

THE
SIX ANCIENT ROLLS
OF
CHURCH WARDENS' ACCOUNTS,
S. LAURENCE, READING.

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Read before the Society, December 21st, 1880.

AMONG the most interesting of our national antiquities are our scattered parochial records ; and the elucidation of these documents tends to promote in no small degree clearer and better views of our social and corporate progress, revealing the under-currents, as it were, of our national life.

Our Church Registers must always be considered the most important of our local archives ; apart from other considerations, being the poor man's only memorial in this world, the church register is a sacred thing. One faint line of manuscript in these, oft mouldering, documents is frequently the only record of a long life of hardship and affliction as bravely and nobly endured as the difficult exploits and sufferings of heroes perpetuated on the brass and marble of our stately cathedrals.

Second only to these, are the accounts of churchwardens, overseers, waywardens, and constables. It is from these we learn the real history of the little community—the social status, and often the doings and strivings of those whose *names* only are recorded in the Registers.

In these, too, we can trace the history of the fabrics of our parish churches, the various changes or mutilations they have undergone, and what is more, we find the names of those under whose auspices much irreparable mischief has been done.

Here also we find particulars of extinct parochial customs, religious and civil. We have details of the items of miracle plays or mysteries, May games, church ales.

In the various special payments to ringers, we have traces of widespread rejoicings over our national victories. We have the local administration of justice illustrated in references to the stocks and whipping post, the pillory, the brank, and the cuckingstool, *i.e.*, the *sedes stercorum*, or tumbrel.

We learn, too, something of the hardships of the poor ; we find who were born “on the fause side o’ the blanket,” and their subsequent history. We can sometimes gain glimpses of poor prentice lads and “wenches” in their efforts to escape the tyranny of unfeeling masters

and mistresses. The old certificates of settlement shew the origin of the settlers in new districts.

Occasionally we find traces of the treatment of pauper lunatics and the cost of the staples and chains procured to bind them. Nay, more, we can find the cost of the miserable shred of red or blue cloth out of which the letters were cut to brand the poor unfortunates on their left arm with the stigma of their poverty.

The surveyors accounts reveal the condition of our highways more graphically in words than an artist could delineate. In winter the main arteries were perfect sloughs of despond; in spring and summer they absorbed half the labour which was more urgently needed elsewhere.

It has been more than hinted of late that these valuable local archives ought to be removed, from the places to which they belong, to some great central registry in London for their better preservation. Now I am decidedly opposed on every ground to this suggestion. At present they are on the very spot they illustrate, and *where*, of course, *they are most wanted for reference*. All that seems to be required is that the historical worth of these documents should be pointed out to the lawful custodians of them, to ensure their careful preservation.

Again, by centralizing our Records we greatly imperil their general safety; one dire catastrophe, fire, for instance, or the ravages of an invasion, would clear the whole kingdom of its ancient registers. Besides, where we have now hundreds of local antiquaries perpetually at work in their investigations, publishing to their parishioners and to the world in a hundred different ways the results of their labours, we should, then, be driven either to the expensive resort of London lodgings, or to the equally miserable and costly expedient of employing a professional copyist.

I cannot but feel that the agitators for this cruel and ruthless spoliation of our country parishes must be a band of *interested* professionals, lawyers, registrars, pedigree makers, or copyists who would thereby, no doubt, reap a golden harvest in town.

I can honestly affirm that after many years of antiquarian experience I have never yet met with any unworthy custodian of our church registers. Many of them it is true are in a deplorable condition, but this has not been the work, nor the result of the apathy, of the present generation. On the contrary I have met with clergy who have not only transcribed their most ancient records, but who with infinite labour have compiled indices of every entry in their registers from their very commencement until now.

I wish, however, I could say the same with regard to the books usually deposited in the parish chest, under the care of the churchwardens and overseers.

I found the old parish chest of a village in Surrey stowed away in an outhouse where poultry was kept; the contents were happily uninjured. It is now in the church.

Many of them have been completely rifled of their contents by the

sexton to light the church fires at a pinch. Very often the books have been retained in the families of those officials in whose time the separate volumes were completed. One farmer I know has two such books, one of them ranging from 1717 to 1730, and from *internal* evidence his family have possessed them for the last 150 years; of course I have made a careful abstract of them.

