

The Constable's role in early seventeenth century rural England

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Let me start by stating the obvious: village life in the early seventeenth century was very different to today. Villages were more independent than they are now – they had to be for a number of reasons. Firstly, poor transport meant that most food had to be locally grown. Secondly, there were no social services so villages had to look after their own. Thirdly, there was no police force so law and order was maintained by the village.

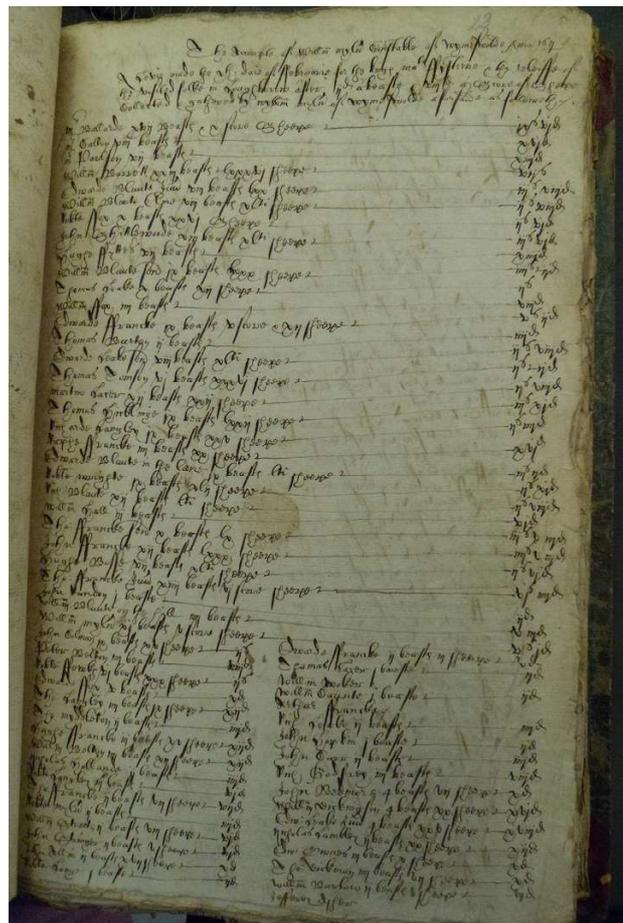
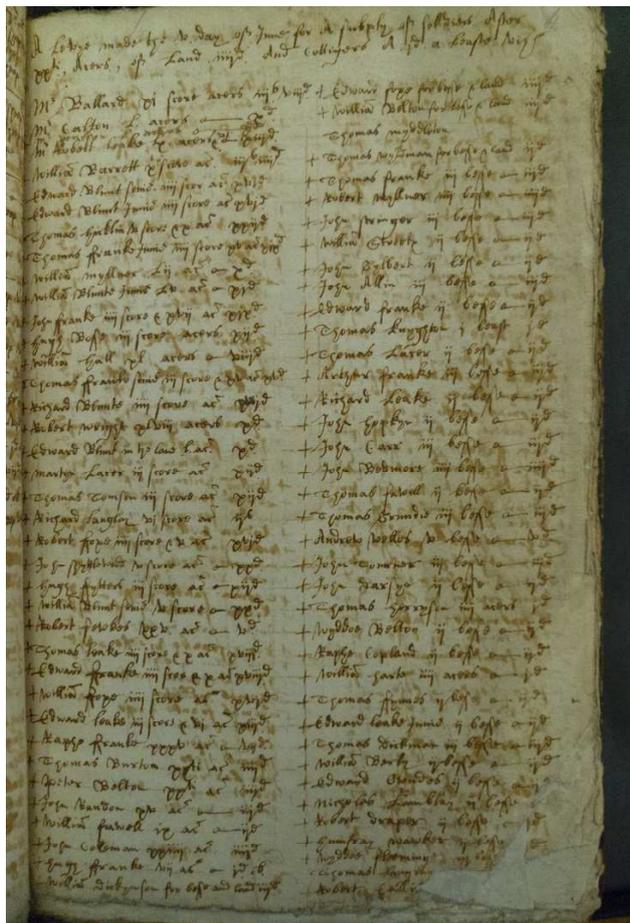
To have an ordered life in a village, certain people had to be nominated to be responsible for controlling the day-to-day aspects of village life. Every year, men would be selected by their peers to hold important roles in the village. These roles included the Constable, the Churchwardens and the Overseers of the Poor. The posts were unpaid and done in addition to the person's usual 'day job'. They were usually local tradesmen, artisans and farmers, which meant that communities were in effect governing themselves to a certain extent. These men would have been the wealthier men in the village, usually with at least a minimum level of literacy and numeracy. They served for one year, but the same group of men would also be used to fill the other roles, and so they would often serve a number of times. As part of their roles they were required to keep accurate accounts which were, from time to time, examined by their peers or superiors.

