

Chapter Nine : Ralph and the Reformation

Ralph, Religion and the State

Ralph was born three years after King Henry VIII declared himself Head of the Church in England. The most immediate, and highly visible, consequence was the disbandment of the monastic communities, the dispersal of their inhabitants, the sale of their assets and the destruction of their buildings. Doctrine only became more clearly Protestant under his son King Edward VI (1547-53) before returning to acceptance not only of Catholic doctrine but of papal supremacy under his half-sister Queen Mary (1553-58). The accession of her half-sister Elizabeth (1558-1603) brought the establishment of a more moderate organization, the Queen at its head, its doctrines set out in the Thirty-Nine Articles so worded as to leave some leeway for personal interpretation. The Elizabethan settlement was not entirely pleasing to either reformer or reactionary; its insistence on weekly attendance, backed up by a fine for absence, was hard to enforce but was used as a yardstick of loyalty.

It was inevitable that those with memories of the older ways might not easily conform; the extent to which a level of tolerance might be necessary was barely recognized. The idea that there could be those who saw no conflict between loyalty to the sovereign and discreet practice of the forbidden religion had yet to be grasped.

In the opening lines of his will Ralph declared that he had lived, and hoped to die, in the verities of the Catholic Church. Those words have shaped the later fashioning of his life. The idea that Ralph was firmly Catholic was first openly stated in 1913;¹ the evidence was thin. That opinion was followed first in an article of 1965, much of its information about Ralph without factual basis.² Catholic historiography of the 1970s represented him, without explanation, as a ‘staunch’ or ‘leading’ Catholic and as a recusant, a man who refused to attend church services or acknowledge the sovereign as the law required.³ Commonly repeated but not confirmed by State or local lists of those accused of recusancy, that opinion has only recently been re-examined.⁴ It is an assertion difficult to substantiate and contrary to his up-bringing. Nothing indicates persecution, harsh treatment or obstruction; Ralph paid recusancy fines for only three years as much because of government tightening up of control before the Armada rather than any connection to his own actions.

His earliest biographer, E. A. B. Barnard (1936),⁵ observed that Ralph’s upbringing was more Protestant than Catholic; both his father and grandfather made it clear that, tacitly at least, they supported King Henry VIII’s actions against the Papacy and, by extension,

¹ Wainwright, (ed), ‘Two lists of supposed adherents’, pp. 98-99.

² Minney, ‘The Sheldons of Beoley’, pp.1-17, trustworthy only for later family members; Davidson, (1968), pp. 1-7, more strongly with Thorpe in Hasler *House of Commons*, ‘Ralph Sheldon’, an entry with many inaccuracies.

³ Trimble, *The Catholic Laity*, at pp.105-06; Morey, *Catholic Subjects of Queen Elizabeth*; Sheldon was not mentioned by Bossy, *The English Catholic Community* or by Pritchard, *Catholic Loyalty*.

⁴ Turner, ‘Cloaked in conformity?’, pp. 562-584, [doi:10.1017/bch.2019](https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019).

⁵ Barnard, *The Sheldons*, p. 30.

against papal power in England. Ralph's marriage into a Catholic branch of the doctrinally divided family of Throckmorton was, however, in no way a strange arrangement in Tudor England; many parallels can be found. His father, William, was described in 1564 as being 'indifferent' in religion, meaning he was not strongly partisan;⁶ his funeral, led by a Herald, was both a statement of his own status and, the first in the family to claim the right to a coat of arms, a celebration of his achievement.⁷ It was also a way of avoiding doctrinal commitment and of masking religious indifference.

Clearly religion played an important part throughout Ralph's life, as much through his own actions as through the opinions and decisions of others. Religion was a much discussed topic amongst contemporaries; the Queen herself was ready to listen. A debate, organized in the University church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford in 1566 as part of the celebrations of her visit, was well attended; amongst its participants were many not yet finally decided on their doctrinal choices, but who would subsequently become fiercely Catholic.⁸ Amongst them were men later his friends; Ralph himself, like many as yet undecided others, may very well have been present.

Two years later the precariously balanced, carefully neutral but pro-Protestant religious Settlement of 1559 was challenged when the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots fled Scotland to take refuge in England. As a great grand-daughter of King Henry VII she was a potential claimant to the English throne; her coming changed the political scene.⁹ Her presence sparked a revolt in northern England headed by the earls of Cumberland and Northumberland, Catholic leaders of a pro-Catholic region.¹⁰ Yet Ralph's first public office was a place amongst the Worcestershire dignitaries ordered to raise troops to suppress the rebels late in 1570, making it unlikely that Ralph was acting as a courier for Mary Queen of Scots.¹¹ The government had more or less regained control when early in 1571 Pope Pius V issued the Bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, condemning Elizabeth as a bastard heretic to whom her subjects owed no allegiance. It never gained support, moral or military, from continental powers in particular France or Spain. In England, however, firstly it spurred the passage of anti-Catholic legislation through the House of Commons. Secondly, the Bull posed the question which confronted every English man thereafter; to whom would he give his loyalty – to a foreigner, the Pope, and the Catholic religion or to his Queen and the Church in England? Thirdly, it framed the question of how those who chose the former should be regarded.

