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The Merchant Venturers of Bristol; an Address

by L. G. Taylor
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THE MERCHANT VENTURERS OF BRISTOL

*An Address by SIR LIONEL GOODENOUGH TAYLOR,
President, to the Annual Meeting of the Bristol and
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THE earliest reference to the existence of the Guild Merchant in Bristol¹ is contained in the Close Roll of Henry III, 1217, and is a royal mandate to the Bailiffs of Bristol to distrain on those who did not wish to be of the Guild Merchant according to the custom of the town. Later the Bristol merchants obtained a monopoly of trade. Latimer states that the Guild at an early period had become a civic body and a constituent part of the municipal government. Its funds appear to have been amalgamated before 1314 as the burgesses are recorded to have informed the ill-fated Edward II that:—

out of the profits of the Gild Merchants and of the town they support eight bridges, the pavement or pitching, five conduits of water, the Quay and the public officers. a very helpful contribution towards the reduction of local rates.

Even as late as 1605, when the Guild faced a recession in trade, and was in low water, although it had received its charter of incorporation only fifty-three years before, the City Corporation took the reorganisation of the Guild in hand and after helpful management ceased to interfere again. Yet the close association remained; in 1624 the Mayor, William Pitt, included the Mastership of the Hall as well as an illustrious name as a claim to fame.

¹ The history of the craft guilds of the city has been recorded in the privately-printed work of Alderman F. F. Fox. The chief work on the Merchant Venturers available to me was John Latimer, *The History of the Society of Merchant Venturers of Bristol*, 1902. Since this address was given the Bristol Record Society has published, as its vol. xvi, Patrick MacGrath, *Records relating to the Society of Merchant Venturers of Bristol*.

The first charter preserved in the Hall today dates from the reign of Edward VI, 1552. It established the 'arte or misterie of marchaunt Venturers of our saide Citty of Bristoll,' and enjoined that members should be elected annually and sworn in before the Mayor and Aldermen of the City. They were empowered to make their own rules and ordinances provided that they did not contravene the laws of the realm or the rights of the Corporation. A 'Lamentable representation' had been made to Edward VI which led to the granting of this charter. It was based on the interference in a trade monopoly by divers artificers and handicraftsmen, destitute of mercantile experience, who had presumptuously undertaken to traffic in merchandise to and from foreign parts. The young King, or his advisers, therefore agreed to help the newly incorporated Guild of Merchant Venturers, with Edward Prynne as its first Master, by granting them what Latimer terms their 'Magna Carta.' Even with this royal intervention all did not go well in establishing a trade monopoly and, in order to penalise small offenders trading outside their body, the Guild sought confirmation of this charter from the late King's sister Queen Elizabeth in 1566, who graciously listened to their prayer. It is a brief document, and the Hall waited until the reign of Charles I for confirmation not only of the two previous royal charters but for powers over their own body and over every Bristol merchant trading overseas. This was granted in the charter of 1639, upon which the Hall works today, notably on its Charter Day of November 10 unless that date fall on a Sunday. This important charter approved the Guild's ordinances of its own government and created a body of Assistants from 'ten of the gravest and discreetest' members, to help the Master and his two Wardens in the art and mystery of its establishment. It is a highly embellished and lengthy manuscript with an excellent portrait of the martyr King to head its lettering. Election to the guild was restricted to merchants who had served a seven years' apprenticeship to one of its members and was a freeman of the city, an observance followed today with a modified interpretation of the word 'merchant.'

It is unfortunate for modern research that very few documents (the collection of charters excepted) have been allowed to survive. Royal Commissions had an unpleasant habit of visiting an important borough—and Bristol was for many centuries the second largest township in the realm—when they were sent to obtain financial assistance for the upkeep of foreign and civil wars. If they wished to distraint upon wealthy burghers, what better source of information could be to their hands than the records of important guilds of which the Merchants held the lead? The records of the Tudor period do not exist; and their loss to history is great, as they would undoubtedly have recorded the close connection of the Guild with the fitting out of the *Matthew* by John and Sebastian Cabot. With eighteen Bristol sailors, they ventured to cross the Atlantic in a mere caravel and discovered Newfoundland on 2 May 1497. Latimer does not mention the name of Cabot in his history of the Hall, as he lacked documentary evidence; but a voyage of this importance made to discover 'the land of the Great Khan' must have been financed by members of the Merchant Guild. Henry VII had missed the chance of engaging Columbus and was glad to favour John Cabot and his three sons. Contemporary evidence confirms the tradition of their connection with Bristol. A letter to the Duke of Milan from his envoy in London, Raimondo di Sonano, says that John Cabot's first voyage was discredited because he was a foreigner and poor, and only supported by the testimony of his partners who were all Englishmen from Bristol. He records of the second voyage that while Royal letters were given to John Cabot alone, the principals of the business were citizens of Bristol. John Cabot with a meagre pension from Henry VII of £20 paid on his return, could not have sailed without financial aid from a body of merchants, who could prevent any trading out of the port by any outside their body or without assistance. The Society of Merchant Venturers seem justified in entertaining today a belief in the help their Guild gave to the founding of North America, when John Cabot stepped ashore and planted the flag of England on Newfoundland.

