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The Guilds of Gloucester

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THE GUILDS OF GLOUCESTER.

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Read at the Popular Evening Meeting, Gloucester, 19th July, 1888.

AT a time like the present, when there are societies of all kinds in every town and neighbourhood, it may be interesting to you to hear something about the Guilds or Fraternities which were formed by your forefathers—for the protection of the innocent and the punishment of the guilty; for the maintenance of religion; the acquisition of commercial and civil privileges; for the regulation and defence of handicrafts; and for the relief of the poor and distressed. I have no doubt that Gloucester, being a town of great importance from its position on the borders of what was anciently Wales, from its command of the Severn—the second largest *water-way* in England, and from its nearness to the oak forests and iron mines of Dean, was among the earliest of the English boroughs to form Guilds. It is a matter, therefore, of the deepest regret that our local historians, whilst they have filled their pages with details of civil wars and the transfer of land from one holder to another, have almost ignored the struggles of your forefathers to preserve their ancient freedom and procure just and equal rights as English citizens.

Some writers believe the word "Guild" to be derived from the Saxon word "Geldan" or "Gildan," to pay, because the members of such societies were called upon to make regular payments for the support of the brethren. Others derive "Guild" from a Welsh word "Gwyl," a feast or holiday, because special feasts were a universal feature of such fraternities. However this may be, it is certain that Guilds were in existence in Egypt thousands of years ago, and in Rome and Greece certainly 700 years before the Christian era.

Lugo Brentano, a distinguished German writer, says, that in no country has the Guild, as an institution for the promotion of the welfare of its members socially, religiously and commercially, been brought to such a state of perfection as in England.¹

I. The earliest known order of English guild is the "Frith" or Peace Guild. This guild was, no doubt, in the first place, only an extension of the mutual ties of love and interest which in all ages and nations have bound together the members of a family.

In the Frith Guild the oath of mutual fidelity was substituted for the tie of blood, and the guild-feast, at certain seasons of the year, replaced the gathering of kinsfolk round the family hearth.

"Let us all share the same lot," ran the law of an ancient Frith Guild—"if any misdo, let us all bear it."

If a member injured anyone by mishap he looked to his fellow-guildsmen for protection against the avenger, or for aid to pay the fine enforced by law. If he were falsely accused his brethren stood by him in court and defended him. If he were taken captive and sold into slavery they redeemed him; if he were imprisoned they visited and fed him; if he fell into poverty they supported him; when he died they met together to bury him, and paid the clergy to say prayers for the peace of his soul.

It was the first principle of every Guild to help a brother if he had justice on his side; but if he were a law-breaker they expelled him, as worthless, from their fraternity.¹

II. The next in order was the Religious Guild, which was formed for the mutual help and encouragement of its members in religious exercises. The fraternity was dedicated to God's service, and placed under the patronage of some saint.

The brethren and sisters assembled together on the feast day of their patron, and at other times, to pray for one another and for those who had been called away by death. One or more

¹ The statutes of the Theyn Guild which existed at Cambridge early in the eleventh century shew that it was a Frith Guild.—Kemble's *Saxons in England*, Vol. I., p. 513.

There was a Frith Guild in London in the days of King Athelstan.—Stubbs' *Constitutional History of England*, Vol. I., pp. 511, 512.

priests were paid by the Guild to celebrate day by day, or at other stated intervals, Holy Communion, which was then called the "Mass," for the welfare of the living members and for the repose of the souls of the departed.

It was said often in the statutes of such fraternities that not eating or drinking but mutual assistance and prayer were the objects of their foundation; nevertheless, conviviality was an important element in their social meetings.¹

There were many religious guilds in Gloucester connected with the parish churches.

A fraternity of brethren and sisters dedicated to St. John the Baptist met in the old hall, part of which still exists in Castle entry, between Eastgate Street and Mitre Lane, and a priest said prayers for them in their parish Church of St. Michael and distributed alms amongst the poor.

Another fraternity, dedicated to the Holy Trinity, gave fifty-one shillings and ninepence a year to a priest to pray for their souls and all Christian souls for ever in the ancient Church of S. Mary Bradgate, better known as S. Mary-de-Lode.

IV. The third order of Guilds was the Merchant Guild or Hanse. These Guilds were founded principally for furthering the interests of commerce; but this object was only gained by the purchase of civil privileges and preservation of peace. The freedom and rights which you now possess as citizens were won step by step and by slow and difficult advances.

At the time of the Norman Conquest, Gloucester was a royal borough, and the King's sheriff exacted the dues which custom had assigned to the King.

