

THE MUNICIPAL RECORDS OF SHREWSBURY.

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During the last five years a committee—I will not say of experts, but—of local gentlemen and one lady, who are very much interested in local antiquities, and have most of them had some experience in dealing with and deciphering old documents, have under the authority of the mayor and corporation been engaged in the work of cataloguing and arranging the corporation records. They have carefully examined the whole of the records prior to the year 1837, and have cleaned them, tied them up in separate brown paper packages, and have sorted and classified them, and attached a label to each package, bearing a note of contents and date, and have arranged them in 75 tin boxes, all carefully grouped, so far as regards the subject matter. They have also made a detailed catalogue or index to the whole of the records, so that now any single document can at once be found without any long search being necessary. They have within the last few weeks presented their report and the MS. catalogue to the mayor and corporation, who have directed the same to be printed. It is hoped that this printed catalogue will be ready and accessible to students and others who are interested within a few weeks time. The total number of documents is nearly 3000, and some of the series commence as early as the reigns of Kings John and Henry III, and are practically complete to the present time. Probably few boroughs have so complete and unrivalled a series of records as Shrewsbury. No thorough examination of the records has hitherto been made. A few have been examined by Archdeacon Owen, the Rev. John Brickdale Blakeway, and other historians of the town, who have made much use of the records they have examined. But when a thorough examination is made, it is certain that much new light will be thrown on the history of the town and liberties of Shrewsbury. The

new catalogue will vastly assist and lighten the labours of any future investigator.

The records must have had a narrow escape from destruction by fire in November 1881, when the Shire Hall was burnt down; but I believe I am correct in saying that none of the corporation MSS. were lost at that time. At least the committee cannot learn that any were burnt, and there are no great gaps in any series, which point to destruction.

Very few also have been injured through damp, or any similar cause of decay, often so disastrous to records. The number of documents which are not accessible to students, owing to decay caused by damp or otherwise, can probably be counted on one's fingers. Taken as a whole they are in a splendid state of preservation.

The committee have arranged the records under the following main heads or classes :

- I. Royal Charters, and Grants of Fairs and Markets, Murage, &c.
- II. Gild Merchant, Admissions of Burgesses, and Assembly of the Common Council.
- III. Courts of Law.
- IV. Finance, including Imperial Subsidies, Assessments, and Taxes, Bailiffs' and Mayors' Accounts, and Poor Relief, &c.
- V. Deeds affecting privileges and property; and Town Bye Laws.
- VI. Military Papers.
- VII. The Royal Free Grammar School Accounts. &c.
- VIII. Miscellaneous, including Petitions and Letters to Bailiffs, Horse and Cattle Fairs, Council of the Marches, Borough Charities, Town Property, Mint, Bonds of Sergeants at Mace, Poll Books, Bridges, County Papers, and general miscellaneous documents not included under any of the first seven heads.

I do not propose to enter into any details concerning any particular records, but simply to give some general idea of the contents of the various main heads or classes.

I. First, as to the *Royal Charters*, and grants of Fairs and Markets, and Murage. There is a complete series, from the first extant charter, which is dated 11th November, 1 Richard I, 1189, to the present time. There must have been an earlier charter still, granted by Henry II, as it is mentioned in a charter of John; but it has long since been lost, certainly as long ago as the reign of Elizabeth, when

all the then existing charters were copied into a quarto volume which still remains. The charter of Richard I grants the town of Salopesberia to the burgesses thereof, to be holden of the King at the annnal rent of forty marks of silver. This and several of the later charters are kept in the Museum for the benefit of the public.

King John granted two charters to the town, before he had been a fortnight on the throne. The first confirms the lost charter of Henry II; and the second sanctions the formation of a common council of the town, and authorizes the burgesses to elect two of the most loyal and discreet burgesses, and present them to the Sheriff; and these two burgesses so chosen were to keep the præpositure (*i.e.* the office of provost or reeve) of the town, and they could only be removed by the common council. The common council were also employed to elect four burgesses to keep the pleas of the crown. And so in 1199 the burgesses apparently first elected their own common council, and the office of King's provost or reeve, by whom the town had formerly been governed, came to an end.

King John granted yet a third charter to the burgesses, 24 Feb. in the sixth year of his reign, 1204-5, by which he granted them the town and hundred (afterwards called the liberties) of Shrewsbury, to be holden of the King at an annual fee-farm of 45 marks. He also granted them all pleas and causes, and the right to elect two of their number to keep the pleas of the crown. They were no longer to be compelled to plead for their tenements by writ of mort d'ancestor, but might conduct themselves by the old law of the town. They were permitted to take toll from all Welshmen coming to the town with merchandise. And lastly (to omit many other matters) they had the grant of a fair for three days on the 1st and two following days of June.

