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On the Gilds of Sodbury and Dyrham

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ON THE GILDS OF SODBURY AND DYRHAM.

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GILDS are of great antiquity in England. Evidence is forthcoming of their existence during Saxon times, and some are mentioned in Domesday book.

The Early English Gilds was an institution of local self-help, which, before Poor-laws were invented, took the place in old times of the modern Friendly or Benefit Societies, but with a higher aim ; for while it joined all classes together in a care for the needy and for objects of common welfare, it did not neglect the forms and the practices of Religion, Justice and Morality.

Without a careful study of the subject it is impossible to estimate the extensive and beneficial influence exercised by Gilds upon all classes of the community, both urban and rural. They have played a very important part in the history of our civilization ; they have fostered our arts and sciences, developed and extended our commerce, and in many ways cherished and preserved our liberties. They have in various respects moulded our national character and institutions ; and they especially initiated and nurtured that principle of association for the common protection in wealth and in adversity, which is claimed as a peculiarity of the Anglo-Saxon race.

Though the aims of the several classes of Gilds might differ, the Frith Gilds, the Religious Gilds, the Gilds of Merchants and Craft Gilds, yet running through the whole, there are to be found the same general characteristics of brotherly aid and social charity.

In Religious Gilds these features were pre-eminent ; for in addition to prayers for the dead, christian charity was freely exercised for mutual assistance of Gild brothers in every exigency

especially in sickness, in old age, in the hour of death, and in burial of the dead ; likewise in cases of impoverishment, of wrongful imprisonment, in losses by fire, water, robbery and shipwreck, on loss of sight, of limb, and of cattle ; aid by loans and by provision of work. And as in the middle ages education was entirely supplied by the church, and was considered a religious duty, we find amongst the objects of Religious Gilds, the aid of poor scholars, the maintenance of schools, and the payment of school-masters.

The Reformation shook the whole system of Gilds to its foundation, and this was especially the case with the Religious Gilds of the laity. By Acts of Parliament in the reigns of Henry VIII. and Edward VI., these Religious Gilds, upon the pretence that they were founded on superstition, were abolished. Their property, in this country, went into the private purse of the King and his courtiers ; but on the continent (especially in Germany and in Denmark) it was delivered into the common treasure for the poor, to poor houses, hospitals, and schools. Their suppression in England was a case of pure wholesale robbery and plunder, done by an unscrupulous faction to satisfy their personal greed under cover of the law. No more gross case of wanton plunder is to found in the history of all Europe. No page so black in English history.

A Religious Gild was founded in Chipping Sodbury by Thomas Hampton and others in the 22nd year of Henry VI. (A.D. 1442), and was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The master was chosen annually, and was generally a clothier or weaver, which trades formerly flourished here.

The objects of the Gild were the finding and maintaining two priests to pray for the good estate of the said King, and after his decease for his soul, for the benefactor of the Gild, for its founders, and always for the brothers and sisters of the said Gild, and for all Christian souls.

The total income of the Gild at the time of its dissolution was £18 19s., and was thus disposed of—

	£	s.	d.
For the two priests	12	4	0
Four obits	0	8	0
Organ player	0	14	8
Steward	0	14	8
Keeping of the clock	0	6	8
Keeping of the ornaments	0	8	8
Rents resolutes	0	11	9
Leaving a margin, presumably for charitable uses, of	3	10	7

It will be noted that no provision was made for the clerk, who was paid by a levy of a penny per house on every house in the town.

Part of the possessions of the Gild consisted of a house, vulgarly called the Gild House, otherwise the Church House, and garden adjoining, situate at Chipping Sodbury, between the tenement in which Thomas Holder now dwells on the west, and the hospitium, or inn, called the "George," on the east, and the King's highway on the south, and against the Rouche Were, behind towards the north." This exactly delineates the spot upon which we are now assembled.

This, with other portions of the Gild possessions, was granted in 2nd Edward VI. to Sir Miles Partridge, one of the King's commissioners for dealing with this class of property. He seems to have paid x^{li} v^s iij^d for them, and to have sold them the same year to Richard Pate, of Gloucester (another of the King's commissioners) for the sum of xxxiiij^{li} v^s viij^d. In the 5th Mary, Richard Pate sold a portion of them to the burghers of Sodbury for xxiiij^{li}, part for a Town Hall and part for an almshouse.

An information was brought in the Court of Exchequer, 14th Elizabeth, for lands in Sodbury called Town-lands, belonging to the late dissolved Gild, which, after a hearing, was dismissed. The chief witness in the case said: "And at the visitation the one half of the said rents was presented to belong to the Prince and the other half to the said town of Chipping Sodbury: and further of his own knowledge he saith that at the time of the visitation the commissioners said that the town of Chipping Sodbury "*myght have kepte the hole landes to their own use.*"

Another information was brought in the Exchequer 32nd Carolus II., supposing the hands belonged to the Monastery of Bradenstoke, in Wiltshire, but this was likewise dismissed. Mr. Trenfield informs me that these lands are still called "Townlands," and that the rents of them are administered by the Corporation of Sodbury in charitable uses.

The plate belonging to this Gild was sold for ciijs, and the ornaments for vj^{li} x^s iiij^d, but no description of either is now obtainable.

A later and more limited species of Religious Gilds are met with, of which some note should be taken. Such an one was founded at Dyrham in the 12th year of Henry VIII. (1520), and not many years before the Reformation, by Sir William Dennis, Knt., dame Anne, his wife (who was the only daughter of Maurice Lord Berkeley) and by others.

Gilds of this class were more after the manner of chantries, endowed simply with revenues for priests to sing masses for the souls of the members.

The statutes of the one at Dyrham are still preserved, and are stated at large in the histories of Atkins and of Rudder. They are representative of such Gilds in general.

Although the Gild at Dyrham could not have been in existence more than about twenty-five years, it seems to have met with great success, for "many were the Brethren and Sisters of this Gild who were prevailed upon to contribute towards its maintenance; which persons lived in fifty several parishes at least, in Bristol, Bath, Somersetshire and Gloucestershire, and might amount in number to three hundred persons." The usual payment from each person was 10^d or 20^d quarterly.

The endowments of the Gilds consisted of oxen, kine, and sheep. The kine were let out to neighbouring farmers at a yearly rental of 22^d.

No statement relating to this Gild at the time of the dissolution can be found in the Record Office, possibly because it does not seem to have possessed any land.