No! we must never consent to resign our parochial records into the hands of a central registrar; it would be altogether contrary to the spirit of our Saxon policy which rejoices in *localization*. Let us then take warning in time and do our best to preserve them. Where the parish is large and important, and the documents numerous, a dry fireproof closet with an iron door and iron shelves with leather coverings should always be provided; on no account should they be kept in the private houses of the officials, and for more reasons than one.

I have always availed myself of every opportunity of making transcripts of parish records. Most of my spare time has been devoted to this work, and during the last six years I have transcribed *verbatim literatim* no less than 25 church registers in various parts of England, besides numerous other ancient documents.

The last addition to my store has been a careful transcript of the six ancient rolls of church accounts belonging to the church of S. Laurence, which I will now describe.

The earliest of them commences as follows:—

"The grant (*concessio*) of the parishioners to the church of S. Laurence for accomplishing the work of the same church from the feast of S. Catharine in the 11th year of K. Henry, for a whole year from the feast of S. Catherine to the feast of S. Laurence."

After this, in a contemporary hand, are the words "from the feast of S. Catharine unto the feast of S. Laurence are 37 weeks." This has been inserted by the collector because the ink has the same tinge as the sums attached to the names.

As the eleventh year of Henry III commenced on 28th of October, 1226, and as S. Catharine's day falls on the 25th of November following, we know the exact date of the document. The roll has now completed the 654th year of its existence.

This heading is followed by 150 names in one long column, and since 53 of these have apparently made no payments at all, I conclude that this is the roll of all the householders in S. Laurence's parish at that time.

A separate column at the foot contains the names and offerings of a few women, apparently voluntary contributions.

The subscriptions range from 1d. to 13s. (then the price of a good ox).

The localities named are the east part of High Street; the north and south sides of New Street and "Hou'strete."

The east wall of the chancel with its three lancets is all that can now be detected as the work of 1226.

On the other side of the roll is the following memorandum, utterly illegible before the application of a solution of gum arabic with diluted tincture of galls.

"Know ye, &c., that I, Joan Tredben, formerly the wife of Walter Tredben, in my pure widowhood and lawful — reason — have given, granted, &c., to Robert Palmer, of ———, one half-acre of meadow in Burghfield, lying in a meadow called 'Estlandmede,' the north side of which extendeth itself to the water of 'Kenet,' and at the south it reacheth unto 'Lanbroke,' and lieth between the meadow of 'Sti [?] Wyke' on the west part, and between the meadow of John Smyzt on the east part. I have given also and granted to the same Robert half-an-acre of arable in the upper field of Burghfield aforesaid, in a certain corner called 'Marchesmanneshernes,' which on the east side extendeth unto the way which leadeth from Punge unto Radyng, and between the land of the lord of Burghfield (manor) and ——— part. I have given also and granted to the same Robert sixpence of yearly rent ——— from one acre of meadow which he hath in a meadow called 'Estlandmed,' near my half-acre ——— yearly rent accustomed to pay. Having and holding, &c. Given on the day next before the feast of S. Luke ——— in the ninth year of the reign of King Henry, after the conquest." (1224)

I am informed by Dr. Wells that this plot of land still belongs to S. Laurence's church.

Beneath this are certain rents received—

Recd. of Rob. Duf for 2 year's rent vi *skill.* (per ann. iiis.)

Recd. for rent from John Wodemancote xvij*d.*

Recd. of Joan Sweyn for rent vs.

"Paid for the affair of 'Gom. Ede' x*d.*" (Gom or gomme is the early English name for godmother.)

From this it would seem there were at least three holdings belonging to the church in 1226, besides the land at Burghfield.

After this follows the account of the disbursements and receipts connected with the building, and the sale of old material.

For carriage of timber from Erle, iiis. *id.*

To William Boteler for timber purchased, xxs. To Thomas Durrayn for cutting it, vijs.

For carriage from thence we received vijs. viij*d.* from Stephen Barvol, and paid to Philip att More xs. *vid.*

Sum, xxxvijs. *vid.*

It. for a ref-tree (roof-tree) sold, viij*d.*

For timber sold to Will. Bowyar, vij*d.*

Paid to John Pachel Tyler xvjs. viij*d.*, and to Walter Thom, one of his substitutes, viij*d.*

To John Tyler, senior, for work in putting on the tiles, iis.