The first step in the direction of freedom on the part of the guildsmen was to obtain the right of taxing themselves and paying the dues directly to the King.

¹ Such guilds existed at Abbotsbury and Exeter before the Norman Conquest.—Kemble's *Saxons in England*, Vol. I., pp. 511, 512.

See also a paper *On the Guilds of Sodbury and Dyrham*, read by F. F. Fox, Esq., at Chipping Sodbury.—*Trans. of B. and G. Arch. Society*, Vol. XIII., p. 6.

Henry II. for a consideration, granted to the Burgesses of Gloucester the like tolls as were paid by the City of London.

Richard I. granted them liberty of passing free on the river Severn with all kinds of merchandise.

John granted "to the burgesses of the Guild Merchant" freedom from all tolls in every part of his kingdom. Edward III. authorised the sheriff of the town if any dared to exact toll from the burgesses of the Guild Merchant to seize upon it and restore it. He granted them a fair from the 23rd to the 28th June.

So reign by reign the merchant guildsmen were enabled to purchase civil privileges whenever the King wanted money for a foreign war, a dowry for a daughter, or replenished coffers for the indulgence of his appetites.¹

In the reign of Richard III., who, as you know, was Duke of this city, Gloucester, obtained the most important of all its charters, and was governed henceforth by a mayor and two sheriffs and a common council elected by the burgesses. The mayor and corporation represent the Gloucester Guild Merchant of early times.

IV. The next in order is the Guild of Craftsmen or the Trade Guild. In the 12th century the members of the Merchant Guilds, as their riches and power increased, began to look down upon and oppress the craftsmen whom they had hitherto treated as brother guildsmen.²

The result of this was that the craftsmen formed themselves into distinct fraternities, which soon rose into dangerous rivalry with the merchant guilds. It was a struggle of the lesser folk against the greater folk.

On the continent this struggle led to a century of fierce conflicts, often ending in bloodshed. In England, where the laws

¹ There was a Merchant Guild at Lincoln in the time of King Edward the Confessor.—Stubbs' *Constitutional History of England*, Vol. I., p. 473.

² "The right of the merchant-guild to exclude from the privileges of trading all who were not members of its own body seems to imply necessarily either that these craft-guilds originally stood in a filial relation to it, or that the membership of the narrower involved also the membership of the wider society."—Stubbs' *Constitutional History*, Vol. I., p. 474. *Oxford, 8^o, 1860.*

were more just, and more honestly administered, the lesser folk were enabled to win their liberty, and protect their crafts.

In all the large towns every craft had its Guild, and as time went on and the merchant guilds were absorbed into the municipal corporations, the trade guilds, in the persons of their masters, obtained a voice in the government of the borough.

Sir Robert Atkyns, the County Historian, who wrote at the beginning of the last century, says: "There are (in Gloucester) twelve companies associated for the better regulation of trade, the masters of which attend the mayor upon public occasions in their gowns, with streamers, and add a reputation to the city. 1, The Mercers, under whom are included the Apothecaries, Grocers and Chandlers; 2, Weavers; 3, Tanners; 4, Butchers; 5, Bakers; 6, Smiths and Hammer-men, in which are Goldsmiths and Ironmongers; 7, Coopers and Joiners; 8, Shoemakers, 9, Metalmen; 10, Tailors; 11, Barbers; and 12, Glovers. There was another company of Brewers which is now ceased, there being none of that trade." Fosbrooke in 1819, says: "There are *or were* twelve companies," and he proceeds to give a similar list, except that he places the Goldsmiths with the Metalmen, and adds to that company, Braziers, Pewterers and Pinmakers, and he adds Cutlers, Saddlers and Glaziers to the Smiths.

He also says that there were formerly Cappers and Furriers, Shearmen and Dyers, united in the 21st year of Queen Elizabeth, quite decayed in 1634; Cooks and Innholders, united 24th Elizabeth.

A few years later than Fosbrooke's time only one guild or Company waited on the Mayor at his choosing, the Butchers' Guild, and that guild has long ago disappeared.

I will proceed to give some extracts from the Rules and Bye-laws of the Gloucester Guild of Tanners, drawn up at two eventful periods of English History—the Rules just before the Reformation, and the Bye-laws eighty years later, just before the Great Civil War. They will show you better than anything else the constitution of such societies, their work and position in the city, and the character of their meetings and festivals.

The Guildsmen were to be summoned every year by the old Master and Wardens, to assemble in their Common Hall on the 23rd of November—the Festival of St. Clement, their patron saint, and choose new officers.

The new Master was to swear that he would observe the rules of the Guild and administer equal justice to rich and poor.

