

## **Russell's Allegations against Sheldon**

### **Sir John Russell's Allegations against Ralph Sheldon, 1585**

In the bitter and allegedly often violent personal battle between them, Russell aimed to undermine his father in law's position. Tabling very personal questions he focussed on Sheldon's performance as a JP before passing to Ralph's personal religious position and practice. Russell, as JP and sheriff (1577-78), had observed both at firsthand; he seems to have forgotten or ignored the fact that Sheldon had observed him. No ancillary records survive.

The arraignment was very public, heard by members of the privy council acting as judges; already familiar with Russell's quarrelsome nature and aware that he had disregarded an earlier summons they were perhaps less inclined to sympathize with him than Russell had anticipated.

The case was heard in the Court of Star Chamber held in the room constructed by King Henry VII in an already rambling palace, named from the gold stars which spangled the ceiling. By Elizabeth's reign it was used also as a council chamber when its long table was covered by a green table carpet exchanged for a red cover when the same people functioned as a court of justice. Its windows overlooked the river Thames, the members sitting either side a long table. The accused stood at the table's end by the door, the humblest position in the room, his face, head and shoulders clear in the light reflecting from the river and the sun in his eyes.

The interrogatories convey the ferocity of Sir John's allegations.<sup>1</sup> Some may have followed the wording of a government memorandum requiring assize judges to enquire how faithfully sheriffs and magistrates were carrying out their duties to suppress non-conformity; others were worded using the simpler expedient of turning the provisions of the Statute of 1581 into questions.<sup>2</sup>

#### **John Russell's Interrogatories to be put to Ralph Sheldon**

Whether you have at any time since you were JP in Worcestershire used any means to take or apprehend a seminary priest or other papistical priest<sup>3</sup> or person in the county of Worcester? Do you know any recusant?<sup>4</sup> Have you presented any recusant? Have you caused any recusant to be indicted?

Since you were a JP have you, your wife, children and household servants repaired to church where you dwell? Do you stay there for divine service? How often have these people received Holy Communion since then?<sup>5</sup> Have you, since you took the Oath of

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<sup>1</sup> TNA STAC 5/R12/34, interrogatories to Sheldon 27 April 1585.

<sup>2</sup> TNA SP 12/154/14; Cockburn, *A History of English Assizes from 1558-1714*, p. 209.

<sup>3</sup> A seminary priest had been trained in one of the newly established seminaries abroad, a papistical priest probably meant a priest ordained before 1558.

<sup>4</sup> A recusant is, in law, a man paying fines for refusal to attend his parish church.

<sup>5</sup> Reference to three of the provisions in the Elizabethan Settlement requiring attendance at church and receiving of Communion.

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the 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?<sup>6</sup>

Have you, your wife and the rest of your household repaired every Sabbath day or commonly on the Sabbath day to the church in time of prayer or have you had service at your house according to the order set down in the book of Common Prayer now established in the Church of England [ie since you submitted to the privy council]? Have you served Holy Communion four times in every year? How often have you received the same?

Have you proposed to separate Russell's wife from him because they differ in religion? Do you know that the principal cause of difference between them is that his wife did not subject herself to him in religion? Have you persuaded her? Have you helped any recusant or any disliking the religion now established within this realm?

Is not religion the chief reason you dislike John Russell? If not, what is the chief reason?

Fifteen subsequent questions turned to the parties' alleged armed attacks on each other.<sup>7</sup> Ralph had been a local official for more than twelve years and sheriff for one, 1576-77; Russell had followed him in office, an apparently ideal opportunity to know what had been happening. The least plausible, if most dramatic, allegation was that Sheldon had brought a retinue of 300 men to the Quarter Sessions. That either man, both JPs, both former sheriffs, could even contemplate doing this probably was surprising, but the Council, already familiar with slack and incompetent official conduct in JPs, even in sheriffs, were all too aware they had few means to counteract such situations. The assertion casts an unedifying light on the conduct of JPs, an echo of the troubles caused by the Warwickshire justices less than a decade before.

But, by suggesting that Sheldon remained a catholic and as such was a lax official not above breaking the law, Russell turned what should have remained no more than a private quarrel over reciprocal violence into a frontal attack on his father in law's conduct in county government.

Two charges, however, held serious danger. Firstly, by removing his daughter from her husband's house on grounds of differences in religion, Sheldon could be accused not only of sheltering a Catholic, but also of aiding and abetting, even of persuading her to remain one. Ralph could legitimately be accused of breaking the provisions of the Act of 1581 'to keep her majestie's subjects in their due obedience'.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, Sir John took the opportunity to inquire whether Sheldon was the same man as before his undertaking to attend church and remain loyal to his sovereign.

Ralph met the allegation head on, turning it against Russell.

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<sup>6</sup> Reference to Sheldon's undertakings before the privy council in January 1581, *APC 12 1580-81*, pp. 301-02.

<sup>7</sup> TNA STAC 5/R12/34, interrogatories, 27 April 1585. More details emerge from Sheldon's interrogatories to Russell, STAC 5/S15/38, undated but must be before July 1585.

<sup>8</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, vol iv, part I, pp. 657-58, 23 Eliz Cap.1.

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Touching the allegation that this defendant hath been vowed and addicted to papisticall religion and that he hath been a giver of countenance to recusants and known adversaries to religion established this defendant thinketh that to these and such like general and uncertayne slanders touching those or like matters he shall not be enforced to answer the like and therein doth refer himself to the consideration of this honourable court whether he shall be enforced to answer for that this defendant thinketh that the matters touching the same are such as this honourable court seldom or never heareth or determineth especially when the same is interlayered with private matters as in the same bill of complaint are impertinently asserted. Nevertheless for some declaration and satisfaction to this honourable court and those which shall see or hear this defendant's answer touching this defendant's duty and allegiance to the Queen's most excellent majesty this defendant sayeth that sithence this defendant did make his submission to the Lords of the most honourable Privy Council he this defendant hath in all things to his knowledge dutifully and most faithfully performed his duty and allegiance according to the said submission and in his conscience thinketh the same to be most well known to the complainant for that in the presence of the said complainant he the defendant hath dutifully accomplished the same.<sup>9</sup>

Sheldon added that he himself attended church; the marriage of his daughter had been solemnized according to the Anglican rites – it is the only one to be recorded in the Beoley registers – and she had attended prayers with her husband, whether within their household or in the parish church is unclear.

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<sup>9</sup> Sheldon's full answer is in TNA STAC 5/R41/32, 1585.