⁶ Bateson, (ed). 'A Collection of Original Letters', pp. 4-7.

⁷ Illustrated and described *Vis Warwickshire* 1619, p. 2; College of Arms, London, MS Vincent 90, f. 209.

⁸ Kilroy, 'The Queen's Visit to Oxford in 1566', pp. 331-373.

⁹ Potentially also she might command continental support as the widow of the French king Francis II. By chance a Sheldon relative, Sir Francis Knollys, was her first gaoler.

¹⁰ Kesselring, *Rebellion in the North*.

¹¹ TNA SP 12/63, end page for the commission. A mistaken transcription makes it likely that Sir Thomas Gargrave referred to Mary's servitor William Skeldoun not to Sheldon as one of her couriers, *CSPD Addenda* 1566-1579, p. 236, no. 95, TNA SP 15/17 f.223, Feb 16 1570. Somerville, *Memorie of the Somervilles*, vol. I, pp. 423,439; *Cal Scottish Papers* vol 2, p. 469, no 747, p. 488, no 781, mention of James Lord Somerville; p.27, no. 38 Mary requests safe conduct for her servitor William Skeldoun in 1563; p.645, no.1053, to his son, May 1569; *ibid.*, vol 3, p. 604, no. 797.

In theory at least Ralph had to face that question of loyalties almost immediately, nominated as a JP in Worcestershire soon after his father's death and required by law as an office holder under the Crown to take the oath of allegiance.¹² The obligation was not rigidly enforced and on only on one occasion was Ralph's absence from the county on the relevant day noted, though there may have been others. His brother William was happy to swear; their brother in law Plowden had had no doubts that he must refuse.¹³ Others decided to leave England, either simply to live peacefully or to train as a priest in the seminary newly established in 1572 at Douai.



Late seventeenth century view of Douai, France, where the English-born William Allen founded a seminary for the training of priests. Source: *Receuil des plans des places du Royaume, divisées en provinces, faits en l'an 1693*, Volume 1 : plan n°20, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris and Wikimedia Commons

Ralph as a JP

As a JP Ralph was at the command of the privy council to execute their orders. Within the next three years he served on three important commissions. Each attempted to settle long running disputes in Warwickshire between his social equals some of whom happened also to

¹² BLib MS Egerton 2345, ff. 36v-37, *Liber pacis* Dec 1573-January 1574, though he is not listed in TNA SP 12/93/part ii, ff.29-29v; BLib MS Stowe 570 (?1575) f. 44 ink/48 pencil] noted as commonly resident in the hundred of Pershore; June 1575, TNA SP 12/104, f.69.

¹³ Parmiter, *Edmund Plowden*, pp.106-07.

be his relatives. The earliest centred on a false property sale to a Cecil associate by Ludovic Greville, related by marriage; the case occupied parliament, the judiciary and local and Westminster courts for nearly forty years and now fills two volumes in the State Paper series.¹⁴ Ralph and his father had both been involved, at least on the periphery, because the husband of Anne Savage, Ralph's sister's first husband, had life rented her the property in dispute, the manor of Aston sub-edge.¹⁵ Ralph and his Gloucestershire neighbour, Sir John Tracy of Toddington a client of the earl of Leicester, were ordered to settle a minor question of a bequest withheld; their decision was announced late in 1571.¹⁶ The next, two years later, focussed on misdoings of the Warwickshire JP Sir John Conwey of Arrow. His first concerned Conwey's illegal eviction of a widow from his property. He hoped to get a higher rent from a lease already arranged; Ralph had been amongst those who heard the depositions of witnesses almost two years before.¹⁷ Sir James Dyer, the Assize judge, ruled against Sir John, a decision unpopular with the local justices; Dyer wrote at length justifying his verdict.¹⁸ Simultaneously, another matter repeatedly engaged both Dyer and the privy council concerning the refusal of Warwickshire JPs to execute the council's orders to act against Conwey, one of their own, in a lengthy case concerning illegal enclosure of land possibly belonging to his neighbour, Lord Abergavenney, not himself.¹⁹ Some JPs had accepted bribes from the parties involved and were prepared to condone the protestors' behaviour; they even advised the rioters to act in pairs rather than as a large, single group! The clash came to a head at the Warwickshire Assizes in July 1574 when Chief Justice Dyer expressed his great disgust over their procrastination. The offended Justices complained to the Council and subsequently wrung an unwilling apology from him.²⁰ Meanwhile two Worcestershire JPs, Ralph and Sir John Lyttleton, and two former Warwickshire members of the bench, the ousted Sir Robert Throckmorton and Sir John Hubaud, were instructed to mediate between landlords and tenants.²¹ Ralph might have no official part to play in Warwickshire politics but he was not without influence, a useful tool for the privy council in their struggle to control local administration.

