

John Sheriff of Welton, Freeman and Gentleman of the Jury

Researched by Christopher North

John Sheriff was the Constable of Welton le Wold in 1377 [see this website article, *John Sheriff, Constable, 1377*]. His election was not a random act by the members of the parish meeting. John must have been a man of economic standing and a figure of respect for him to be selected for such a position. Interestingly, a further pair of historical sources survive concerning him beyond the references to him in the Poll Tax records.

In the Public Record Office ^[1] there is a short list of four Freemen of North Ormsby priory. They were not monks or priests but civilians who had made a commitment to support the priory. This religious house, set up in the mid 12th Century less than 4 miles to the NE of Welton, was one of several Gilbertine nunneries that existed in the county. This was the only English monastic order ever established. It was started in Lincolnshire by Gilbert of Sempringham [later St Gilbert] for women who wanted to dedicate their lives to God and for parents who wanted to use their daughters for their mutual spiritual benefit. At each nunnery the religious women were 'directed' by a small group of male canons and a prior, who dealt with the outside world on their behalf. This special arrangement was known as a 'double house', having both men and women living on the same monastic site, though rarely meeting. The nunnery of North Ormsby or Nun Ormsby was the patron of the church in Welton, having the power at this time to nominate the priest whenever there was a vacancy. Their influence on the parish was thus quite noticeable.

None of the Gilbertine houses were particularly wealthy, though they were well supported by the ordinary good folk of Lincolnshire. Their main source of income was wool production, which was undertaken by lay brothers. These were usually of *villein* stock, semi-free peasant farmers, though some of them were also very skilful as carpenters, builders and herdsman. In addition, some freemen, from those of higher status who could dispose of their property and lands as they chose without the interference of any master, chose to make an allegiance to a particular priory. They promised that if they decided to give any of their land or goods away to a religious house for the benefit of their soul, the grant would be to this particular one and nowhere else. They could not afford to be patrons by giving huge amounts of money or lands to the priory, but became supporters of 'their house' and always acted in its interest. Their dedication was in the tradition of the pre-Conquest *sokemen* choosing their lord, who in turn provided them with protection and associated social standing. The priory then became their 'lord'.

John Sheriff was one of the men on the North Ormsby list, along with John Smyth, John son of Odo and Robert, son of Eleanor. Very little is known of these other three, though John Smyth is probably the John Smyth who acquired the outlying farmstead at Acthorpe within South Elkington by marriage in 1376 ^[2]. It is quite likely that he was the one who started the Smyth dynasty that had such a strong influence over Elkington for the next 500 years. Who Eleanor, mother of Robert, was is unknown, but she must have been a woman of some substance and thus a local power in Welton. Men were usually known by association with their father's name, like John son of Odo, not their mother. She must have been a widow ever since her son was very small and they had been known always as a family unit. These freemen and Eleanor would all be of high standing and privilege in the community of Welton.

One of the advantages of becoming a freeman of a religious house was that when he or one of his immediate family died, they could be buried in the consecrated ground of the monastery, thus gaining a spiritual benefit. Furthermore, there were additional temporal benefits, because whatever freedoms of tolls North Ormsby priory had, its freemen also had. It is not known what these four men did for a living, but it is most likely that they were merchants. If so, they would be able to trade

in various towns and even export goods without having to pay the numerous taxes that were normally required. This would have given them a great advantage over other merchants who were not similarly exempt.

John Sheriff's link to a religious house would have further added to his social status. Indeed he was regarded as reliable enough to be included in a group of local jurymen called together to appraise a serious problem in late 1375 ^[3]. John Tasker of North Ormsby had been accused of murder. The jurors had to decide whether he should be presented to the King's Bench on the charge of felonious killing. There was no issue whether John Tasker had killed Robert, son of Thomas de Kelum, or not, but had it been murder? This jury concluded that there was indeed a case to be answered. As a result, John was transported to London where he was incarcerated for several months in the Marshalsea prison in Southwark, that had only been opened 2 years before. It did not yet have the notorious reputation ^[4] that it acquired later in its use.

His trial was held at Westminster over Easter 1376. The Lincolnshire jurymen were not involved in this, for the new jury was made up of London merchants. No judgement was recorded in these papers, but John Tasker was not given his freedom. The fact that he was not executed either indicates that this was not a simple case of murder. No-one could firmly decide. The incident had a final good outcome, because John was given a royal pardon on 3rd February 1377 by Edward III ^[5]. Forgiveness overcame the usual desire for retribution.

Nothing more has been found about John Sheriff, but members of the Sheriff family were recorded as living and working in Caistor in the 17th Century. It is such an unusual surname that these people must be descended either directly or indirectly from our man in Welton le Wold.

- Sources:
- 1 Public Record Office, E 135/3/9
 - 2 Rev. A.R. Maddison, *Lincolnshire Wills*, part 1, xxxiv
 - 3 R. Sillem [ed.], 1936, *Some Sessions of the Peace in Lincolnshire*, Lincoln Record Series vol. 30, p67
 - 4 Charles Dickens' father was sent there in 1824 for debt, forcing his son to leave school aged 12 and work in a boot-blackening factory. The novelist later used his familiarity with Marshalsea prison as a dark inspiration for the disturbing fate of several of his characters.
 - 5 R. Sillem, above, p127