To John Taler, of Tilhurst, for covering the church, x*d.*

To John, labourer, for repairing the church, iiij*d.*

From Robert Beche for all things sold, iijs. viij*d.*

From Thomas Okes for timber sold, vjs.
 Paid to the chamberlain for tiles, xxvijs. *xd*.
 To Nicholas Spicer for lime, viijs."

The five remaining rolls are of the time of Henry VI.

The first of them is inscribed—

"The account of Will. Lelhome, goldsmyth, and Thomas atte Hawe, chaundeler, sacristans of the church of S. Laurence, Radyng, from the feast of S. Michael the Archangel, Anno 12, Hen. VI, unto the same." (As the king began to reign on the 1st of September, this document was written in 1433.)

They commence office with 6s. in hand.

Collections were made from the parishioners on the feasts of All Saints, Christmas, and Easter.

On this roll are the following items :—

Recd. from Thomas Clerk for the clapper of the great bell, iiij*d*.

Recd. xs. the bequest of Richd. Glover.

Recd. vjs. viij*d*. the bequest of John Barton, butcher.

(The Bartons frequently occur; the brass of Walter Barton, who died 1538, still lies in the chancel.)

Of the bequest of Richd. Benton, iiij*d*.

" " Thomas Glover, xx*d*.

" " Will. Lousse, xx*d*.

" " John Markham, junr., vjs. viij*d*.

" " John Chapman, xiid., at the hands of
 Will. Bressele.

" " Thomas Couper, vi*d*.

"Sum, xxxs. *xd*.

Rents—

From two cottages, held by the Woodfolder of the Abbot, in New Street, vii*d*.

From Will. Fitchett, for ten^t in N. S., xx*d*.

Robt. Pasteler, " " id.

For a yard in N.S., xiid.

Robt. Newland, for ten^t in High street, xviiij*d*.

Rich. Turnour " " iiij*d*.

Peter Delamere " " xiid.

Henr. Roolf, cottage in New street, id.

The tenement in the Cornchepyng yard in Lortemerelane, viijs.

The yard in Lortemere lane, xiid.

An empty place in the venella (narrow road or footpath) called Gotterne lane.

From John Kirkby's cottage in the same, xiid.

John Porter, of New Street, iiis.

John Tyler, " iiis.

Jas. Forster of New Street, iiis. ivd.
 Simon Porter, Gutter lane, vid.
 Joan Denton, for a yard she holds, 6d.

Sum of all rects. vii. iijs. iiijd.

Paid for Peter pins and smoke ferthynges, vs. vjd.
 Paid to the maker of lights by the year in gross, ijs.
 Washing for the year, xxd.
 Paid John Tyler for keeping the clock and lighting the lights,
 vijs.
 For wax purchased to sustain the light of All Saints, vs. vjd.
 Wax purchased to sustain the light before the High Cross,
 xiis. vd. ob.
 Wax for the Paschal, iijs. viijd.
 Wax for the light of S. Katherine, xijd.

Sum xxiiis. vijd. ob.

For mending the lock of the church door, iiijd.
 For a key for the same, xd. ob.
 For a large cord for the *great bell*, 2s.
 For suspending the same rope, 1d. ob.
 For 'sordiyng' the clapper of the *little bell*, ijs.
 For making a clapper for the *middle bell*, "et bateryng de la
 botte," xvijjd. ob. (Note—3 bells only.)
 And for wages for the clock maker, iis.
 For viii rods of linen cloth for a surplice for the parish clerk,
 iijs. vjd.
 For making the same, xixd.
 For cleaning a cruett, a thurible, and 2 candlesticks of laten,
 xxd.
 For binding the foot of a candlestick, 2d.
 For x rods of ribbon, ['reban,'] for mending the principal
 vestment, ijs. vid.
 For mending ii albs with amices, iid.
 And for velvet (panno cepill) for the high altar and the altar
 of S. Blaise, ijs.
 For oil to sustain the lamp before the high cross, ijs.

Lawrence Lane occurs.