King Henry III was at Shrewsbury in 1226, and a few months afterwards, on 20 March 1226-7, granted a charter to the town, which recognised and established the authority of the merchant gild of Shrewsbury; and a second, on the same date, probably because the provision was momentarily overlooked, which forbade any person purchasing raw hides or undressed cloth within the borough, unless he be in lot and scot, and in assessments and talliaiges with the burgesses.

Thirty years later, in 1256, Henry III granted two additional charters to the burgesses; by the first he granted that if any burgess died with or without a will, his goods should not be confiscated by the crown, but the whole should go to his heirs. The second gave to the Shrewsbury burgess freedom from arrest for the debt of any co-burgess when passing through another town, a most valuable privilege at that time.

Edward III, on 3 March, 1326-7, granted the burgesses a fair on the feast of St. Matthew; and 14 months later, licence to erect mills for grinding corn and malt,—a privilege hitherto belonging only to the Abbot of Shrewsbury. In 1341, he granted them a prison and the power of attachment, and of fining persons convicted before the bailiffs. And this charter was confirmed by parliament then sitting.

In 1398 Richard II confirmed by *Inspeximus* a composition of the bailiffs and burgesses, by which the latter elected twelve men to assist the bailiffs in the government of the town. The bailiffs were to nominate 25 resident householders, whose duty it should be to choose annually six sessors and two coroners. A new composition was entered into in 1433, which was also allowed by an *Inspeximus* for three years. Another composition of 1444, confirmed by charter 12 Jan. 1445-6, appointed 12 aldermen, and 24 assistants, and gave the bailiffs power to hold sessions of gaol-delivery.

Henry VIII in April 1542 granted the burgesses a new charter on the dissolution of Shrewsbury Abbey, to wit, all the liberties, franchises, and privileges within the parishes of Holy Cross and St. Giles which the abbots formerly enjoyed.

Queen Elizabeth by charter in 1586 extended the liberties of the town, adding to it not only the newly acquired parishes of Holy Cross and St. Giles, but also a number of adjacent villages and townships. She also gave the town a court of conscience, to be held every Thursday for matters not exceeding 40s., and a court of record, to be held every Tuesday, with cognisance of fines, statutes-merchant, &c., and power to prove wills of freeholds. The inhabitants were also to be free from all tenths, fifteenths, subsidies, and aids, granted to the crown by the commons.

In 1638, Charles I gave the town a new charter, and, instead of two bailiffs the chief magistrate was henceforth to be mayor. There were to be 24 (instead of 12) aldermen, and 48 assistants who were to be called the common council. This is the working charter of the corporation of Shrewsbury. In 1664, a new charter was drawn up, which did little more than confirm the charters of Elizabeth and Charles I. In June 1684 the burgesses surrendered their charter to King Charles II under pressure, which James II renewed nine months later, shortly after his accession. By this charter, the town was to be governed by one good and discreet man of the aldermen, who should be mayor, by 12 aldermen, 24 assistants, "one famous man" as recorder, one steward, and one common clerk. The corporation were to fill up vacancies, the King reserving to himself power to remove any at his own will. This power the King attempted to exercise in Jan. 1687-8, but presently found it necessary to retrace his steps, and on the 17th Oct. following, issued an order restoring corporations to their ancient charters and privileges, and removing all officers put in by the crown since 1679. This was the last of the long series of Royal charters to Shrewsbury.

II. The second class of documents are the rolls of the *Gild-Merchant*, Trades Gilds, Admission of Burgesses, and the Books of Assembly of the Common Council.

The gild-merchant rolls commence as early as 11. John, 1209. The earliest is a series of nine parchment rolls, all sewed together. There are lists of "those who are in the gild-merchant, and whose fathers were not before in the liberties of the gild," thirty names, probably previous members. Then follows a list of "those who first entered the gild," nine names, probably new members in 1209. Then "foreigners who entered the gild, and their fines," which varied from half a mark to ten shillings, fifty-six names. Then foreigners "who entered at the last session for the first time," fifty-nine names. Upwards of three hundred names are endorsed on this first roll; and there are altogether upwards of two thousand two hundred names on these nine rolls. On the second roll there appear one hundred and sixty nine names, the first born burgesses of Shrewsbury, whose fathers were

burgesses before them. The gild-merchant must have existed some time before 1209, as there were then persons "whose fathers were before in the gild," but it continued a *voluntary* association until 1227, when Henry III's first charter compelled tradesmen to become members of it.

