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**The Manuscripts of Coventry**

by M. D. Harris  
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## THE MANUSCRIPTS OF COVENTRY.

BY MARY DORMER HARRIS.

MANY valuable documents belonging to Coventry were destroyed at the Birmingham Free Library fire in 1879.<sup>1</sup> A similar fate befell the early registers of St. Michael's at the Reformation, because of some "marks of Popery" found in them, while later books met with destruction in 1699, when the parish clerks carelessly put hot ashes under a cupboard in the vestry. In recent times the Grammar School Library has been dispersed,<sup>2</sup> while of the Priory records scattered at the Reformation little remains save one or two rolls of the cellarer's and pittancer's annual accounts,<sup>3</sup> which mention among other things a mumming or "interludium," and record extra expenses—for delicacies, no doubt—at the season of the "O's," that is when the anti-phones begin with "O," just before Christmas.

In spite of all this destruction and dispersal, thousands of manuscripts of historic value, belonging to the Corporation, the representatives of the old craft companies and Trinity Church, yet remain at Coventry.

The special feature of this last collection is the unique fifteenth-century MS. dealing with the duties of the clerk,

<sup>1</sup> See Fretton's Introduction to Sharp's *Antiquities of Coventry*, p. xiv., for list of the principal MSS. of this collection. It seems possible that the Reader MSS. in the Coventry Free Library make up to some extent for this loss.

<sup>2</sup> See Sharp, *Antiquities*, pp. 172-6, for an account of the library. The books had been much damaged and many lost before the sale. The catalogue was bought by Cambridge University.

<sup>3</sup> Warw. MSS., 168,239, *Compotus* of Br. Joh. Warde, cellarer, 1502-3. *Ibid.*, 168,235, *Compotus* of Br. Rob. Colman, pittancer, 1505-6 (Birmingham Free Library). The Priory chartulary is at the Record Office (Exch. K. R. Misc. Bks., vol. xxi.), the foundation charter at the British Museum (Add. MSS., ch. 28, 657).

called "The Offesse of the Dekyn,"<sup>1</sup> but the church also possesses hundreds of documents, chiefly land transfers, some as old as the time of Henry III. A catalogue of three hundred and fifty of these deeds has been printed in a local newspaper,<sup>2</sup> and one for the whole collection on simple lines exists in MS. in the hand of the antiquary, Thomas Sharp.<sup>3</sup> The registers begin in 1561,<sup>4</sup> and the churchwardens' accounts in 1560, with a few entries of an earlier date. These last are full of interesting items as to the displacement of church furniture in the settlement under Elizabeth, and contain the curious entry of a payment to a joiner in 1617, the year of James I.'s visit to Coventry, "for amending of one of the Communion Tables lent to St. Mary Hall, when King James came, that was broken."

Large as this collection is, it is quite dwarfed by that in St. Mary Hall, the property of the Corporation, which numbers one hundred and eighty-eight volumes, thousands of charters, rolls and writs, of which the oldest, dating from about 1180, a grant of privileges to his tenants from Ranulf, Earl of Chester, is the foundation of municipal self-government in Coventry. Of all these manuscripts by far the most valuable is the city "Leet Book," which has now been printed, practically in its entirety, by the Early English Text Society.<sup>5</sup> It is a stout volume, containing some four hundred and fifty pages, bound in its original boards and calf, with parchment end-papers covered with mediæval music. The entries, made in Latin, French and English, by scribes from the fifteenth

<sup>1</sup> Wickham Legg, *Clerk's Book* of 1549; Sharp, *Antiquities*, pp. 122-4.

<sup>2</sup> In the *Coventry Herald* in a series of articles by the present writer, 1912-14.

<sup>3</sup> In the possession of the clerk of the vestry.

<sup>4</sup> The names of Shakespeare, Ardern and Barnard occur. The St. Michael's registers begin in 1699, but there are a few entries of earlier date in the Bishop's transcripts at Lichfield.

<sup>5</sup> *Coventry Leet Book or Mayor's Register*, transcribed by M. Dormer Harris.

to the early seventeenth centuries, record the city by-laws passed by the Court Leet between 1420 and 1555, with a chronicle of royal visits and other remarkable events which distinguished the local history of that period. A great deal of the most valuable fifteenth-century matter, a city chronicle with much human interest, is in the hand of John Boteler, Town Clerk in 1480, a diligent scribe with no small historic talent, whose name well deserves mention among the very few who have helped to give a picture of town life in later mediæval England.