One of these nominated men, the Constable, had the role of maintaining law and order in the village and keeping the peace. He was often referred to as the 'Petty Constable' to differentiate himself from the two Head-, High- or Chief-Constables of the Hundred, to whom he reported.

The Constable's Accounts contain a wealth of information on daily village life. Wymeswold is one of the few villages in Leicestershire where the Constable's accounts are still available. The accounts for Wymeswold are held at the British Library, Add MS 10457, and they cover the years 1602–69. Constables' accounts from other villages are available at Leicestershire Records Office.

One advantage of the accounts for us today is that these lists provide an indicator of the wealth of the people from those times. Of note is that the Constable also had to pay. In 1608

the Constable was Thomas Frank Junior, and in 1611, William Mylner – both their names are on the lists.



The Constable's Accounts of 1608 and 1611 for Wymeswold.

Transcripts are at the end of this article.

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As well as maintaining law and order, the Constable was also responsible for raising money to be spent within the village. This money was needed for various reasons, such as giving aid to legitimate travellers (i.e. those in possession of passes); providing the money to send soldiers for training with the county's trained band; and for giving aid to those towns and villages, in the same county, struck down by the plague – 'the visited people', as they were known. He would have to raise money a number of times throughout his term of office. The method used in Wymeswold was levies, which were a form of a tax on land and/or animals. Usually he kept these charges to an absolute minimum: he had to have the agreement of those being taxed or levied, or they would not pay. The levies of 1608 and 1611 say why the

money was being raised:– one to pay for the costs of mustering their six trained soldiers and sending them to be trained and the other, money for the King’s household expenses and to pay towards the relief of the plague victims in Loughborough. There were other levies in the same year for other purposes.

The system used in Wymeswold meant that only those who could afford it were taxed. The Constable knew all these people and would have collected the money in person. He knew what each man or woman owned so no one could escape paying their fair share.

What else did the Constable have to raise money for? In the 1608 accounts, ‘other charges’ to the village included four quarterly payments of 4s 4d each for the county’s hospital and for maimed soldiers, and other payments would be to have the village weights and measures checked. 2d would also have been paid to each legitimate traveller passing through (provided they had a pass or passport).

One point here about the vital importance of travellers having a pass. If a traveller arrived without a pass the constable was expected to treat them – man, woman or child – as a vagrant. The law called for them to be whipped at the village’s whipping post, ‘until their back be bloody’, afterwards they would be given 2d and a pass and sent on their way. Many constables missed out the whipping for a simple reason, they usually had to pay someone to do it and pay for the pass to be written out; so to save money for their village, they usually did not carry out the actual whipping, but Wymeswold would have had a whipping post.

1608

A levy made the 5th day of June for a supply of soldiers, as per 20 acres of land, 4d and cottagers a penny for a beast.

Mr Ballarde	XI score acres	iiii ^s viii ^d
Mr Calton	L acres	x ^d
Mr Ponlro	L acres	x ^d
Mr Robett Leake	LX acres	xiii ^d
William Barrett	X score acres	iii ^s iiiii ^d
Edward Blunt senior	IIII score acres	xvi ^d
Edward Blunt junior	IIII score acres	xvi ^d
Thomas Hicklin	V score & X acres	xxii ^d
Thomas Franke, junior	IIII score & V acres	xix ^d
William Myllner	LII acres	x ^d
William Blunt, junior	LV acres	xi ^d
John Frank	IIII score & XVII acres	xix ^d