Ralph and the Catholic faith

Nevertheless, even as he carried out the orders of the privy council, several of the friends with whom Ralph is known to have kept company throughout the 1570s, as well as members of his family, were at the very least Catholic sympathizers. Amongst them was the Vice President of the Council in Wales, Sir John Throckmorton of Feckenham, Ralph's wife's uncle and father to two traitor sons, Francis who was executed after the plots of 1583 and

¹⁴ TNA SP 12/78, f. 79; the problems passed to the next generation, continuing into the next century, *CSPD 1603-10*, 234, 268, 288, 301.

¹⁵ TNA PROB 11/40/349, 1555.

¹⁶ *CSPD 1547-1580*, p. 458, no 3; SP 12/91, f.5; Gloucestershire Archives D5626/1/2[1571] offers further complications.

¹⁷ TNA REQ 2/131/17, some 35 sheets in all.

¹⁸ Dyer, *Lost Notebooks*, vol. 118 (ii).

¹⁹ TNA STAC 7/11/15, sheet two; STAC 5/C10/3. This episode is omitted from Enis, 'Justices'.

²⁰ *APC 8 1571-75*, p. 320.

²¹ *APC 8 1571-75*, p.313 15 Nov 1574; *VCH Worcestershire 3*, pp. 418-430 for Throckmorton.

Thomas who went abroad and died in 1595.²² The Council's President, albeit often absent because of duties in Ireland, was Sir Henry Sydney, one of several office-holders who did not strictly enforce laws against Catholics.²³ Married to the sister of the earls of Leicester and of Warwick²⁴ and former guardian of Margaret Whorwood, Ralph's step-sister, he addressed a letter to William Cecil during a brief stay at Weston.²⁵ Two other still Catholic families with members who had been in office under Queen Mary were also guests. Sir Thomas Cornwallis of Brome, Suffolk, arrived unexpectedly in 1582; the visit had unanticipated consequences.²⁶ John, the barely conforming head of the Petre family of Ingatestone, Essex, former landholders in south Warwickshire, and his family made an overnight stay at Beoley in July 1577 while on a round of West Midland visits.²⁷ One of his sisters, Thomasine, was married to Greville of Milcote, Ralph's cousin, and another, Katherine, to his friend John Talbot of Grafton near Bromsgrove. Ralph was amongst the godparents to their son born in 1572.²⁸ Both Ralph and his widowed sister Philippa Pollard earned a brief mention and thanks for money sent in correspondence between Gregory Martin and Edmund Campion which must imply acquaintance before the latter's decision to go abroad.²⁹ Yet, despite contacts unlikely to be secret, Ralph's twice widowed sister Anne (Daston) entertained the Queen at Elmley Castle in 1575 and Ralph next year served as sheriff.

Almost certainly Ralph, or at least his family, were amongst those who knew and were known by the Marian priests – the rectors or vicars ordained before or during Queen Mary's reign who declined to accept the Elizabethan Church. Two former monks from Bordesley, Richard Whittington and then Richard Malbon had served as priests at Beoley.³⁰ Others flitted through the countryside; the colourful James Lessman, former rector of Tardebig, walked the lanes in vibrant clothing.³¹ Another, the elderly John Felton, was sheltered by several Sheldon relatives and the Throckmorton's bailiff before he was summoned by Mrs Sheldon, knowing she was going against her son in law's wishes, to celebrate Mass at her daughter's home at Strensham in August 1582. Sir John's attempt to present both his wife and his mother in law as recusants failed, though he reported Felton to bishop Whitgift.³² The Marian priest Hugh Hall whose family lived at Idlicote was

²² *ODNB* sv Francis Throckmorton.

²³ Younger, 'How Protestant was the Elizabethan Regime?', pp. 1060- 92; [doi:10.1093/ehr/cey273](https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cey273)

²⁴ *ODNB*; Bindoff, Hasler, *House of Commons*. I have been unable to trace Philip Sydney's friendship with a Gregory Sheldon, noted by Brennan and Kinnamon.

²⁵ He addressed a letter to William Cecil Lord from Weston, *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland, Tudor Period*, Vol. 3, 1571-1575, 417, no. 82; original at TNA SP 63/42 f.86. As guardian *CSPD 1547-80*, p.41; an unsubstantiated suggestion in Bindoff *House of Commons* sv Whorwood suggests the wardship then passed to Sir Robert Throckmorton.

²⁶ The consequences are discussed in McGrath & Rowe, 'The Recusancy of Sir Thomas Cornwallis', pp. 225-263 at p. 245. The source is Hugh Hall's examination in 1583, TNA SP 12/164, f. 141, *CSPD 1581-90*, p. 142, no. 77.

²⁷ Edwards, *John Petre*, pp. 91-2.

²⁸ Burke, *A History of Roman Catholic families in England*, pp. 38-9, 50-1.