The later gild-rolls are exceedingly valuable for genealogical purposes, giving very often, on a burgess's admission to the gild, his own name, his father's name, and the names of all his sons.

The earliest of the assembly books of the common council is of high interest, and its contents are very varied. It begins with the order of the procession (of gilds, &c.), on the feast of Corpus Christi, and a list of places within the liberties of the borough, and goes on to give the lists of bailiffs, coroners, and sessors from 13 Richard II. It also contains compositions and ordinances of gilds, admissions of burgesses, copies of deeds, bonds, fines, wills, &c.

III. The Records of the *Courts of Law* form the third class, and we have arranged these in the following order.

1. Curia Salop ; Court Leet and Court Baron and View of Frankpledge ; Mayor's Court. The rolls of these courts are very voluminous, and fill twenty-six, or more than one-third, of the boxes. They commence as early as 1259, and form a nearly complete series of rolls. The earlier rolls of the Curia Magna, arranged under streets and localities, throw much light upon the state of the borough in mediæval times.

2. Court of Piedpoudre, otherwise Piepowder. There are only four rolls, ranging from 1435 to 1453, of this court, which was a court of summary jurisdiction held in markets or fairs, when justice was awarded on the spot. It is so called, as Wharton tells us, from the dusty feet of the suitors, or because justice is done there as speedily as dust can fall from the foot. The steward of the owner was the judge, and the matter in dispute must be determined on the same day on which the injury was done.

3. Court of Record. The writs and pleadings in this court fill fourteen boxes, The proceedings commence in the year 1508, and are civil. Queen Elizabeth, by her charter of 1586, sanctioned the erection of a court of

record to be holden every Tuesday, with cognisance of fines, statutes merchant, &c. But there must have been a court of record long before the date of her charter, as we have proceedings seventy-eight years earlier. The first mention of a recorder is in Henry VI's charter of 14th January, 1445-6, when the bailiffs were empowered to hold sessions of gaol-delivery, and to associate with themselves some sufficient person learned in the law, recorder or seneschal of the town; but there is no appointment of any person to act as recorder until the year 1473, when the town clerk of Shrewsbury is styled recorder. In later times we find prominent local noblemen and gentlemen appointed recorders, such as the Earl of Shrewsbury, the Earl of Powis, and Lord Clive; but these usually appointed deputy-recorders to act in their stead.

4. The Quarter Sessions rolls and papers occupy eight boxes, and date from the year 1564. Power was given to the bailiffs to hold sessions of gaol delivery, as we have just seen, by Henry VI's charter in 1445-6; but if any record of the proceedings for the first one hundred and twenty years after the foundation of the sessions was ever kept, it has long ago been lost.

The sheriff's accounts, including fines de banco, post-fines, quietus, &c., which were associated with the quarter sessions, date from 1444.

5. The Court of Conscience was established by Queen Elizabeth's charter of 1586, to be holden every Thursday, for matters not exceeding 40s.; but we have no separate record of the proceedings of this court.

6. Superior Courts. Under this head are included all proceedings in the civil courts as Westminster, very few in number, those that exist being chiefly records of fines and recoveries.

IV. *Finance* forms the fourth class of records. Under this head we have placed the following:—

1. Imperial Subsidies and Aids. The earliest subsidy roll for Shrewsbury is dated 1296, thirty-three years earlier than the earliest Shropshire roll preserved in the Public Record Office. As is well known, the roll of 1 Edward III, 1327, is for most counties the earliest, and it is generally a well preserved and full roll. There are

several subsidy rolls, prior to 1327 amongst our corporation muniments. There is a very good one for 1313, 7 Edward II, a grant of one-fifteenth of all moveable goods, which contains particulars of one hundred and eighty-nine persons taxed, and is unusually full. It gives details of a man's goods down to his minutest possessions; heifers, sheep, pigs, hides, cloth, wheat, barley, and even spoons, silver buckles, boots and gloves, are all enumerated in this detailed list.

These subsidy rolls, with other assessments, land tax, house and window tax papers, fill two boxes.

2. Bailiffs' Accounts commence in 1256, and are fairly complete until 1638, when the bailiffs came to an end, and mayor's accounts begin. The rolls fill six boxes. These accounts are, as we might expect, among the most valuable records we have for elucidating the history of the town. The historians of Shrewsbury (Owen and Blakeway), have made great use of them, but they have done little more than touch the fringe of these invaluable documents. Any future historian will find here a mine of wealth, as yet scarcely touched.

