



**An IATL funded project to  
Unlock Warwick's Criminal Past**

## **Introduction**

This interdisciplinary project was an innovative and inclusive initiative for the Law School that provided a novel learning experience to a mix of first year Law students, intermediate year students and finalists, and students from the English department.

This student-led, performance-based project took learning outside the classroom to the Warwick County Records Office and the Old Court House in the town of Warwick and positioned students as creative partners in their learning. Students explored historic newspaper reports and records from nineteenth century Petty Sessions to unearth criminal cases from Warwick Town's past. Students then worked with the volunteers from the Unlocking Warwick team to perform a dramatic re-enactment of a nineteenth century Petty Sessions hearing in the historic Warwick Court House. The same team (supplemented by staff and students from the Warwick Law School) also performed the drama for the Warwick Law School and visitors to the Law School's Open Day.

## **Project Aims and Outcomes**

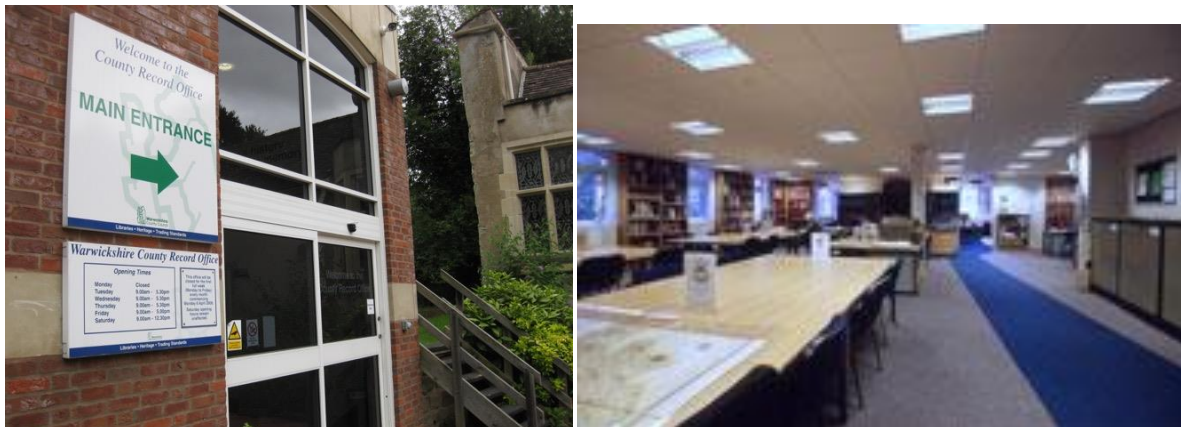
Many law students will not have been in a law court before this project began nor examined historic court records. This project sought to show students how justice was administered in the past, and *where* justice was administered and provide them with tools to facilitate further archival research.

This project involved an inclusive, interdisciplinary group of Warwick undergraduates drawn from across year groups and faculties. The students worked with a local scriptwriter, Rick Thompson, and with volunteers from Warwick Town's Unlocking Warwick Project together with staff from the County Records Office and Warwick Town Council.

This project led to the collection of materials from historic records that reveal a glimpse of Warwick Town's criminal past and also led to two collaborative performances of an original script drawn from historic court records.

The dramatic re-enactments, in period costume and using words from contemporaneous court records and newspaper reports, brought to life a nineteenth century Petty Session. This 'authentic' experience of the law was of great benefit both to student performers and spectators as they are often required to learn the detail of cases from the eighteenth and nineteenth century but can find it difficult to appreciate the historical context in which the judgments were given.

## Visit to Warwick County Records Office



In October 2015, students involved in the project visited the Warwick County Records Office and were given a morning workshop which introduced them to the various records from eighteenth and nineteenth century local court hearings. Working with the assistance of Records Office staff and Unlocking Warwick volunteers, the group undertook archival research, exploring historic court records and contemporaneous newspaper reports into local crimes. The group decided their focus would be crimes committed in Warwick Town in the mid-nineteenth century period involving women and their fertility. The group unearthed detailed accounts of women charged with, amongst other things, the crimes of unlawful abortion, infanticide and selling fake contraceptives.

## Public performance of a re-enactment of a Nineteenth Century Petty Sessions in Warwick County Court House



On 9th April 2016, student volunteers from the project joined the Unlocking Warwick team to perform an original dramatic re-enactment of a nineteenth century Petty Sessions in Warwick County Court House to a public audience. This collaboration between Warwick Law School and a local group of volunteers was very well-received and was praised in the local press <http://www.unlockingwarwick.org/drama-fascinating-and-entertaining/>

## Warwick Law School staff-student re-enactment of a Nineteenth Century Petty Sessions in Warwick Arts Centre



On 29th April 2016, the students and volunteers from Unlocking Warwick, together with academics, students and administrative staff from the Warwick Law School put on a repeat performance of the Petty Session re-enactment for students and visitors to the Law School's Open Day giving a memorable, authentic experience of local criminal justice brought to life.