

## Border Reivers - The March Wardens and Justice

### Borderlands Authority Sought to Bring the Reiving Clans to Heel

The March Wardens, English and Scottish, worked in direct opposition to each other across the Border Line. Their paths would cross often, especially at a 'Day of Truce'.

Feud, blood feud, theft, maiming and murder were endemic for centuries in the Border regions of England and Scotland. The perpetrators of crime were often difficult to apprehend as they sought sanctuary with their clansmen or holed up in the Debateable Land.

The March Wardens were charged with bringing such felons to justice in a landscape where thieves and murderers were almost impossible to find. The responsibility was onerous, time-consuming and often led to friction between the two countries.

#### **How the March Wardens Worked Together**

Should an English Reiver steal Scottish cattle from north of the Border, then he would naturally make haste to drive his ill-gotten gains back south of the Line and hide them until the heat had died down.

If the Scotsman who had suffered as a result of the reive knew who it was who had stolen his beasts, then he would report the crime to his March Warden. He in turn would communicate with the Warden opposite him in England and demand that the thief be apprehended and brought to the next Day of Truce. This process resulted in what was known as a 'Bill of Complaint'.

#### **The Weakness of the System**

Often the system worked tolerably well should the Wardens be men of honour with a liking for each other. This was not always the case. The relationship between the Wardens could be strained as a result of suspicion and animosity. Moreover the Wardens were often in 'the pockets' of the Reivers and would turn a blind eye to the crime should a portion of it come their way. Not all Wardens were honourable men!

If the relationship were good then it was readily accepted that every effort had been made to apprehend the criminal. Should the Warden not bring the fugitive for trial at the Day of Truce, it was understood and appreciated that everything had been endeavoured to comply with the 'Bill of Complaint'. If the Wardens were not on friendly terms, then argument and resentment would ensue if the felon requested was absent from the Truce. Violence and bloodshed could ensue as in the Raid of the Redeswire in 1575.

#### **The March Wardens in Action**

Before the Day of Truce began the two Wardens would meet a little aside from their retinues, up to 1583 often a thousand strong, and discuss the number of 'Bills of Complaint' and deliberate on their relative value. They would note the number that were not to take place because the criminal in question had not been found. It was at this phase in the proceedings that tempers could flare.

The Wardens sought to achieve a balance both in number and value. For each animal stolen, be it kye (cattle), sheep or horse there was a value put upon it, even to the point of whether it was a young or old beast.

The Wardens, often strove to achieve an equality so that each side could leave the field satisfied that honours were even.

In the records that still exist from the times of the reivers it is interesting to note that loss of livelihood and the suffering that ensued as its aftermath often took second place to a balancing of the books in monetary terms.



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