In almost the earliest roll, we find the charges for our town being fortified to withstand the aggressions of Llewellyn, Prince of Wales, and the townsmen providing for their own safety in consequence of the disputes between Henry III and his barons. Fines, and tolls arising from the gates, fill a considerable number of rolls.

3. Papers relating to the relief of the poor, and accounts relating to the highways, form the last item under the head of Finance, and commence in the year 1559.

V. *Deeds* affecting privileges and property, and the Town Bye-Laws, together fill two boxes, but need no further mention.

VI. *Military Papers* form the sixth class of records. They commence in the reign of Henry VIII. For the reign of Elizabeth, very full rolls are preserved of the musters raised in the town and liberties, with the names of the trained soldiers and statement of the arms in their possession, and minute instructions as to their training, &c. Some of these have been carefully edited by Mr. William Phillips, F.L.S., and are printed in the "Shropshire Archæological Transactions" for the years 1890 and 1891.

VII. *The Royal Free Grammar School* accounts, deeds and papers, fill a large box. Amongst them are numerous seventeenth and eighteenth century leases of the tithes and property granted to the school by its royal founder. A curious list of books presented to the school library deserves mention.

VIII. The eighth and last class we have styled *Miscellaneous*. It comprises a number of papers which could not conveniently be classed under any of the preceding seven heads. Amongst these are a large number of petitions and letters to the bailiffs and mayors, many of the sixteenth century of high interest, some few of historical value. Horse and cattle fairs and sales. Certificates of officials receiving the sacrament, signed by the ministers and churchwardens, under the Test and Corporation Acts. Letters and papers relating to the Council of the Marches of Wales, very few. (Most of these were lost or destroyed at Ludlow, many years ago.) Borough charities. Town property. Bonds of Serjeants-at-Mace, whose duties are defined in the charter of 1389. Poll-Books and papers relating to elections. Bridges, and general miscellaneous documents.

Amongst these is one solitary paper relating to the Shrewsbury mint, a roll of the assays made by the keepers of the dies at Salop, in 1272, 33 Henry III. From this roll it appears that two forges were at work, and that during the twelve months there were two hundred and thirty one assays, and pennies coined to the amount of £7060. Money was coined at Shrewsbury from the reign of Æthelstan (924-940 A.D.) down to the reign of Henry III; but, with the exception of this one roll, we have no records of the mint here. It might be remarked that money was also coined here by Charles I in 1642.

As regards *County Records* there are but very few preserved amongst our municipal records. They are numerous, so far as those villages and places are concerned which lie within the limits of the hundred or liberties of Shrewsbury, but outside these limits practically *nil*. Just two or three tax rolls for various hundreds, a document or two relating to collections for the plague here and there in the county, and that is all.

And I fear that the Shropshire county records in the

custody of the Clerk of the Peace are very few and very modern. The County Quarter Sessions orders commence only in the year 1709. The earlier ones, of which little is now known, are said to have been destroyed in the fire already referred to, which burnt down the Shire Hall in the year 1881.

I might point out that amongst our court rolls are a great many allusions to the *Tensors* of Shrewsbury, those persons who traded in the town, but did not belong to the gild, and who therefore were fined at the Great Court. We find them mentioned in records of the fourteenth century, and onwards; and non-burgesses who traded were fined as recently even as the early part of this century.

I must ask you to pardon this imperfect and inadequate description of the contents of our Borough Muniment Room. I am sure any of the members of the Records Committee present will gladly answer any questions you may like to ask about our records; and will also be glad to receive any suggestions by which their catalogue about to be printed may be improved. They have suggested to the corporation, that it would be well to invite the Historical MSS. Commissioners to send one of their inspectors to examine and report upon the records, when documents of real historical value might very possibly be brought to light.

By the kindness of the town clerk, I am enabled to exhibit a few of our early records.

List of Shrewsbury documents exhibited.

- (1.) Royal Charter, 11 Henry III, 1226.
- (2.) " " 13 Richard II, 1389. (Beautiful initial letter with portraits of the King and Queen.)
- (3.) Gild-Merchant Rolls, 11 John-36 Henry III, 1209-1251.
- (4.) Subsidy Roll, 6 Edward II, 1312-13.
- (5.) " " 7 Edward II, 1313-14
- (6.) " " no date (temp. Edward).
- (7.) Minters' Account, 33-34 Henry III, 1249-50.
- (8.) Suit between the Abbot of Shrewsbury and the Burgesses, *re* the Abbey Mills, 34 Edward I, 1305-6.
- (9.) Bailiff's Accounts, 3-5 Edward I, 1274-6. (Contains record of building the Guild Hall).
- (10.) Assembly Book of Burgesses from 13 Richard II.