behalf of”) and subscribers have been identified and further information about them has been added.

Some petition-level data has been added to the petitioner tables in the Excel spreadsheet version of the dataset for users’ convenience; documentation of those columns is not repeated here.

column	collections	description
petitioner_id	HOL QS SP	a unique identifier for the petitioner within the dataset
petition_id	HOL QS SP	the dataset ID for the petition (see the petitions table documentation); shared key for the CSV/SQL versions of the data
name	HOL QS SP	petitioner’s name

column	collections	description
name_type	HOL QS SP	type of individual within the context of the petition. Values: “petr”=identified as petitioner at the beginning of the petition; “behalf”=a person on whose behalf the petition is submitted; “sub”=subscriber (names at the foot of the petition or a separate sheet)
sig_type	HOL QS SP	signature “types”. Values: “sig”=autograph signature; “in”=initials; “m”=signed with a mark; “ss”=petitioner’s name but in the same hand as the petition text (so probably written by a scribe); “[s]”=there is a signature but type not recorded (untranscribed Cheshire petitions)
gender	HOL QS SP	gender of petitioner. Values: male/female/unknown.
residence	QS	petitioner’s residence, where identifiable within the petition
status	QS	petitioner occupation/social status, where identifiable within the petition

## Notes and caveats

Signatures were encoded at the time of transcription, making it relatively easy to extract subscriber names (apart from a few that were illegible or lost to damage).

All other petitioner data, including names, has been extracted from the texts, largely relying on semi-automated procedures.

Although the process was accompanied by extensive manual checks, corrections and additions, especially for petitioner names, none of this additional data has been *comprehensively* checked for errors or omissions.

- Petitioner names were usually identified from the first line of the petition.
- Gender was assigned primarily on the basis of extensive name lists drawn from English sources covering the 17th to 19th centuries.
- Residence and occupation/status have been (so far) extracted for QS petitioners only, using a combination of context (eg, keywords such as “of” or “near” immediately following a name), place name gazetteers and fuzzy matching, followed by manual cleanup and removal of obvious errors. The quality/detail of available geo data varied between counties and was best for Cheshire.

## Data version

1.0, August 2022.

## Licence

This dataset is shared under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY-SA) licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

## Citation

Suggested format: Brodie Waddell and Sharon Howard. (2022). *The Power of Petitioning in Early Modern England, 1573-1799, version 1.0* [dataset].

## Credits and acknowledgments

An Arts and Humanities Research Council Research Grant (AH/S001654/1) provided the primary funding for the project from January 2019 to December 2020.

Two Economic History Society Carnevali Small Research Grants:

1. funding for a pilot project in 2014-15
2. funding to enable the addition of 18th-century QS petitions (2019-20)

IHR Digital undertook the technical work to publish the edition and provided extensive valuable advice to the project (<https://www.history.ac.uk/research/digital-history>)

Gavin Robinson (<https://www.drgavinrobinson.uk>) and Tim Wales transcribed the petitions.

The repositories, without whom a project of this nature would be impossible:

- Cheshire Archives and Local Studies (<https://www.cheshirearchives.org.uk/>)
- Derbyshire Record Office (<https://calmview.derbyshire.gov.uk/calmview/>)
- London Metropolitan Archives (<https://search.lma.gov.uk>)
- Staffordshire Archives (<http://www.archives.staffordshire.gov.uk/CalmView/Default.aspx>)
- Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service (<http://e-services.worcestershire.gov.uk/CalmView/>)
- Parliamentary Archives (<https://archives.parliament.uk/>)
- The National Archives (<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>)

Significant additional online resources:

- London Lives 1690-1800 (18th c Westminster petitions) (<https://www.londonlives.org/>)
- State Papers Online [subscription] (<https://www.gale.com/intl/primary-sources/state-papers-online>)
- FamilySearch (images of Cheshire QS records) (<https://www.familysearch.org/en/>)
- Internet Archive (collection of *Calendar of State Papers Domestic*) (<https://archive.org/details/texts>)
- Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire (online publications) (<http://rslc.org.uk/out-of-print-publications/>)