Next, perhaps, in order of interest to the *Leet Book* is the record of the Corpus Christi Guild,<sup>1</sup> wherein are given, besides the account of the guild estates, yearly lists of the names of, and subscriptions paid by, the brethren and sisters of this fraternity, which included not only Coventry citizens of every calling, but men and women from all parts of England and from Ireland, nobles, clerics of high position, as well as traders and parsons throughout the country-side.

It is well that the records of this brotherhood, probably originally composed of the Priory tenants, have been preserved, for time has dealt unkindly with the guild church and hall of St. Nicholas, companions to the still existing church and hall of the Trinity Guild. St. Nicholas Church fell into decay and disappeared after the Reformation, the hall was swept away in the eighteenth century, but the book remains, doubly precious now the companion Trinity Guild volume has perished, to show the union of Coventry folk with folk of distant shires, and the constitution of one of the great brotherhoods which played so notable a part in the life of the city in the Middle Ages.

Of members, people of much and people of small importance, the volume furnishes long lists between the years 1488 and 1535. From Rutland they came, from Westmorland, from Huntingdon, Manchester, "Bristow," from Cambridge, "Langadok in Wallia," Wing in Buckingham,

<sup>1</sup> The Guild was founded in 1348.

and Tewkesbury, the many Dublin names reminding us that Coventry was on the road to the north-west, where ship was taken to the sister island.

Gathering a few names at random, we find "Maister Wyliam Hassard de Maudlen Colage," the Prior of Daventry, the Master "of Seynt Bartulmewes spytul," "Dan Tho. Branche, Celerar of Glocetter abay," "Alycia Hortell, sylkwoman," "George Talbot, Erll of Shrewsbury, and Dam An vxor eius," "Joh. Corbet de London, ffostryonsherer," a "Clerk of the pastre of the Kynges hous," "John Bradwell, Tewxbere," "Ryc. Blakwall de Worsworthe in the Peeke, ledman,"<sup>1</sup> and "Tho. Nedecote de Cornewell, Tynman."<sup>2</sup>

It is said that Prince Edward, afterwards Edward V., was brother of this Guild, but the entries do not begin till after his death.

Among the members, however, was the king's half-brother, Thomas, Marquis of Dorset,<sup>3</sup> of the family of the Greys of Astley, who held land in Coventry hard by Trinity Church. The entry, "My lady Ferrys of Badysley," recalls a family whose representatives still dwell at Baddesley Clinton; and "my lady Anne Barkley,"<sup>4</sup> the great west-country family who held Calaudon Castle in Warwickshire. Interesting entries show the membership of "Adryan Quyny of Stretford,"<sup>5</sup> "Robert Shakespier"<sup>6</sup> (1489), "Thomas Somourfeyll of Erdrichton, gent."<sup>7</sup>—without doubt an ancestor of Somerville of Edstone, author of *The Chase*—"Syr Walter Smyth, knyght,"<sup>8</sup> of Shirford, murdered at the

<sup>1</sup> Corpus Christi Guild Book, ff. 41 back, 42, 49, 49 back, 64, 68 back, 74 back, 82 back.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Guild Book, f. 25 back. Another entry is, "De domino Johanne Grey, domino de Powes, vjs. viijd," *ibid.*, f. 11 back, and "De domino Grey, Milite, domino de Lisle," *ibid.*, f. 39 back. The nobility are well represented, e.g. "domina Katerina, domina de Hastynges," *ibid.*, f. 23, "the Yerle of Huntyngton," *ibid.*, f. 313.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 313 back.      <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 301.      <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 13 back.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 62.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 313 back.

instigation of Dorothy, his faithless wife, and John Rastell,<sup>1</sup> without doubt that unfortunate lawyer and printer who was involved in the downfall of Sir Thomas More. Rastell married More's sister, Elizabeth, and it is most likely it was this sister, and not, as the Archdeacon of Northampton suggests,<sup>2</sup> Mistress Stafforton, whom the author of *Utopia* came to visit at Coventry, when, as he tells us, he fell in with a strangely-deluded friar.

