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## Deaf Marriage

*From the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards, deaf people were allowed to use sign language to get married in Western Europe, but prejudice often stood in the way of a happy ending.*

In 1198, the head of the Catholic Church, Pope Innocent III, issued a ruling that deaf people could get married using sign language. As the Pope wrote (in Latin): what deaf people 'cannot express by words, they can declare by means of signs'. A few years later, he repeated the ruling, stressing that he was referring to the sign languages used by prelingually deaf men and women. Over the following centuries, many different writers repeated this ruling in handbooks for clergy to be used throughout Europe.

Despite this, deaf marriage was not always straightforward. Some vicars were reluctant to help when, for the first time, they met a deaf person who wanted to get married.

Why, when the guidance was so clear? In the medieval and early modern period (around 1100-1700), there were prejudices about deafness, speech, and sign language. Some people believed that deafness was a learning disability. They thought that deaf people could not hear or speak vocally because they were not very clever. Some lawyers even argued that deaf people should be treated as 'infants': unable to make decisions on their own behalf. In English they used the phrase 'deaf and dumb' to describe deaf signers. Significantly 'dumb' had the same double meaning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as it does now, showing that people thought vocal speech was a sign of intelligence.

This meant that getting married could be tricky for deaf people, despite clear rules allowing it. One of the most famous marriages in deaf history took place in Elizabethan Leicester in 1576, when a deaf man Thomas Tilsey, married a hearing woman, Ursula Russell. We know about their marriage because one of the local officials wrote down the marriage in full, listing all the signs that Thomas made to show he wanted to get married. Here's an extract:

Thomas took [Ursula] by the hand, put a ring upon her finger, and laid his hand upon his heart, and then upon her heart, and held up his hands towards heaven, and to show his continuance to dwell with her to his life's end he did it by closing of his eyes, with his hands, and digging out the earth, with his foot and pulling as though he would ring a bell.

However, it was not a straightforward path up the aisle for Thomas and Ursula. Before they got married, Thomas had to get the support of the mayor of Leicester and the town council. In addition, the vicar who married Thomas and Sara approached the bishop and a local church lawyer to get their advice before conducting the ceremony. In fact, the reason this service was copied down was probably to ensure legal protection if the marriage was ever challenged.

And marriages were challenged, and sometimes it was the family who claimed deaf people were not capable of getting married. In 1618, during the reign of James I/VI, a deaf man in Essex wanted to marry his boss's daughter. Thomas Speller was a blacksmith, and he

moved to the neighbouring town to work in another forge which is where he met his future wife, Sara Earle. The couple planned to get married in Hatfield Broadoak, Thomas' hometown, and that is when trouble started. Thomas was one of four deaf brothers and sisters, and his father had established trusts for them all, so that when Thomas married, he received the equivalent of several thousand pounds. Thomas' mother, Winifred, was not happy at the idea of Thomas' marriage and tried to stop it, claiming that Sara Earle had 'stolen' Thomas. Winifred argued that Thomas was not capable of making his own decision about who he could marry.

The arguments became so heated that Thomas and Sara travelled to London to visit the lawyer in charge of the church in Essex. They brought letters supporting the marriage from the local vicar and friends of family. They were both examined about whether they wanted to marry, and when Thomas made it clear 'by signs' that he wanted to marry Sara, they were given a licence to get married.

But back in Essex, tempers were running so high that in the end the couple could not have the service in Hartfield Broadoak, where Winifred lived. Instead, they had to move it to London, where they finally married in December 1618.

These are particularly unusual cases of deaf marriage. In Medieval and Early Modern England, it was more usual for deaf people to marry – usually in sign language – without their cases attracting any comment. I have looked at hundreds of parish registers (the books where vicars recorded details of marriages) and marriages between deaf and hearing people were usually recorded just like a marriage between two hearing people – even when we know that the deaf person was using sign language.

But to end, what about Winifred Speller, the nightmare mother-in-law? She was so angry about the marriage that she and her other children got into physical fights with Thomas, Sara and Sara's father – the blacksmith. Several months later, she had to pay a substantial fine and promise to stay away from the couple who set up home in a neighbouring town. After their eventful marriage, however, Thomas and Sara disappear from the historical record: hopefully, they got their happy-ever-after!

907 words.

Dr Rosamund Oates is a Reader in Early Modern History at Manchester Metropolitan University. If you are interested in finding out more, there is a public online talk on Deafness in Renaissance Europe (22.11.23) , with Live BSL interpretation and closed captions.

Tickets are free, book here : <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/deafness-in-renaissance-europe-tickets-732684217217?aff=oddtcreator>