Guild records were lost during the reign of James the First. That rapacious monarch, ostensibly to finance the dowry of his daughter, Elizabeth of Bohemia, lodged a royal demand for 'purveyance.' The Hall's record of this distraint has disappeared, but the City Council's minute book, dated 1641, has an entry:—

'That a letter be written to the burgesses now serving in Parliament . . . to seek reformation and redress against such persons as by unjust informations to his Majesty . . . have injured and abused the merchants of this City, and by entering into the Merchants Hall, *taking away their book of accounts and other writings*, and procuring many of the inhabitants of this City to be pursued up (to London) and unjustly handled and ill-dealt with.'

Charles I was no less exacting, instructing household officers to treat with the merchants as the royal expenditure 'was likely to increase by God's grace by reason of our children.' Later in the Civil War in 1644 Charles established a mint in Bristol Castle to melt some of the silver of the Hall for the payment of the Royalist Army, massive salvers preferred, as at Oxford, to coin more easily into silver Crowns. No records of his demands on Bristol merchants for twelve years have survived; no minutes were kept and the only record is in State papers. The first minute book of the Guild's Standing Committee is dated 90 years after the Charter of Incorporation.

It is strange that this period of distraint should have marked the Guild's recorded interest in financing English explorers and privateers to sail the seas and harass the vessels of neighbouring countries with whom Great Britain was periodically at war. Piracy was deliberately encouraged by Elizabeth, and documents in the Record office show how a Bayonne ship returning from Newfoundland with a cargo of 108,000 dried fish was taken by a ship appointed by Sir Walter Raleigh and brought to Uphill, in earlier days a Roman port by Weston-super-Mare. There was no redress. And later, under legitimate sailing, the fine mariner, Martin Pring, left to explore North Virginia, the name given generally to North America, in the *Speedwell* of

50 tons and a companion ship of 20 tons. This was in 1603 before there was any English settlement on any part of the American Continent. An effort to settle was made three years later, and the Bristol Archives office has a list of ten thousand apprentices sent out to Virginia, a book treasured by Americans anxious to establish a genealogical background.

A local ballad celebrated the feat of the *Angel Gabriel* in beating off three Spanish galleons, and the *Eagle* was no less famous for bringing back prizes worth £40,000. Charles I encouraged legitimate warfare rather than mere piracy, by granting letters of marque. Captain Thomas James¹ was chosen to lead a 'venture' to discover the North West Passage, and as a man of learning rather than a seaman wrote the story of his experiences. He chose 'a well-conditioned strong ship of burthen of 70 tons, stored with provisions for eighteen months and manned with a crew of twenty-one.' He utterly refused to take aboard any man of Arctic experience, probably because he was not a professional sailor and had no wish to have his authority disputed. The qualifications he insisted on for his crew were that they should be 'unmarried, approved, able and healthy'; he took on board a baker, a brewer, and a butcher to ensure the provision of good victuals. On 2 May 1631 he sailed in the *Henrietta Maria*, loyally named after Charles's Queen. The ship was furnished at the costs and charges of the Society, 'the Master, Wardens and Commonalty of the arte or misterie of Merchant Adventurers undertaking to pay the wages.' He failed to find the Passage but wintered in Hudson Bay. He and his crew stripped his ship and sank her, suffered much hardship on land through the winter, and raised her to return to Bristol in the October of the following year, 1632. He brought her back to port badly battered and with nothing to record except the glory of adventure. Other intrepid seamen were financed by the Guild in the Stuart period. Maritime trade was developed in the next century, when the Gold Coast

¹ His story has been told by Mr Cyril Clarke, ex-Master of the Society, in a lecture given to the Bristol branch of the Royal Empire Society in January 1922.

was opened up with its vista of wealth, and the West Indies were developed. In all this enterprise the Guild played its part to the great advantage of its members and the City.

Throughout the 19th century members maintained an active interest in the sea by helping to develop the value of the Port both in the City Docks and at Portishead. And if maritime adventure was not financed, trade was helped by straightening out a tortuous river to gain safe access to the sea, and by financial help given to the promoters of the railways to London and to Exeter, for which promotion meetings were held in the Hall. The Company's Manor of Clifton, acquired in 1676, was turned into a residential suburb after the Hotwells of the 18th century, generously financed by the Society, had ceased to present any competition with Bath.