The Wardens were to swear that they would obey the Master, and give him every assistance in their power. This oath they were to make before the Mayor and Sheriffs of the city at their hundred court, within 15 days of their election.

The Beadle was to swear that he would obey the Master, summon the brethren and sisters when ordered to do so, and collect all fines and other payments due to the funds of the Guild. If he performed his office satisfactorily he was to have 1d. from each of the brethren and be excused his quarterly payments for that year.

Any one refusing to take office was fined, as a Master, 6s. 8d.; as a Warden, 5s.; as a Beadle, 3s. 4d.

No brother or sister was to be admitted to the Guild for love or money, but only such as had a good name.

Every new member was to swear obedience to the Master, and to the rules of the Guild.

No member of the Craft was to keep a journeyman in his employ for 14 days without undertaking to pay 2d. for the entry of his name, and 1d. every quarter so long as he worked for him, on pain of paying a fine of 3s. 4d. No craftsmen was to entice the servant of another member to leave his employ, on pain of a fine of 5s. In case of any dispute between any two members, they were to refer the matter to the Master for his decision, but he was not to prevent them from taking the matter before a court of law if they wished it. Every brother or sister falling into poverty was to receive 4d. per week, paid quarterly. Every decayed or poverty-stricken Past Master was to receive 7d. a week. When any brother or sister died the Town Crier or Bellman was to go through the town and ask for the prayers of the brethren for the soul of the deceased. On the day of the funeral the brethren

were to gather together and bring the corpse to the church, and anyone absenting himself was to pay two pounds of wax for the light on the Altar in the Chapel of St. Clement's, in the Church of St. John the Baptist. No one was to practice the craft of Tanner unless he was a freeman of the city and a member of the fraternity, under pain of forfeiting 13s. 4d. a month and being punished by the Mayor and Sheriffs. No brother or sister was to take an apprentice for less than seven years, under penalty of 40s.

The members were to come to the Hall when summoned by the Beadle, or pay 3d. for the first offence, 8d. for the second offence, and be expelled for the third offence. Any member who was deprived of his franchise by the Mayor and Sheriffs for bad conduct was to be expelled from the craft until such times as he was admitted to his former liberties. Every brother was to be in readiness at the Hall with the Master and Wardens on St. John the Baptist's Eve, June 23rd, and on St. Peter's Eve, June 28th (that is, on the first and last days of the Great Fair), in their best apparel, with bends and badges on their shoulders, touching their faculty, to wait on the Mayor and Sheriffs on both nights in the King's Watch, within the town of Gloucester, and not to depart from the said watch till they had brought the Master and Wardens back to the Common Hall, on pain of 3s. 4d. On each of these nights the Master and Wardens were to make an honest drinking for the brethren at the Hall.

If any of the foregoing rules proved to be opposed to the King's Law or the commonwealth of the town, the Justices of Assize were to alter them.

Such were the laws in 1543.

In calculating the amount of the fines imposed, and the allowance to decayed members, we must remember that money was worth very much more in the reign of Henry VIII. than it is now. An ox was valued in £1, a cow or a cart horse in 10s. The fee for apprenticeship was 2s. 6d., and a skilled artisan's wages were about £8 a year, or 5¼d. a day, with board and lodging.

On S. Clement's Day, Nov. 23rd, 1628, the following bye-laws were agreed upon by the Tanners' Guild :—

No Master of the Guild was "to keepe a shopp and a standing bothe in the markt in Gloucester to sell clowte leather" on payne of forfeiting 6s. 8d. No hide was to be sold or bought in any place in the market except between Mr. Bubb's door and Mr. Russell's door. (The old Beast Market was held in Pitt Street, and the Tanners' Hall was in Hare Lane.) No hide was to be sold before 7 o'clock in the morning, and no leather until 11 o'clock. No member was to buy clowte leather with a view of selling it again in any fair or market under penalty of 5s. for the first offence, 10s. for the second, and 20s. for the third. If the servant of any one member of the Guild behaved badly in the market and did not go away on being ordered to do so, or if he bought or sold any hide or skin his master was to forfeit 10s. The Master was to have the handling of the first hide in the market.

The Master was to make a dinner on St. Clement's Day for every brother and sister under penalty of £5. No brother was to be Warden till he had served as Beadle, or to be Master till he had served as Warden, under penalty of 10s. No journeyman working under one of the members of the Guild was to leave his service and work with any other member without his master's good-will; or the member receiving him was to pay a fine of 10s. Every Master was to provide himself on election with a scarlet gown, and to wear it as Master and Past-Master at all assemblies and meetings for the appointment of officers, or pay a fine of £5. No brother or sister was to disclose anything that had been done or said at the meetings of the Guild under penalty of 3s. 4d. Every new member was to make a sufficient dinner for the whole company on his election, or pay 40s. fine. Every apprentice was to be entered in the books of the Guild, within a month of his being bound, or the member binding him was to pay 6s. 8d.

