

In Search of Sherlock Holmes: The Life of a Country Squire

In the short story “The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter,” Sherlock Holmes tells Dr. Watson that his ancestors were “country squires.” And other than that bit of information, along with the note that his grandmother was the French portraitist Vernet, Conan Doyle provided little with respect to his most famous character’s origins.

Knowing his parents were country squires, however, provides insights into Holmes’ social level and certain expectations common to those of his rank. A country squire would have owned enough land to rent to tenants and have lived in a manor house. While the squire’s position was below a nobleman or large landowner,¹ but still ranked high in the local social structure.

In addition to running his estate and ensuring the welfare of those under his tenancy, the country squire also held the position of Justice of the Peace. In this capacity, the squire had both civil and legal duties. Within the local government, the justices supervised parish (or county) officials, in particular those in charge of the maintenance of roads and bridges and the enforcement of the Poor Laws.² As a legal position, the Justice of the Peace served as a magistrate during the Quarter Sessions, where they and a jury heard and decided on serious crimes such as theft, highway robbery, assault, burglary, rioting, drunkenness, profane swearing, and a variety of crimes against property (poaching, cutting estate timber and the like. Between these sessions, the justices would hold petty sessions where the least serious crimes were reviewed and decisions made without a jury.³

Because the English system did not (and still does not) include a prosecutor, the preparation of a case rested with the constable, from collecting evidence to presenting it at trial. The justice of the peace supervised and worked closely with the village constable, issued warrants, and determined whether to move a case to trial and to which court.⁴

As a member of the gentry, Sherlock Holmes would have been in a position of privilege. With a father as a Justice of the Peace, he would have developed a familiarity with the criminal justice system and the law. For the consulting detective, the foundation for investigating and solving crimes would have come naturally to this son of a country squire.

¹ Daniel Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1993), 46.

² Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 90.

³ “Victorian Crime and Punishment,” accessed February 16, 2015. <http://vcp.e2bn.org/>

⁴ J.J. Tobias, *Crime and Police in England: 1700-1900* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 125.