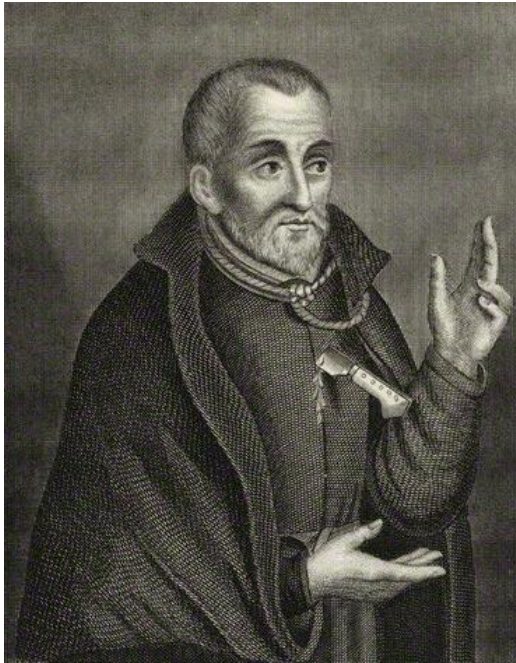
²⁹ Knox, ed. *The First and Second Diaries of the English College, Douay*, 308, 317; Jesuit Archive Farm Street London, Anglia A (A.III.i) Vol I, no. 6, Printed in Simpson, *Edmund Campion*, 131-32.

³⁰ CCEd Person ID: 83169; CCEd Person ID: 66546.

³¹ *CSPD 1581-90*, p. 66, no. 9, 10 August 1582.

³² In their law suit in 1585 Ralph dismissed Russell's attempt to indict his daughter and his wife, TNA STAC 5/R41/32; Felton's confession, *CSPD 1581-90*, p.79, no.29, SP 12/156, ff.46-48v is reprinted in Hodgetts,

questioned in December 1583 as a potential abettor of John Somerville's impulsive intention to assassinate Queen Elizabeth against a wider background French plotting on behalf of Mary Queen of Scots.³³ He stated that from the late 1560s four Worcestershire landowners including Sheldon had sheltered him in turn; at two houses he had been in the guise of a gardener.³⁴ Trying to support his hosts he declared all were 'true with refusall of her majesties name', an attempt to clear them of suspicion of any part in the recent plotting.³⁵ No independent evidence substantiates his statement, always employed to show Ralph as a Catholic supporter but forgetting his Catholic wife might want Hall's presence.



Father Edmund Campion, one of the two missionaries chosen to return to England in 1580. National Portrait Gallery, London, and Wikimedia Commons

Increasing external threats, growing pressures from Puritan sympathizers and the declaration of a Cornish Catholic priest that he would take up arms against his sovereign in the event of invasion by foreign forces, prompted the privy council to order every bishop to return a list of Catholics in their diocese to the Council within a week in October 1577.³⁶ Virtually a census, it was the first attempt to count Catholic numbers and at 'profiling' their social background. Yet the bishops were not united in judging there to be a serious threat and the demand met a mixed response, the names too hastily gathered. Ralph's name was omitted from the list sent in by officials of the see of Worcester, an accident later remedied.³⁷ Against these mounting tensions the Pope, persuaded by members of the Jesuit Order, decided to send a mission to England, the terms of *Regnans* relaxed to permit Catholics to obey the Queen in civil

matters. Its activities were limited to offering comfort to co-religionists and strict, scarcely workable, orders were given to operate without touching on politics.³⁸ Two English-born

'Elizabethan Recusancy in Worcestershire', in part II, vol 3, pp.81-91 at pp. 89-90 from the transcription by Mrs Veronica Webster, *Worcestershire Recusant*, vol 1, April 1963. A wider context for these events is described by Parry, 'Catholicism and Tyranny in Shakespeare's Warwickshire' pp. 121-138.

³³ *CSPD 1581-1590*, p.142, TNA SP 12/164/77, f. 141-141v, Dec 31st 1583; Hall did not specify in which of Ralph's houses he stayed. Often said to have been a monk at Bordesley its pension book does not substantiate this; the misinformation originates with Dickins *1000 Years in Tardebigge*, p.41, repeated by Minney, *Sheldons*, p. 4. He cannot be the Hugh Hall ordained in 1580, *Douai Diaries*, p.10

³⁴ With John Talbot of Grafton near Bromsgrove, Humphreys, 'The Elizabethan Estate Book of Grafton Manor', pp. 54, 57,66, 69, later with the Arden family at Park Hall, SP 12/163, ff. 174-5; *CSPD 1581-90*, p. 130, nos. 69,70, 71. Sheltered also by the Lords Windsor and Sir John Throckmorton. Glynn Parry, 'Catholicism and Tyranny in Shakespeare's Warwickshire', in ed. R Malcolm Smuts, *The Oxford Handbook of the Age of Shakespeare*, pp. 121-138.

³⁵ Hall's role in the plots of 1583 has not yet been fully studied; his personal life has been examined by Cogan, 'Gardens, Religion and Clerical By-Employments...', pp. 32-65.

³⁶ TNA SP 12/118/11; Ryan, 'Diocesan Returns of Recusants for England and Wales 1577', pp. 1-108, esp. pp. 63-66; Lake, 'A tale of two Episcopal surveys', pp. 129-162.

