

DECLARATION OF SPORTS

James I (1566–1625), King of England (1603–1625) and Scotland (1567–1625)

Puritan attempted to prohibit Sunday recreations wherever they dominated local politics. In 1617, while visiting Lancashire, James received a petition from local residents requesting permission to engage in sports on Sundays despite Puritan disapproval. James issued the following Declaration of Sports for Lancashire, and the following year extended its provision to the entire country.

24 May 1618

Whereas We did justly in Our progress through Lancashire rebuke some Puritans and precise people, and took order that the like unlawful carriage should not be used by any of them hereafter, in the prohibiting and unlawful punishing of our good people for using their lawful recreations and honest exercises upon Sundays and other holy days after the afternoon sermon or service, We now find that two sorts of people wherewith that country is much infected, We mean Papists and Puritans, have maliciously traduced and calumniated those, Our just and honourable proceedings.

It is true that at Our first entry to this Crown and Kingdom We were informed, and that too truly, that Our County of Lancashire abounded more in Popish recusants than any county of England, and thus has still continued since, to Our great regret, with little amendment, save that, now of late, in Our last riding through Our said country, We find both by the report of the judges and of the bishop of that diocese that there is some amendment now daily beginning, which is no small contentment to Us.

The report of this growing amendment amongst them made Us the more sorry, when with Our own ears We heard the general complaint of Our people that they were barred from all lawful recreations and exercise upon the Sunday's afternoon after the ending of all divine service, which cannot but produce two evils—the one the hindering of the conversion of many, whom their priests will take occasion hereby to vex, persuading them that no honest mirth or recreation is lawful or tolerable in Our religion, which cannot but breed a great discontentment in Our people's hearts, especially of such as are peradventure upon the point of turning. The other inconvenience is that this prohibition bars the common and meaner sort of people from using such exercises as may make their bodies more able for war, when His Majesty or his successors shall have occasion to use them. And in place thereof sets up filthy tippling and drunkenness, and breeds a number of idle and discontented speeches in their ale-houses. For when shall the common people have leave to exercise, if not upon the Sundays and holy days, seeing they must apply their labour and win their living in all working-days?

Our pleasure therefore is that the bishop and all other inferior churchmen and churchwardens shall for their parts be careful and diligent both to instruct the ignorant, and convince and reform them that are mis-led in religion, presenting them that will not conform themselves, but obstinately stand out, to Our judges and justices, whom we likewise command to put the law in due execution against them.

Our pleasure likewise is that the bishop of that diocese take the like strait order with all the Puritans and precisians within the same, either constraining them to conform themselves or to leave the County, according to the laws of Our Kingdom and canons of Our Church, and so to strike equally on both hands against the contemners of Our authority and adversaries of Our Church.

And as for Our good people's lawful recreation, Our pleasure likewise is that after the end of divine service Our good people be not disturbed, letted, or discouraged from any lawful recreation, such as dancing, either men or women, archery for men, leaping, vaulting, or any other such harmless recreation, nor from having of May games, Whitsun ales, and Morris dances, and the setting up of maypoles and other sports therewith used, so as the same be had in due and convenient time, without impediment or neglect of divine service. And that women shall have leave to carry rushes to the church for the decorating of it, according to their old custom.

But withal We do here account still as prohibited all unlawful games to be used upon Sundays only, as bear and bull-baitings, interludes, and at all times in the meaner sort of people by law prohibited, bowling. And likewise We bar from this benefit and liberty all such known recusants, either men or women, as will abstain from coming to church or divine service, being therefore unworthy of any lawful recreation after the said service, that will not first come to the church and serve God. Prohibiting in like sort the said recreations to any that, though conform in religion, are not present in the church at the service of God before their going to the said recreations. Our pleasure likewise is that they to whom it belongs in office shall present and sharply punish all such as in abuse of this, Our liberty, will use these exercises go before the end of all divine services for that day. And We likewise straightly command that every person shall resort to his own parish church to hear divine service, and each parish by itself to use the said recreation after divine service. Prohibiting likewise any offensive weapons to be carried or used in the said times of recreation.

J. Turral, ed. *Illustrations to British History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1917):148–151.