

The Necromancer of Coventry:

First account of a witchcraft trial for black magic in England, 1325

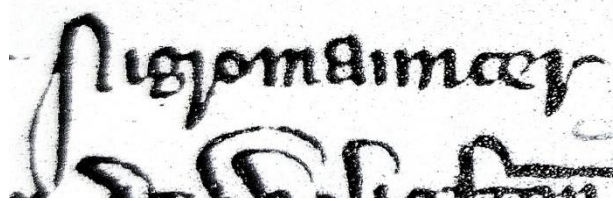


Image: 'nigromancer' from the 'witchcraft' document, 1325, PA2557/11 (copy at Coventry Archives) & KB 27/259 (TNA original)

The story involves a conspiracy of a number of the Priory of Coventry's tenants who disliked the Prior so much that they were prepared to risk the penalties for wizardry. Just to be clear, this tale has been told many times and my aim here is to promote Coventry Archives, as its new Archives Manager. Although the original 1325 document is held at the National Archives, we hold various material on this subject (see resources below).

Master John of Nottingham, a cleric and Necromancer and his assistant Robert Mareschal were paid £20 and £15 respectively by the conspirators, twenty-seven in number [see Burbidge]; Richard Latoner spoke for the Coventry men and stated that the men couldn't live any longer under the harsh conditions placed on them by the Prior. He complained that the town was being ruined by the Prior Henry Irreys and by further extension King Edward II himself and his favourites (hated by the country) Hugh Despenser and his son by the same name. Latoner then asked whether John of Nottingham would be able to dispense with these elites: i.e. kill them.

On Sunday after the agreement was made, March 11, part payment was made, and Robert Mareschal (the assistant) was given four lbs (pounds) of wax and two ells of canvas for materials. They made seven waxen images to represent:

King Edward II, Hugh the Despenser, his son Hugh, Prior Henry Irreys, his cellarer of the Priory (not sure of his name?); his steward Nicholas Crump and Robert Sowe (assistant to the prior in some way and more than probably, also hated!)

The necromancer John of Nottingham then began with the aid of Robert Mareschal to focus intent on the harming of Richard Sowe (as an experiment, being the last one on the list to have killed) and eventually led to inserting a lead pin into his wax effigy, two inches in the head and later in the heart, which allegedly led to his death!

Robert then got scared or had cold feet and confessed his guilt on the assumption he would be pardoned for exposing his master, John. The conspirator's names were given

and they also complied with the law on the assumption they would be released. The case was transferred to London and the document remains in the Court of King's Bench records at The National Archives, of which Coventry Archives has a copy. In summary, the trial never came about as John died in prison (probably murdered by the conspirators in order to remove any evidence produced against them). Robert was further kept in order to wait and decide what should be done about him; but we never actually find out what happened to the necromancer's assistant.

The offices involved in holding the accused in custody were the Sheriff of Warwickshire and his bailiwick: run by a privately appointed bailiff exercising the sheriff's functions; and the Marshal of the King's Bench.



Image: various sources concerning the witchcraft case at Coventry Archives

Resources:

Primary sources available at Coventry Archives:

PA2557/11 Photocopy of original "witchcraft case" document [KB 27/259]

CCE/18/1/1/47 The Coventry Conspiracy, recalls the story of the witchcraft case with a list of the conspirators.

Secondary Sources available at Coventry Archives:

Burbidge, F. Bliss Old Coventry and Lady Godiva by F. Bliss Burbidge, pp144-149

[The full list of the conspirator's names is provided on pp145]

Walters, Peter The Little History of Coventry, The History Press, 2019, pp45-46

Primary Sources held elsewhere:

KB 27/259 Original “witchcraft case” document held at The National Archives
[PA2557/11]

(Coram Rege Chief Justice's roll, venue: Westminster, 18 Edw II Hilary term.) King's Bench records.

Online Articles:

Riddell, William Renwick Trial for Witchcraft Six Hundred Years Ago, *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Volume 8, Issue 1, Article 16, 1917