³⁷ *CSPD 1547-1580*, p. 564, no. 1; TNA SP 12/118 f.21-21v, Nov. 5 1577.

³⁸ Marshall, *Heretics and Believers*, pp. 529-30.

Jesuit priests, both converts, Robert Persons and Edmund Campion, had arrived separately by late June 1580 to a warm and well managed welcome, which Ralph may have played a part in organizing alongside Thomas, 4th Lord Paget. Eight weeks later Ralph, like forty or so others, had been summoned to London suspected of Catholic sympathies and therefore of potential disloyalty.³⁹ He was questioned first by bishop Aylmer of London and incarcerated in the Marshalsea prison where he remained for two months. Questioned again, by bishop Whitgift of Worcester late in October, Ralph admitted that he had not attended church for ten years.⁴⁰ His wife submitted a possibly specious plea to the privy council for his release on grounds that ill-health threatened his life; a temporary malaise is plausible but otherwise her appeal is somewhat at odds with Ralph's stamina in the saddle and might be no more than a diplomatic excuse. Nevertheless, he was transferred to the custody of the Dean of Westminster, effectively house arrest, under the care of Mistress Anne and surgeons when needed and permitted to walk in the gardens.⁴¹ A Catholic priest reported rumours that he and Lord Paget were wavering, influenced by a 'certain peevish book', which argued that a Catholic might attend parish services without committing any great sin.⁴² Early in 1581 Ralph stood before a scantily attended privy council to swear allegiance to the Queen; he also undertook to attend church.⁴³ Paget was made to attend service in St Paul's.⁴⁴ Few locals believed his sincerity; certainly Ralph could not have entirely ignored the question of loyalty until then.

Two years later widespread unrest swept across Warwickshire following an abortive attempt to assassinate the Queen made by Warwickshire-born John Somerville; Ralph had had brief dealings with his father five years previously.⁴⁵ Members of the Arden family into which Somerville was married were arrested on charges of intended treason. Simultaneously members of the Throckmorton family were suspected of involvement in plots with the French to aid Mary Queen of Scots. The two latter were related to Ralph by marriage, yet the turmoil left him untouched.⁴⁶ He was not questioned nor even considered to be under suspicion though rumour spread that he had fled abroad.⁴⁷ No links to any plots have been found and direct participation, on this or any other occasion, remains unproven.

³⁹ *APC 12 1580-81*, pp. 156, 166 and following pages.

⁴⁰ Lambeth Palace, Carte Antique A IV no. 183, printed in Gilbert, 'Catholics in the diocese of Worcester 1580-81,' pp.19-27; Turner, 'Cloaked in conformity?', pp. 562-584.

⁴¹ *APC 12 1580-81*, p. 254-55. Mrs Anne was therefore effectively also under house arrest.

⁴² The single surviving text is endorsed in Cecil's hand as 'Sheldon's persuasion', *CSPD 1547-80*, p. 691, no. 69, Dec 31 1580; SP 12/144/ff. 137-142, part printed by Miola, *Early Modern Catholicism; an anthology of primary sources*, pp.71-75; in full in Crosignani et al, *Recusancy and conformity*, paras 19, 23. An interpretation is offered by Holmes, *Resistance and Compromise*, pp. 90-4.

⁴³ *APC 12 1580-81*, p. 301-02.

⁴⁴ *CSPD 1581-90*, p. 1, no.5; SP 12/147, ff.7-7v.

⁴⁵ Stopes, *Shakespeare's Warwickshire Contemporaries*, 1st edition, p. 40, recites an indenture recorded in the Inquisition post-mortem of his father, also John Somerville, TNA C 142/183/104 (1578) made to preserve his lands to his son's use. Many years later Sheldon terminated a loan he had had with Somerville – 1609 TNA E 401/ 2415, Bowyer, *Fines and Compositions*, though named as Robert Sheldon.

⁴⁶ Enis, 'Edward Arden', pp. 170-210.

⁴⁷ *CSPD 1581-90*, p. 154, no. 35(ii), 20 Jan 1584; TNA SP 12/167, ff.93-94, quoted by Stopes, *Shakespeare's Warwickshire Contemporaries*, p. 73.

Following the assassination of the Protestant leader of the Dutch provinces in July 1584 further measures to protect the Queen were enacted in parliament, playing on and ratcheting up distrust of Catholics. Soon afterwards a Bond of Association was formed, its signatories swearing to protect the Queen and to kill Catholics, not far short of legitimized vigilantism.⁴⁸ The formation of the Bond marks the start of increasing pressure on Sheldon. It was against this stormy background that in April 1585 his son in law, Sir John Russell of Strensham now formally separated from his former wife Sheldon's eldest daughter, was given leave from the House of Commons 'to pursue his great matter', an attack on Sheldon in Star Chamber.⁴⁹

Aiming to denigrate his father in law Russell tabled questions focussed first on Sheldon's performance as a JP and sheriff before passing to Ralph's personal religious position and practice. He asked if Sheldon, when a JP, had taken measures to arrest priests, to bring to court or condemn anyone who refused to attend church services (a recusant). <https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/Russell-Charges1585.pdf>. He inquired about religious observance in Sheldon's household; did Sheldon attend church services or did he and his household attend service only in the household chapel – as he was entitled to do. Did they receive Communion? Very directly, he asked whether Sheldon had helped any recusant or any disliking the religion now established within this realm and whether religion was the chief reason Sheldon disliked John Russell. If not, he added, what was the chief reason?

