

17th Century insults

Using the following 'scandalous, malicious and contemptuous words' landed a number of people before courts in the West Riding in the 17th Century: 'thou shakeragg blewe beard' (shakeragg = a mean beggarly fellow); 'a rogue and a base fellow'; 'a bankrupt, roaguish and knavishe constable'. Comments like these which questioned a man's good name or reputation were seen as particularly offensive; it was also unwise to demean someone who was socially superior. Even 'sirrah' applied to a gentleman was unacceptable as was 'venomous toad' or 'foul blabber-lipped blockhead'. Sir Francis Wortley JP, was particularly unpopular because of the punishments meted out to illegal hunters on his estate to the north of Sheffield. In the 1630s he took several men to court, for example, for criticising him in words to the effect that a man worshipped him with his bottom. Alexander French of Stainton, after calling Sir Ralph Hansby of Tickhill Castle a base fellow in 1637, was prosecuted and ordered to pay 100 marks to the King, £100 to Hansby, £20 in costs and then on 10 July 1638 to appear at the Sessions House in Rotherham and apologise for his scandalous words. One example of a woman being insulting was Ann Walker who publicly called a court official 'cuckoe' for prosecuting a bill of indictment on the King's behalf against her father in 1614. She was classed as a scold and her impudence punished by having to walk through Wakefield with 'basins before her', the metal basins being 'rung' or hit to draw attention to her and humiliate her.

Insulting language is looked at in depth in David Cressy's *Dangerous talk: scandalous, seditious and treasonable speech in pre-modern England*, OUP, 2010. Details of some court cases can be found in Cust, R. P., and Hopper, A. J., *Cases in the High Court of Chivalry 1634-1640*, The Harleian Society, 2006