

## The Last Woman to be Burnt

Beddingfield, Margery (1742—1763), murderer of her husband John, was probably the last woman in England to be sentenced to be burnt for petty treason. Her father John Rowe or Row (c. 1702-1778) was a substantial farmer, first at Kelsale where he and his wife Margery his wife (c. 1710-1756) had their first two sons; they moved to Red House Farm, Blaxhall in time to christen Margery at the church there on 29 June 1742. The girl lost her mother and at least two of nine siblings by the time she was fourteen, and was just seventeen when she married the yeomen farmer John Beddingfield of Hill Farm, Sternfield at that parish church on 3 July 1759. There their daughter Pleasance was christened on 6 June 1760. When Margery was brought to bed of her second child John while visiting William Starkey, the latter observed how well husband and wife got on together and gave evidence to that effect in the trial. Young John was christened at Sternfield on 9 September 1761, but was buried there, aged about four months, the following November.

It was at Michaelmas 1761 that Richard Ringe was taken on by Beddingfield as husbandman and Elizabeth Cleobald arrived as nurserymaid. Ringe had been christened at Bredfield near Woodbridge, the only surviving son in a family of six, by his parents Samuel Ringe and Mary (nee Cacamole), tenants of Moat Farm there, on 21 September 1740. Six months after joining the Beddingfield staff, the other servants noticed open displays of affection between Margery and Richard; she would kiss him and sit on his lap. Ringe was reckless and naive, lacking both discretion and decision. On one occasion he failed to persuade another servant, Elizabeth Riches, to poison her master; later he put white arsenic bought at Aldeburgh into a cup of water for Beddingfield who, noticing the sediment, refused it.

Ringe later confessed that it was three months after Margery promised him marriage if he would destroy her husband before he found the courage to act, and that on the night of the murder, 27 July 1762, he stood watching his master sleeping for a full quarter of an hour before he could lay hands on him. John Beddingfield, after a busy day's harvesting, shared three pints of punch before bedtime with James Scarlett, a Saxmundham butcher to seal the sale of a beast. He asked his wife to sleep with him in the parlour chamber, but she, determined to share a bed with Elizabeth Cleobald in the kitchen chamber next door, repeatedly refused (as she had for several days past). At ten o'clock they wished each other good night without ill humour, and the house was soon quiet, with only Ringe lying awake. Half an hour later he entered his master's bedroom, and when at length he did take a stranglehold on him, the struggle brought both men and the bed curtains to the floor, but Beddingfield, still sleepy, was quickly overpowered. Margery ignored the muffled cries of her husband, and waited for Ringe to report success on his way through her room to the backhouse chamber which he shared with two young cow hands. When eventually the servants were roused they were told that their master had died by falling out of bed head first, and the Saxmundham surgeon Sparham made such a cursory examination that he failed to notice the obvious signs of foul play. The dead husband was buried in Sternfield churchyard on 30 July. It was sometime before Cleobald, having left her employer in

the meantime, gave evidence which led to a more thorough investigation. A trial was ordered at Bury St Edmunds Assizes the following March before the Hon. Sir Richard Adams, a Baron of the Court of Exchequer. Both prisoners were tried for murder and petty treason, the justification for the latter charge being that the deceased was the master of one and husband of the other. The prosecution had the upper hand throughout, for the defence case was weak, and first Richard and then Margery were found guilty and sentenced to death, she by burning and he by hanging, his body to be dissected.

Ringe was first to make a full confession, stating (probably truthfully) that he and Margery only became 'criminally acquainted' after her husband's death, and that, in the course of the next few weeks, her affection turned to dislike and then to hatred.

Margery's confession came very late, only triggered by his, which she resented. She declared that 'she was guilty, and deserved to die, for having been too much privy to the murder of her husband, having held conversation with Ringe for that purpose for three months'.

The sentences were carried out at Rushmere St Andrew, two miles out of Ipswich, where the gallows stood on the right hand side of the Woodbridge road just over the borough boundary. On 8 April 1763, the condemned pair were drawn on a sledge to the place, where Richard was hung, but Margery, as had become customary, was strangled before being burnt; both appeared penitent. The Ipswich Journal reported the trial and executions briefly and entirely without sensationalism, but there was no shortage of sightseers. The Bluecoat boys of the charity school Christ's Hospital were given 'half a day's liberty... to see Mrs Beddingfield executed'. Sarah Truelove, Guide at the Hospital, was given 1s 9d by the Treasurer for their subsistence. Ringe was twenty—two and Margery not quite twenty—one. A London publisher produced *The genuine Trial...* of the pair, including their confessions, and the *Gentleman's Magazine* for June carried almost as full an account. Nowhere in print was Margery's maiden name disclosed, nor was it stated that her father still farmed at Blaxhall, and Ringe's at Bredfield. John Rowe held the Beddingfield assets in trust for his orphaned granddaughter Pleasance. These she inherited, with a thousand pounds from him, at his death in 1778, and seems not only to have married well, but twice: at Felixstowe in 1780, and again at St Clement Danes in 1792, on each occasion using her maiden name.