I see that in 1632 it was agreed that every Master should be allowed 40s. towards his Feast, and half that amount was allowed to a new member when he made his dinner.

The latest accounts of the Tanners' Guild that I have seen are for the year 1724, when the receipts were £3, and the expenditure £2 9s. 7d.

The minutes of the Annual Meetings are carried down to the 5th November, 1846, when Mr. George Bullock, jun., was chosen Master, and Mr. George Bullock and Mr. Edward Bower made Wardens. It seems to have been the custom of the Guild for the last 200 years to nominate the officers on the 5th of November, and to swear them in on the 23rd (S. Clement's Day).

I have not yet been able to learn much of the other Gloucester Craft Guilds. The *Butchers* had their slaughter-houses and standings in the middle of Westgate Street, near the Cross, and their Hall was the house now occupied by Mr. Nest, the Confectioner. The *Grocers* had their Guild Hall in the fine old house occupied by Mr. Beal on the opposite side of Westgate Street. The *Weavers*, who claimed S. Anne as their patron Saint, maintained a service in her honour in the Church of S. Michael.

The *Weavers* and *Clothiers* are said to have had their Hall in Watery Lane, near S. Catherine's Church.

A Fraternity dedicated to S. Thomas, perhaps the *Coopers and Joiners*, maintained a chantry in S. Mary de Crypt Church.

The *Smiths and Hammermen* perhaps had their Hall in Long Smith Street.

A portion of the old Chapel of Kyneburg's Hospital, or Kimbrose, was given to the fraternity of *Cordwainers* in 1671 as a Common Hall. Upper College Court was called *Crafts' Lane*, and also *Ironmongers' and Farriers' Lane*, probably because the halls of these two guilds were there.

The decay of the Craft Guilds arose from three or more causes.

I. At the Reformation they were cruelly plundered by Henry VIII. and Edward VI., under the flimsyest pretence of zeal for religion; and Elizabeth, James I. and Charles I. extorted large sums from the Craftsmen by forcing upon them Patents of Monopoly.

II. The selfishness of the Craft Masters led them to make restrictions on trade which were hateful to the people. Certain families monopolized the trades, and looked with suspicion and dislike on any new comer. In the list of Masters of the Tanners'

Guild, I find such names as Smyth, Payne, Pryce, Jeynes, and especially Lugg, occurring over and over again in the 17th century.

III. Improvements in manufacture, and the introduction of machinery, threw trade more and more into the hands of capitalists; and the Guilds only made themselves hated and despised in their endeavours to arrest the natural course of events. The obstructions which the Guilds, through their Charters and their influence with Municipal Corporations, were able to place in the way of great factories drove away the trade from ancient towns like Gloucester to places like Birmingham and Manchester, which were free from corporate control.

Thus it was that the Guilds, which in earlier times raised Gloucester to a high state of commercial prosperity, in later times impoverished and well nigh ruined her.

I have said enough to show you that Trade Unions, Friendly Societies, Church Guilds, and the other forms of social union for mutual help and advantage are not peculiar to our times. History is always repeating itself. There is nothing new under the sun.

In the 17th century the journeymen were content with their position; their wages were low, but they were regularly paid, and work was certain. In the 18th century, under the Factory System, the workmen were completely in the power of their employers, they had no rights and no customs. During the latter part of the 18th century the grievances of workmen led to riot and bloodshed, and Acts of Parliament were passed to improve their condition. Between 1790 and 1800 the first Trade Unions were formed to protect the employed against their employers. At first there were no regular payments; all contributed voluntarily to a common fund. From this fund such members as were out of work or sick were assisted.

This was the beginning of a movement which has had mighty results. Artisans in the 19th century have fought the same kind of battle as the merchants fought in the 11th and 12th centuries, and the Craft Masters a century later. Step by step the English workman has won for himself a power and an influence which is now felt and acknowledged by every class and party in the land.

The Guildsmen of the 19th and 20th centuries (call themselves what they will) will do well to imitate the virtues of their fore-runners in the middle ages, and avoid their selfishness. History is written, not for our amusement, but for our warning and encouragement. May the English Craftsman, proud of the race from which he springs, and grateful for the freedom which he inherits from his fathers, be in the future, as in the past, a bright example to his brethren on the Continent, and his kinsmen across the seas !