Hugh Bosse	III score acres	xii ^d
William Hall	XL acres	viii ^d
Thomas Frank, senior	III score & XV acres	xv ^d
Richard Blunte	IIII score acres	xvi ^d
Robert Wright	XLVIII acres	x ^d
Edward Blunt	in the lane L acres	x ^d
Martin Lacer	III score acres	xii ^d
Thomas Tomson	III score acres	xii ^d
Richard Langlay	VI score acres	ii ^s
Robert Foxe	IIII score & V acres	xvi ^d
John Shyttlewood	V score acres	xx ^d
Hugh Fytters	III score acres	xii ^d
William Blunt, senior	V score acres	xx ^d
Robert Fowkes	XXV acres	v ^d
Thomas Leake	IIII score & X acres	xviii ^d
Edward Frank	IIII score & X acres	xviii ^d
William Foxe	IIII score acres	xvi ^d
Edward Leake	III score & VI acres	xiii ^d
Raphe Franke	XXXV acres	viii ^d
Thomas Burton	XXII acres	iiii ^d
Peter Bolton	XXII acres	iiii ^d
John Randon	XV acres	iii ^d
William Suwell	IX acres	ii ^d
John Coleman	XXIIII acres	iiii ^d
Hugh Franke	VII acres	i ^d
William Dickynson	for bests and land	iii ^d
Edward Sope	for bests and land	iiii ^d
William Bolton	for bests and land	iiii ^d
Thomas Myddleton	[blank]	
Thomas Wyldman	for bests and land	ii ^d
Thomas Franke	iii bests	iii ^d
Robert Myllner	iiii bests	iiii ^d
John Pringer	iii bests	iii ^d
William Street	ii bests	ii ^d
John Sylbert	ii bests	ii ^d
John Allin	ii bests	ii ^d
Edward Franke	ii bests	ii ^d
Thomas Knyghton	i best	i ^d
Thomas Lacer	ii bests	ii ^d
Arthur Franke	iii bests	iii ^d
Richard Leake	ii bests	ii ^d
John Hupkyn	ii bests	ii ^d
John Carr	iii bests	iii ^d
John Bodmore	iiii bests	iiii ^d
Thomas Fawell	ii bests	ii ^d
Thomas Grundie	iii bests	iii ^d
Andrew Welles	v bests	v ^d
John Tomner	iii bests	iii ^d

John Darsye	ii bests	ii ^d
Thomas Harryson	IIII acres	i ^d
Wyddoe Bolton	ii bests	ii ^d
Raphe Copland	ii bests	ii ^d
William Harte	IIII acres	i ^d
Thomas Fynnes	ii bests	ii ^d
Edward Leake, junior	ii bests	ii ^d
Thomas Dickman	iii bests	iii ^d
William Barly	ii bests	ii ^d
Edward Owndes	ii bests	ii ^d
Nicholas Lamblay	ii bests	ii ^d
Robert Draper	iii bests	iii ^d
Humfray Wawker	ii bests	ii ^d
Wyddoe Sleeming	iii bests	iii ^d
Thomas Langlay	[missing]	
Robert (Ealli?)	[missing]	

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N.B. This account uses both Roman numerals and Arabic  
e.g. 'Edward Blunt in the lane, ix beasts 1 sheep'.

### The account of William Mylner Constable of Wymeswold AD 1611

A levy made the 5<sup>th</sup> day of February for the King's Majesty's fifteenth & the relief of the visited folk in Loughborough after 2d a beast & 8d a score of sheep collected & gathered by William Myln of Wymeswold aforesaid as followeth;

|                     |                               |                                    |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Mr Ballard          | xvii beasts, xx score sheep   | ix <sup>s</sup> vi <sup>d</sup>    |
| Mr Catlon           | viii beasts                   | xvi <sup>d</sup>                   |
| Mr Pardsey          | vii beasts                    | xiii <sup>d</sup>                  |
| William Barrett     | xxiii beasts lxxxvi sheep     | vii <sup>s</sup>                   |
| Edward Blunt junior | viii beasts lxx sheep         | iii <sup>s</sup> viii <sup>d</sup> |
| William Blunt, jun  | viii beasts xl sheep          | ii <sup>s</sup> viii <sup>d</sup>  |
| Robert Foxe         | x beasts xxvi sheep           | ii <sup>s</sup> vi <sup>d</sup>    |
| John Shittlewoode   | xiii beasts xl sheep          | iii <sup>s</sup> vi <sup>d</sup>   |
| Hugh Fyttes         | xii beasts                    | xiii <sup>d</sup>                  |
| William Blunt, sen  | ix beasts lxxx sheep          | iiii <sup>s</sup> ii <sup>d</sup>  |
| Thomas Leake        | x beasts xii sheep            | ii <sup>s</sup>                    |
| William Fox         | iiii beasts                   | viii <sup>d</sup>                  |
| Edward Franke       | ix beasts v score & xii sheep | v <sup>s</sup> ii <sup>d</sup>     |
| Thomas Burton       | ii beasts                     | iiii <sup>d</sup>                  |
| Edward Leake, sen   | viii beasts xl sheep          | ii <sup>s</sup> viii <sup>d</sup>  |
| Thomas Tomson       | vi beasts xxxvi sheep         | ii <sup>s</sup> ii <sup>d</sup>    |
| Martin Lacer        | xii beasts xxii sheep         | ii <sup>s</sup> viii <sup>d</sup>  |
| Thomas Hickling     | ix beasts lxxii sheep         | iii <sup>s</sup> vi <sup>d</sup>   |
| Richard Langley     | ix beasts xxv sheep           | ii <sup>s</sup> iii <sup>d</sup>   |
| Raphe Franke        | iiii beasts xx sheep          | xvi <sup>d</sup>                   |