In the present century some of the Company's educational activities, begun in the 18th century in carrying out the Colston Trust, have been taken from the Hall's direction. The Merchant Venturers Technical College which grew out of the Diocesan Trade School has been wholly absorbed by the Faculty of Engineering of the University. The large Secondary School has been taken over by the Local Educational Authority and, as Cotham Grammar School, takes a high place in the new scheme of the Butler Act. Colston Girls' School is an aided school under the new Act with members of the Guild remaining undisturbed on its Governing Body, and control of the Alms-houses remains untouched, except by enemy action in St. Michael's Hill and the Mariners' Almhouse at the entrance to King Street. The most notable activity of the present century is the control of St. Monica's Home, a generous gift by another Bristol philanthropist, the late Mr H. H. Wills, for the benefit of chronic and incurable patients, lavishly endowed and presenting annuities far outside the City boundaries. Mr Wills was impressed by the integrity of the Hall in the long administration of Colston Boys' School and paid the Guild today a compliment akin to that of Edward Colston 250 years ago.

The first building to be occupied by the Company was Spicer's Hall with its frontage on Bristol Bridge by the 'Back',

or the 'Welsh Back' as this Avon frontage is better known today. Spicer's Hall was the 13th century mansion of an important Bristol family and appears to have been built by Richard le Spycer, a successful merchant of the Middle Ages. Richard was three times Mayor, and represented the City in Parliament in 1355. Later he bequeathed his residence to the Mayor and Corporation, who leased it to the Merchants Guild for their meetings, at a rental of 20 shillings a year. There is no record of the size of Spicer's house; fortunately its exceptional wooden doorway was removed in 1885 and presented to the City, being set up in the Museum. The door contains seven panels with exquisite tracery with side brackets and groining springing from capitals, the whole emphasizing the importance of the residence. A fire in 1906 destroyed the greater part of the house fronting the river, leaving the spacious hall at the back of a courtyard where the merchants assembled. Bristol members may recall this mediaeval building, which was 32 feet by 21 feet with a plain roof. It had ten bays well preserved. The building had long lost all its dignity and was a storehouse for bananas when I last saw it. It was consumed in the fire by enemy action in November 1940 and the last trace of its ancient character was removed two years ago. It has passed; we remember it with regret, for the first members of the Guild gathered there in 1467, when William Canynge, Mayor, carried out the terms of the Council's ordinance and elected the Master and Wardens from those who had served as Mayor and Sheriffs of the Town. Here the Fellowship or Guild regulated the sale of meat, oil, wool and wax imported from abroad. In 1493 the Fellowship outgrew Spicer's Hall, and were allowed to purchase a piece of land in the Marsh by a bastion of the City wall on which to build a chapel to the blessed Pope Clement, the patron saint of Mariners. They did not transfer to their new property until 1561, and in their use of the Chapel for their meetings, must have been put to some inconvenience, as Latimer, quoting from an inventory of 1631, writes of the simplicity of the life of that day at their Councils. There was no covering for the floor, no table cutlery and no drinking vessels. Eighteen 'joyned stools' were provided for present

and past officers, and ordinary members were seated upon five homely wooden benches. For dinner one long drawing table board and two shorter tables were covered with damask and diaper, and fourteen dozen trenchers and six dozen napkins were provided. As the Hall controlled the import of wine from Bordeaux, Spain and Portugal, presumably drinking vessels were not wholly neglected. A quit rent of twelve pence, which if in arrear would lead to distraint, was regularly paid until 1900 when it was redeemed.

There is no record of the building of the second hall which occupied the space of St. Clement's Chapel, a door and some stone tracery of which was discovered in 19th century repairs. It was first mentioned in 1623 when some wainscoting was fixed, and the Chapel was used for meetings until 1701 when a large building scheme was in progress for some years, and additional space was obtained by the removal of some small tenements to provide a reception room over the Chapel, and banqueting and withdrawing rooms at right angles, with a small garden plot at the back of the adjoining almshouse. This is the old hall as we knew it so well, and where for years we attended meetings of consequence and banquets of Victorian measure. Its destruction in two blitzes is a great loss to historic Bristol. The building, though badly shaken, might have survived the first attack in December 1940, but a second blasting in the following May showed that the early Georgian building had an interior of rubble, and its site is largely occupied today by the rush of traffic, surging round a round-about at the entrance to Queen Square. The banqueting hall was an impressive room capable of dining a hundred members. Its chief charm lay in its furnishing with crystal chandeliers and mahogany tables and chairs, all of which have been saved. They are placed in a new hall carved out of two pretentious and certainly well-built Victorian houses fronting Clifton Down, and still maintaining the Guild's connection with the Avon. Members may eventually return to a site adjoining their old hall in the Marsh and their time-honoured association with King Street. But that return is not yet, though the land has been acquired.