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Alec Samuels

Chief Justice Richard Lyster 1480-1553

Richard Lyster was born in 1480 into an established Wakefield, Yorkshire, family. He came to London as a student in 1500 and studied law at the Middle Temple, one of the Inns of Court, and qualified as a barrister. He quickly attained success, originally through the patronage of Lord Darcy. He was Lent Reader 1516 and 1522 and Treasurer (i.e. President) 1522-1524. He became a law officer, Solicitor-General in 1521 and Attorney-General in 1525, then seen as a prelude to senior judicial appointment. Consulted along with other leading lawyers over the wish of Henry VIII to divorce Queen Catherine he was unable to come up with a legal solution. So the King broke with Rome and married Anne Boleyn. Lyster rode in the coronation procession. In 1529 he was duly appointed Chief Baron of the Exchequer, which today we would call the chief judge in Chancery, the property court, and he was knighted. After some 16 years in this office, in 1545 he was appointed Chief Justice of the King's Bench, the most senior of all the judicial appointments. Lyster cannot be said to have been an eminent judge and jurist, in the reign of Henry VIII it was prudent to "keep one's head down", and he was somewhat prolix, but at a time of growing trade he did develop remedies in commercial law, shipping law, marine insurance, factoring, partnerships, bills of exchange, debt recovery, guarantees and sureties. This work was achieved largely through technical procedural methods (still beloved of the lawyers to this day) and by attracting litigants away from the competing Court of Common Pleas. Lyster is believed to have kept meticulous notes and records of his cases, but these have been lost. In 1546 Lyster was one of the judges to whom the Duke of Norfolk made confession of treason and in the event the Duke was only saved from execution by the death of Henry VIII 12 January 1547 during the night before the morning fixed for the execution. Lyster signed the document appointing the Duke of Somerset the Protector of the new boy king Edward VI and he was re-appointed Chief Justice. In 1552 due to ill health Lyster resigned and retired to his "mansion" in Southampton, Tudor House. He had long had interests in Southampton, and a relative Thomas Lyster was Mayor 1517-1518. He had married as his second wife Jane Dawtrey, widow of John Dawtrey from Petworth, and thereby inherited Tudor House. After Jane's death he remarried, as his third wife, Elizabeth Stoke. He died in 1553. His elaborate monument, with effigy in judicial robes and collar of SS, erected by Elizabeth, in 1567, stands in St Michael's Church opposite Tudor House, but at some time was moved to its present location in a corner. Lyster remains one of Southampton's famous sons, albeit not native-born.

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