

Border Reivers - An English West March Warden

A Crown Appointee Held Sway in the Western Borderlands of England

The English March Wardens were appointed by the Crown. Last of the West March Wardens up to the Union of the Crowns of England and Scotland in 1603 was Thomas Lord Scrope.

Thomas Lord Scrope was a member of an illustrious family from the north of England. Their main home was the formidable pile of Bolton castle in picturesque Wensleydale, North Yorkshire.

The ancestors of Thomas included William le Scrope who was knighted after the Battle of Falkirk in 1298. Lost by the Scots, Falkirk saw an end to the good fortune of the Guardian of Scotland, William Wallace of 'Braveheart' fame. Yet another, Richard le Scrope, was appointed Chancellor of England and knighted at the Battle of Neville's Cross in 1346.

Appointed March Warden

Some pedigree then! It was natural that Thomas would follow his father Henry Lord Scrope who had been English West March Warden for over thirty years until his death in 1591. Thomas was appointed in 1593 at the age of twenty-five and soon fell foul of the Cumbrian Border Lords. Two of the most notable families in the English West March were the Lowthers and the Carletons. Thomas quite rightly had cause to be odds with both yet both would endeavour to sour his authority.

March Warden's Authority Undermined

Thomas Lord Scrope sought to bring peace and justice to the English West March. He was thwarted in his admirable goals by Sir Richard Lowther and Thomas Carleton.

Lowther had been acting March Warden on the death of Henry Lord Scrope in 1591, indeed had been his deputy Warden for many years. He felt that he was positive and progressive in the role between 1591 and 1593 yet was relieved of the position on the orders of Elizabeth I. As a result he detested Thomas Lord Scrope.

Thomas Carleton had many roles of influence in the English West including Constable of Carlisle castle. He was to incur the wrath of Scrope when the latter found out about his double dealings. As Land-Sergeant of Gilsland, Carleton was responsible for the welfare of the inhabitants of the villages within the barony of Gilsland yet conspired with the Scottish reivers in their inroads into the area. For a backhander in kind or gold he would, on a regular basis, orchestrate the raids of the Scots whilst appearing to defend the people against them.

When Scrope became aware of Carleton's duplicity he dismissed him out of hand from his position of Constable of Carlisle.

Carleton waited only for the day when he could exact his revenge on Thomas Lord Scrope.

The Warden's Legacy

Scrope had endeavoured to be only fair and just yet he was to suffer for his uprightness. In 1596 Kinmont Willie Armstrong, the most notorious of the Scottish Border Reivers, was captured illegally by the English at a Day of Truce and warded in Carlisle castle much to the wrath of the whole of the Scottish Border clans. Whilst Scrope did his utmost to justify the capture based on Kinmont's previous wholesale raids into the English West March for which he suffered not a whit, Lowther and Carleton worked behind his back to aid in the rescue of the Scottish reiver.

Kinmont was rescued by a small party of the Scots, mainly Armstrongs, but not without the help from within the castle of Carlisle much of which was provided by the friends of Lowther and Carleton.

Warden Humiliated.

Following the rescue of Kinmont, Scrope fell victim to one humiliation after another. The Scottish Border Clans increased their reiving into the English West March convinced that he had lost all authority whilst some of the English Lords welcomed the upheaval having vowed to see the back of Scrope as Warden. He was to survive it all.

Warden Knighted.

Thomas Lord Scrope was to survive the Kinmont Willie Armstrong affair, the last great raid of the Scots into English territory against a Border stronghold, Carlisle castle, in time of peace. For a time Elizabeth I was at the throat of her Scottish counterpart, James VI of Scotland. In the end sense prevailed and the Kinmont affair was consigned to history with the standing of the monarchs intact.

In 1599 Thomas Lord Scrope was made a Knight of the Garter, an honour accorded to only twenty-four men at any one time. He was to rule as March Warden for another four years following this singular recognition of his efforts to serve the troubled English West March with both dignity and integrity.

He died at the village of Langar in Nottinghamshire in 1609. There in the village church stands his magnificent tomb surmounted by a stone effigy of himself, his wife, Philadelphia Carey and their son Emmanuel.



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