

John Sheriff, the Constable of Welton

Researched by Christopher North

This is a story of real people who lived and worked in and around Welton le Wold in 1377. To preserve their memories, their names have not been changed. Their spirits may still walk our paths.

It is mid March 1377 and there is still a wintry nip in the air. John Sheriff, known officially as Johanne Cheriff, is going round the community of Welton and knocking on doors. As Constable of the parish, he has been tasked with calling on every family to collect their poll tax recently imposed by the king, Edward III. His Majesty needed the money to continue his prolonged war with France, known later as The Hundred Years War.

John walked onto one of the tofts, with its small food garden leading to an even smaller mud and stud cottage huddled under a dirty thatched roof. A weak ghost of smoke slithered out of the chimney in the still afternoon. He thumped on the door with his staff of office. How easy it would have been to break this frail timber if his blow had been any stronger. A man appeared round the corner of the building with a cabbage in his hand, the soil still dropping off the roots as he walked.

“Well?” he asked, knowing exactly why John was there, but the game was to play total innocence. Every villager was doing the same and it was beginning to get John irritated. It was the only way that they could fight back. With the agreement of Parliament in mid February, the king had ordered a tax on every person in England over the age of 14 years of a groat or 4 pence. Hence the name of the Head Tax or Poll Tax. A charge of this amount per household would have been hard enough for some families, but to find a payment from every adult under their roof was crippling. A groat represented nearly two days paid work in the fields, but the villeins who were tied to the land did not receive wages. Gathering coins of the realm was extremely hard for them and usually needed extra labour work or the sale of vegetables needed for their own table.

John knew this, but he had a job to do and he had less than a month to collect it all. When he was elected Constable by the parish meeting last autumn, he had hoped for a quiet year, perhaps with the occasional squabble over an arable strip in the open field or even some inter-family violent friction to have to deal with. This had proved not to be the case, because last week he had been directed to collect this new version of the Poll Tax, making it the most hated tax in the history of England.

“Thomas, I need your payment, for you, your wife and two sons.”

“I remember I paid last time,” growled the crofter, his blackened broken teeth visible. He limped quite badly, showing where his ox had proved who was the real boss in their toiling relationship.

“Yes Thomas, but that was 5½ years ago, when every parish paid a fixed amount. You know that we freemen paid more than you villeins. We felt it much harder than you ever did.”

“Besides”, the man continued, ignoring John's complaints, “Will, my youngest, is only 12, so I don't need to pay for him.”

The Constable laughed, “If your Will is 12, then I'm a Frenchman. He is almost as tall as I am and he won the youth wrestling challenge at the Harvest Supper last year. It won't do. You cannot prove he is underage. The memory of the elders in the village will not support you there.”

“Rector will remember, he's been here over 20 years.”

“Be that as it may and even though our beloved rector is a local man only coming from Kelstern just to the north of Welton, Master Henry will not remember, because he was seldom here. He won't remember any baptism of your lads. No registers and no memories. Now, pay up or I shall have to inform your own master. He could soon get rid of you and your whole family.”

The man glared at him before stumping into the cottage, shouting for his wife.

With the extra money burning a hole in his satchel, John walked onto the next toft to repeat the same stressful procedure. It was getting dark and coming on to rain. He would have to leave the outlying cottages at Red Wells down on the boundary with Withcall and those up at Lambecotes, where the shepherds were attending to their pregnant ewes, until tomorrow. Then there was the small hamlet down at Welton Springs to visit. He was going to be hard pressed to get the task completed before his deadline. All together, he had the money from 60 taxable people to collect. His only consolation was that he had far less work than Richard in Elkington, who had to gather the tax from 132 unwilling parishioners.

Fortunately, John Sherif did complete his collection in time. However, he was not quite done, because he then had to deliver the money from Welton to the commissioner for Louthesk West, John Dymmok, who was a member of one of the senior families in the county. So, for mutual protection, our Johanne Cheriff, Ricardus de Hakr, the collector for Elkington, and Willelmus de Ravendale, Constable of Kelstern and Calcethorpe, walked to Horncastle on the 16th April 1377 to hand their heavy satchels over to John Dymmok. Only then could they return home, no doubt after quenching their thirst in the town, with a drink or two, or maybe three, their unpleasant task finally completed.

Sources: G. Platts, 1985, *Land and People in Medieval Lincolnshire*, p306
C.C. Fenwick (ed), 1998, *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381*, part 1, xiv and part 2, pp48-9