Finally, trying to show himself a model subject, he accused Sheldon of having taken the Oath of Supremacy in 1581 only as a means to achieve release from prison:

'Have you, since you took the Oath of Supremacy, said or affirmed you were the same man you were before and that you took it only for manners' sake and for saving that you had?'

Ralph met Russell's allegation head on, turning it against his accuser, replying that he thought these were matters beyond the court's competence. The court, members of the privy council and the judiciary meeting under the star-spangled ceiling of a building fronting the Thames, seems to have agreed; the outcome has gone unrecorded.

Russell had turned what should have remained no more than a private quarrel and incidents of reciprocal violence into a frontal attack on his father in law's conduct in county administration. Composed to discredit him and bring him into disrepute, the comprehensive, acrimonious questions were harsh and damaging. The episode looks very like trouble deliberately fomented; just possibly the disagreements were being used by someone much higher in the social scale to manipulate Russell into confrontation for other ends. The episode is comparable in its flimsy, though heart-felt, basis to the earl of Leicester's hounding of the Arden family in Warwickshire the previous year, designed to destroy their local influence.

⁴⁸ Cressy, 'Binding the nation...', pp. 217-236.

⁴⁹ BLib. Ms Lansdowne 43, anon journal, f.171.

Feeling seems to have run against Russell. The result, intended or engineered, was that the troublesome Sir John left England to fight abroad.

Locally, however, Ralph's undertaking five years previously to attend services cut no ice. Mistrust, even animosity, had been building up particularly in Worcestershire. Thomas Morley, a clothier living some six miles north of Worcester, informed against Sheldon late in 1586. He wrote to Sir Francis Walsingham, the Queen's spymaster, commenting on the undue influence Sheldon and his friends exercised in the county and of the encouragement they gave lesser men aspiring to office the writer considered they did not deserve.⁵⁰ His remarks were aimed directly at William Childe, Sheldon's lawyer, then a candidate for the post of sheriff.

'two of the gentlemen now in election for the sheriff in the county of Worcester are reputed Papists viz William Sheldon and William Childe already are also in great kindred, affinitie and alliance to friends of that countrey and of the better sorte for hability being known favorers of the Romish religion. William Sheldon is brother unto Raffe Sheldon of Beoley esquire and allyed to the Throckmortons. Childe is a man raysed from poor and meane estate by Mr Sheldon's father and has good gotten without trying and very hard opinion in the country. All which I thought good to signifye unto your honour for the better furtherance of justice in these partes

The denunciation was almost certainly was provoked by, and despatched after, the news of that Ralph had arranged the arrest of the parish priest at Tredington, his own nominee, on 28 October 1586.⁵¹ Whether Walsingham's letter which summoned Ralph to appear before the Council in London at short notice in mid-June 1587 was a long-delayed response is not clear; exactly what transpired before the council is not recorded.⁵²

1587 Worcester Assizes : Ralph's condemnation as a recusant

The Assizes, courts held in the county towns where judges appointed by the Crown presided over the hearing of cases on local matters, were always a special occasion. Held twice each year, pairs of judges travelled a prescribed circuit through a group of counties on a timetable (*sic!*). Their coming was a signal for county society, as well as JPs, officials, plaintiffs, defendants and their lawyers, to gather in the county town.

Possibly as early as May 1587 Ralph would have known that a charge of being amongst those who did not attend service at his parish church as the law required had been laid against him. It would be heard at the Assizes in September, where the sovereign's judges presided. His case, and those of some thirty others, would be put to the thirty or so strong grand jury, its jurors drawn from a wide range of people, all freeholders chosen from the middle ranks of the county's inhabitants.⁵³ What he did not know then was that the hearing would be conducted under the stronger legislation passed only in May.⁵⁴ It was the first

⁵⁰ *CSPD 1581–1590*, p. 369, no. 35; TNA SP 12/195 f.58. Morley, "The Origins of the Morleys in England and their Early Appearance in Wales," pp. 1–61.

⁵¹ TNA STAC 5/H31/35, sheet six, Answer of Ralph Sheldon, February 1587; see also Chapter Ten.

⁵² CR 2632, ff.74, 76; *APC 15 1587-88*, p. 137, 23 June 1587.

⁵³ Cockburn, *A History of English Assizes*, p. 204.