|                           |                            |                                    |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Edward Blunt in the lane  | ix beasts 1 sheep          | iii <sup>s</sup> ii <sup>d</sup>   |
| Robert Wright             | ix beasts xlii sheep       | ii <sup>s</sup> xi <sup>d</sup>    |
| Richard Blunte            | xii beasts 1 sheep         | ii <sup>s</sup> viii <sup>d</sup>  |
| William Hall              | iii beasts                 | vi <sup>d</sup>                    |
| Thomas Frank, senior      | x beasts lx sheep          | iii <sup>s</sup> iii <sup>d</sup>  |
| John Frank                | xii beasts lxxx sheep      | iiii <sup>s</sup> iii <sup>d</sup> |
| Hugh Bosse                | vii beasts xl sheep        | ii <sup>s</sup> vi <sup>d</sup>    |
| Thomas Franke, junior     | iiii beasts vi score sheep | vi <sup>s</sup> iii <sup>d</sup>   |
| John Randon               | i beast                    | ii <sup>d</sup>                    |
| William Blunt on the hill | iiii beasts                | viii <sup>d</sup>                  |
| William Mylner            | xi beasts v score sheep    | v <sup>s</sup> i <sup>d</sup>      |
| John Coleman              | ix beasts xv sheep         | ii <sup>s</sup>                    |
| Peter Bolton              | iiii beasts                | viii <sup>d</sup>                  |
| Robert Fowkes             | vi beasts xxx sheep        | ii <sup>s</sup>                    |
| Edward Fox                | v beasts                   | x <sup>d</sup>                     |
| Thomas Langley            | iiii beasts ix sheep       | xii <sup>d</sup>                   |
| Thomas Myddleton          | ii beasts                  |                                    |
| Hugh Franke               | iii beasts xv sheep        | xii <sup>d</sup>                   |
| William Bolton            | iiii beasts xii sheep      | xii <sup>d</sup>                   |
| Nicholas Holland          | ii beasts                  | iiii <sup>d</sup>                  |
| Robert Langley            | iii beasts                 | vi <sup>d</sup>                    |
| Thomas Franke             | ii beasts viii sheep       | vii <sup>d</sup>                   |
| Robert Myllner            | ii beasts                  | iiii <sup>d</sup>                  |
| William Street            | ii beasts viii sheep       | vi <sup>d</sup>                    |
| John Stringer             | ii beasts vi sheep         | vi <sup>d</sup>                    |
| John Allin                | ii bests xvii sheep        | x <sup>d</sup>                     |
| Robert Lenye              | i beast                    | ii <sup>d</sup>                    |
| Edward Franke             | ii bests iii sheep         | v <sup>d</sup>                     |
| Thomas Lacer              | i beast                    | ii <sup>d</sup>                    |
| Humfray Wawker            | ii bests                   | ii <sup>d</sup>                    |
| William Caunt             | i beast                    | ii <sup>d</sup>                    |
| Arthur Franke             | [blank]                    |                                    |
| Richard Leake             | ii beasts                  | iiii <sup>d</sup>                  |
| John Hopkyn               | ii beasts                  | ii <sup>d</sup>                    |
| John Carr                 | ii beasts                  | iiii <sup>d</sup>                  |
| Richard Godfrey           | iiii beasts                | viii <sup>d</sup>                  |
| John Bodmore              | 4 beasts vii sheep         | x <sup>d</sup>                     |
| William Dickingson        | 4 beasts xx sheep          | xvi <sup>d</sup>                   |
| Edward Leake, junior      | 4 beasts xxv sheep         | xviii <sup>d</sup>                 |
| Nicholas Lambley          | ii beasts xx sheep         | xii <sup>d</sup>                   |
| Edward Owndes             | iii beasts x sheep         | x <sup>d</sup>                     |
| Thomas Dickman            | iiii beasts vii sheep      | x <sup>d</sup>                     |
| William Barlow            | ii beasts v sheep          | vi <sup>d</sup>                    |
| Jeffrey Aster             | [blank]                    |                                    |