

BEFORE THE F--- WORD THE HISTORY OF SWEARING

The history of swearing and oaths over several centuries reveals the changing influence of religious belief, the power of social pressure and taboos, and the ambitions of church and state to control minds and loyalties. This multi-disciplinary project uses testimony from the law courts, plays, sermons, diaries, dictionaries and opinion surveys to chart and explain these changes.

Today 'swearing' means two distinct things: foul, obscene and profane language, often sexual or racial in substance, and often intended to insult or affront others; or a solemn oath in a court of law or when appointed to an office. This distinction is a modern development.

For much of recorded history, 'to swear' meant to utter an oath, to call upon God to witness the truth of a statement or to guarantee a promise of future action. A profane oath was invoking God when it was inappropriate, untrue or malicious: it was taking the name of God in vain.



Breconshire 1778

Be it remembered that on the twentieth day of October in the Eighteenth year of his Majesty's Reign, Thomas Powell of the Parish of Devynnock, in the said county farmer, was convicted before me one of his Majesty's Justices of the Peace for the said county, of Swearing one Profane oath. Given under my hand and seal, the day and year aforesaid.

L. Williams

Be it remembered that on the twentieth day of October in the Eighteenth year of his Majesty's Reign [King George III], Thomas Powell of the Parish of Devynnock in the said county farmer, was convicted before me one of his Majesty's Justices of the Peace for the said county, of Swearing one Profane oath. Given under my hand and seal, the day and year aforesaid.



Author: **John Spurr**
The History of Swearing
Contact: j.spurr@swansea.ac.uk