⁵⁴ *Statutes*, 29 Eliz I c.6.

occasion in the city when the verdict on potential recusants would be assessed and pronounced by royal justices instead of by local JPs; the jurors were still local men. The Act's aim was to circumvent leniency springing from local interests and influence on the outcome. Ralph still had some advantages. He was already known to both judges, Sir Roger Manwood, chief baron of the Exchequer, and Sir Francis Wyndham, having appeared before them the previous summer to launch charges against the men involved in the affray at Tredington.⁵⁵



View of Worcester; the castle where the courts were held lay on the far bank between the C18 bridge and the Cathedral. © Hilary L Turner

Two documents record the trial. In an oblique reference the account book reveals that Sheldon tipped the criers of both judges, presumably just before they walked through the city announcing Assize business. It also shows that Ralph did not attend alone; several henchmen and a team of named lawyers who had already acted for him in Westminster courts and were already familiar with their client's affairs were paid to be in the city, whether on this or other business is not known. A friend and former sheriff, Gilbert Lyttleton, was also present; intriguingly, so too was Richard Hyckes, still the titular head of the Queen's team of arras menders, 'in charge of the witnesses'. Without a direct role in the events, they were there to represent a show of strength.⁵⁶

The second, fuller source of information is an anonymous account of the proceedings, lacking a recipient's name or address, now lodged in the State Papers, sent, presumably, to someone high in authority.⁵⁷ <https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/1587-Conviction-text.pdf>. It tells how the jurors, having without difficulty sentenced the other men accused, were reluctant to convict Sheldon. They made an unusual request. Men from his

⁵⁵ See Chapter Ten

⁵⁶ CR 2632, ff. 96-97.

⁵⁷ CSPD 1581-90, p.449, no. 83; SP 12/206/, f.175, undated; the reference has been omitted from Turner 'Cloaked in conformity', n. 63, p. 571.

household were present, they said; though not of the jury, might they be allowed to speak. Justice Manwood, Lord Chief Baron, granted permission despite the irregularity.

Three people spoke up on Ralph's behalf, but each individual's information stopped short of proving that Ralph was accustomed to attend church services and none of it was sufficiently recent to demonstrate Ralph's steady presence at church with any credibility. A quiet word exchanged between the retiring sheriff William Childe, Sheldon's lawyer, and Justice Manwood did no good. Though Manwood, who appears to have presided alone over the sessions, had condoned highly irregular proceedings, exasperation with the jurors' delaying tactics finally led him to threaten to investigate for himself. The jury caved in and Manwood secured Ralph's conviction. It made Ralph liable to pay the fine of £20 per lunar month, £260 a year; if he became a long term defaulter, he would lose his lands.

Who then wrote this unsigned account and why? One strong possibility is that it was one of the two justices, both of whom had previously faced accusations of bias, for example from the townsmen of Hereford in 1581 when none of those convicted had been condemned; on previous occasions Manwood was known to have favoured his Catholic hosts by appointing them JPs and Wyndham had recently caused offence in Norwich.⁵⁸ Had they anticipated the need to defend themselves against similar allegations? Had an explanation been required of them? Or did William Childe or John Boulton make an attempt to defend their master? Could it even be Ralph himself?

A bare three months later Ralph lost his office as JP, removed from the bench on the grounds that his wife was a recusant.⁵⁹ But he paid fines for only three years;⁶⁰ probably because by then there was no need his name was not transferred to the newly instituted recording system, the Recusant Rolls, introduced at Michaelmas 1592.⁶¹ According to later evidence from an Oxford resident in Ralph's service Ralph had invoked the help of the Lord Chancellor Hatton for his conviction to be quashed; presumably he had, for a second time, undertaken to conform.⁶² The stigma was removed, but Ralph never regained his JP status.

Ralph's Local Network

Unsurprisingly some specifically Catholic contacts can be identified amongst Ralph's local acquaintance, most immediately the Bishop family of Brailes and Wolford. John Bishop's mother was, according to a later Visitation, a member of the Willington family.⁶³ Barnaby,

⁵⁸ Cockburn, *English Assizes*, pp. 208, 209, 211; McClendon, *The Quiet Reformation*, pp. 238-9

⁵⁹ Strype, *Annals of the Reformation*, London, in the 1725-28 edition, vol 3, part ii, p. 455, item no 24.

⁶⁰ His first payment was 16 Dec 1587, CR 2632, ff. 148; May 1588, 183, 185; payments were entered on the pell rolls, TNA E 401/1842-48 and on the Pipe Rolls. The fines were levied retrospectively for the year Sept 1586-Oct 1587, in full for 1587-88 and 1588-89 but recorded as a debt in 1589-90. TNA E 372/ 432-35; printed Bowler and McCann, *Recusants in the Exchequer Pipe Rolls 1581-1592*, p.152.

⁶¹ No entries in Calthorp, CRS, vol. 18, 1916 or Bowler, CRS, vol. 57, 1965 CRS, vol. 61, 1970.

⁶² CSPD 1591-1594, p. 545, no. 92; TNA SP 12/249 f.152-154v, esp. f. 152v; see Chapter Thirteen.