Besides this collection there are numerous account books belonging to the various companies, mercers, drapers, fullers, weavers, tanners, carpenters, cappers, bakers and smiths, which have had a continuous existence since the Middle Ages. These are mostly scattered over the town lodged in lawyers' offices, and are rather more difficult of access than those belonging to the Corporation, being guarded by people who have something better to do in a solid business way than minister to the wants of eccentric persons who wish to read ancient writing.

The most interesting late example of these books—that of the smiths, goldsmiths, chandlers, pewterers, cutlers and wire-drawers, which begins in 1684—has recently been acquired by the British Museum. Here the scribes have indulged in somewhat rudimentary examples of painting, and emblazoned on its pages the arms of the crafts, derived from the London Livery Companies, together with a painting of two Godivas, a white lady mounted on a white horse, and a black lady with gold epaulettes and short red skirt mounted on the elephant of Coventry.

The lists of names in these MSS. make them a happy hunting ground for the genealogist, and the craft rules they set forth reveal little known points of the workings of various industries. They also contain very naive allusions to the

<sup>1</sup> De Joh. Rastell, filio Thome Rastell, vjs. viijd., *ibid.*, f. 28 back.

<sup>2</sup> *Highways and Byways in Shakespeare's Land*, p. 399. John Rastell was Coroner of Coventry, 1508-9 (*Leet Book*, p. 619). For More's visit, see Nichols, *Bibl. Top. Brit.*, pt. iv. vol. xvii. p. 41.

famous Corpus Christi plays, and such entries as a payment of fourpence "to Fastoun for hangyng Jwdas," or a like sum for "coc-croyng"<sup>1</sup> at the scene of Peter's denial, shock the modern ear. Occasional items illustrate points of national history. Thus the Drapers' Accounts for 1555 record expenses for weapons of war, showing the unquiet state of the Midlands at the time of Wyatt's rebellion. The story of the repulse of Suffolk, representative of the Greys of Astley, at Coventry in 1554 is a dramatic one, and shows how a little quickness might have turned the course of history. Suffolk had come down to rouse the Midlands against Queen Mary and the Spanish match. He sent a messagē from Leicester, where he lay. In Coventry feeling was divided, the ruling families were conservative, nevertheless the messenger met with assurances of support. They urged him to go back at once and bring his master. "My Lord's quarrel is right well known; it is God's quarrel; let him come and make no stay, for the town is his own." But the messenger was weary and would fain have rested; moreover, the January day was darkening; if the citizens were roused and fell to plunder in the darkness substantial folk would be alienated from his master's cause. Nothing was done. Meanwhile the city council received a warning to be on their guard. Before daybreak everyone was on the alert, and when the Duke appeared he found the walls manned and the gates shut against him.

These doings are reflected in the Drapers' Accounts thus:—<sup>2</sup>

Md. that we have payd for own occapacyon the  
xxxj daye of Januarye, when the duke of Soffoke  
was takyn.

<sup>1</sup> Sharp, *Coventry Mystery Plays*, p. 36. A new "hoke" to hang Judas cost 6d. in 1578. Two actors had 16d. for playing the part of "worms of conscience," *ibid.*, p. 68. The Weavers' Play, sole remaining MS. of the Coventry Mystery Plays, has been several times printed.

<sup>2</sup> Drapers' Accounts, f. 41.

Itm, payd for wachyng to the harnys men for vij days and viij nyghtts ..	lviijs. vjd.
Itm, payd for a sheffe of aroys .. ..	ijs. viijd.
Itm, payd for the fetheryng of xvj aroys and vij newe aroys and mendyng the cassys of them .. ..	xviijd.
Itm, for iij dossyn of poyntts .. ..	vjd.
Itm, payd for iij sworde gyrdylls ..	xviijd.
Itm, payd for ij gyrdylls for sheffe areys	iiijd.
Itm, payd for bostryngys and a brassar <sup>1</sup>	iijd.
Sma iijli. vs. ijd.	

It could be wished that in England we had more national feeling with regard to our past history, and greater facilities for printing documents such as those which reveal the life of the city of Coventry in bygone times.

<sup>1</sup> Brassart, a protection for the arm.