⁶³ *Vis'n Warwickshire 1682-83*, 87.

their son, married Jane, grand-daughter of Baldwin of Broadway, Ralph's uncle;⁶⁴ Barnaby's brother was William, a seminary priest (one trained abroad), later the first Catholic bishop in England since the Reformation with the title bishop of Chalcedon. Captured returning to England in February 1581 he had been sent to the Marshalsea prison; freed, he again went overseas, returning by 1592 to be named, with his brother, in that year's survey of Warwickshire recusants.⁶⁵ He was reported in 1594, possibly inaccurately, as a celebrant of mass at Weston.⁶⁶ Ralph was said also to have taken his turn to shelter the priest Hugh Hall of Idlicote, also familiar with the means to travel overseas, spotted by a government agent at Rouen in 1581.⁶⁷ Antony Skinner of Shelfield, Warwickshire, an Oxford student and later a companion of Francis Plowden, Ralph's nephew, had also gone overseas.⁶⁸ The Foskewe (Fortescue) family at Inkberrow, with whom Ralph several times broke his journeys, would later employ a school teacher, David Baker, suspected by the authorities of being a priest.⁶⁹ Close by at Throckmorton, the Throckmortons' bailiff Reginald Williams, had been accused of recusancy in 1577, but had decided to conform, sufficiently at least to persuade the authorities, by 1586; relations remained close enough for Ralph to act as his executor.⁷⁰ Further away but also visited were the homes of Thomas Throckmorton of Coughton, Ralph's brother in law, and John Talbot of Grafton, both known recusants, their fines on record and mounting up from 1581 onwards.⁷¹

Sheldon as a Church Papist

These were men far more clearly active Catholics than Ralph. His twice-taken decision to conform was possibly a matter of expediency in circumstances which Ralph did not view in black and white; loyalty to the person of the Queen did not involve denying Christian beliefs or the principles common to both the Catholic and the Protestant interpretation of faith. He might be devious by nature but he was not disloyal and stayed clear of all the many plots, several planned by relatives. Contact even with his brother in law Sir Thomas Tresham whose faith was expressed very visibly through his pen and on his buildings is unknown.⁷² Question marks against Ralph's name however were not entirely unjustified and the suspicions that had accumulated round his name by September 1587 had their origins in his own actions. The same misgivings were still strong in 1594 when he was alleged to be

⁶⁴ *Vis'n Worcestershire 1634*, p. 91; she was daughter of Nicholas Lewkenor and Jane, daughter of Anthony Sheldon of Broadway.

⁶⁵ TNA SP 12/243, no.76, ff.235-248, transcribed Hodgetts in *Worcestershire Recusant*, vol 5, May 1965, pp.18-30, continued in vol.6, December 1968, pp.7-20.

⁶⁶ *CSPD 1591-1594*, p. 541-2, no. 72, copy no. 73; SP 12/249, f.122, f.124.

⁶⁷ TNA SP 12/164, f. 141, *CSPD 1581-90*, p. 142, no. 77.; BL MS Cotton Caligula C VIII f. 204r - 206v, printed in full by Bossy, *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy Affair*, pp. 206-08, now on-line.

⁶⁸ Questioned, *APC 22 1591-92*, pp. 130-31.

⁶⁹ Woodward, (ed.), *That Mysterious Man*.

⁷⁰ *CSPD 1581-90*, p.332, no. 11. WAAS, Wills, Reynold Williams, 1597/168.

⁷¹ Bowler and McCann, *Recusants in the Exchequer Pipe Rolls*.

⁷² Kilroy, 'Sir Thomas Tresham: His Emblem', pp. 149-179; Fairey, 'Tres testimonivm dant: Resurrecting the Hawkfield Lodge at Rushton as Part of Sir Thomas Tresham's Architectural Testament', pp. 55-82.

involved in potential treachery. This time conformity acted in his favour; it was particularly noted that ‘he cometh to church’.⁷³

Contemporaries might have recognized him as a Church Papist, the term Elizabethans, aware of larger difficulties, used to describe those prepared to attend the new services in church while not concealing their preferred allegiance.⁷⁴ First found in 1582, the epithet was not a compliment but a term of abuse. Its target was a member of a despised, distrusted Church, using their presence in their parish church to retain respectability and possibly to cloak any untoward activities which might be indulged. Applied to any who were not committed, actively fighting Catholics, (for example the returning exile priests), their identity has been lost in the later black and white presentation of English Catholic history, restored only because the view of the Reformation as an easily achieved and welcome objective has only recently been challenged.⁷⁵ That a body of unconvinced ‘Protestants’ should emerge is scarcely surprising. Their rediscovery represents the story of ‘how a constitutional decision was translated into local, psychological reality’.⁷⁶

Remarkably, it remained possible for such a man to play a role in the Protestant church.

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⁷³ *CSPD 1591-1594*, p. 554, no 1, SP 12/250, f.1. The printed version abbreviates and omits material, see Turner, ‘Cloaked in conformity?’, and Chapter 14.

⁷⁴ Turner, ‘Cloaked in conformity?’, pp. 562-584.

⁷⁵ Haigh, *English reformation: religion, politics, and society under the Tudors*.

⁷⁶ Walsham, *Church Papists*, p. 7.