The third roll contains the accounts of Thomas Clerk, hosyer, and William Brasseley, sacristans, from Michaelmas Day, 15th Henry VI, (anno 1436) to Michaelmas next following.

They receive 26s. 9½d. from rents of property in—

New street, *novo vico*.
 High street, *alto vico*.
 Gutter lane.

Market place.

Lortmere lane.

They record the gift of one linen cloth and a 'coverchief' for the altar of the Blessed Mary.

The wax purchased for the light burning before the high cross during the year amounted to 43lbs. and cost 21s. 1d. A lamp also was maintained before it for which the yearly supply of oil cost 2s.

One lb. of incense cost 4½d.

Paid to Thomas Hawe for iilb. of wax purchased for the lights of S. Catharine in the chapel of S. John, there to the feast of the Nativ. of S. John, xijd.

Paid to Margaret Bingham for mending the apparel of the vestments for the year, iiijd. ob.

Paid to John Hale for making the Selyng in the Roedloft, xxvijs. iiijd. (observe this was done in 1436.)

Whether this applies to the groining beneath the loft, or to the panelling on the church roof above the loft, I cannot tell.

Paid for an *Estricheborde* purchased at London, xxid. Paid for the carriage of the same, vd.

With regard to *Estrich Boards* I find in *Kennett's Parochial Antiq. vol. II., 254*, the following—

"Custus Domorum

"Et in vj estregbords, viz. Waynscots empt. apud Steresbruge ii sol. iiijd."

(In the accounts of the Priory of Burcester, anno 3 & 4 Hen. VI.)

Hallewell's Dictionary gives—

"Estrich Boards—Deal boards exported from the Eastern countries, (Austria?)"

For ale given to the labourers, id.

For ii torches purchased of John Chaundeler to burn before all the altars, vs. viijd.

We now come to the fourth roll, being the accounts of Thomas Clerk and John Sawyer, sacristans, in 1440.

Joan Taylor or Tyler pays iis. for the tolling of the great bell.

It would seem from this roll that some "work" was being done at the church this year; the only words used are "*opus ecclesie*."

There is an interesting list of subscribers headed by Master Henry Coupere, the then vicar. There are 84 names contributing altogether ixli. xvjs. vd. ob.

The largest subscribers are John Kirkeby, Robt. Morys, William Hunt, Robt. Kayns, and Richd. Turnour, who each contribute 6s. 8d.

Thomas Laurence, the parish clerk, gives viijd.

The windows in the north wall and the arcade between the nave and aisle are of this period.

The Paschal and baptismal candles occur in these accounts.
 At this time, too, the church tenements in New Street were repaired.

The fifth roll comprises the accounts of the same Thomas Clerk, hosyer, and John Sawyer, sacristans, for the 20th and 21st years of Henry VI. 1442-1443.

It appears from this roll that pew rents are no novelty.

- * 4d. of the gift of the wife of John Tanner, for i setell.
- 6d. of the wife of Nicholas Carter, for i setell.
- 4d. of the wife of Robt. Hover, for a setell.
- 4d. of the gift of the wife of John Strode, for a setell.
- 4d. of the wife of Thomas Benham, for a setell.

The next entry is curious :—

"And iiijd. received from a stranger (de extraneo) for (aisiamento) had in the south door of the church in the time of two"
 —the next word is abbreviated, but it certainly ends with
 "diarum"—meridiarum, or mid-days.

This word "Asiament" is explained by the following entries from subsequent accounts, anno 1498.

"It recd. at the fayer for a stondyng at the church porch, iiijd."

The sum of 2s. is received from John Athelard for tolling the great bell; and Juliana Gowler presents a towell to the church.

A pot for "haly watre" is purchased for 20d.

Mention is made of a *setell* in connection with an image of the blessed Mary, and viiid. is affixed to the entry. This document is much defaced, but not so much as the sixth roll, which is almost obliterated from the effect of damp.

The sixth and last roll comprises the accounts of John Smith, Chaundler; and John Athelard, sacristans or wardens of the parish church of S. Laurence, in Reading, from the feast of the Annunciation, 36 Henry VI, to the same feast the year following, anno 1458-9.

It contains a list of subscribers to a fund for the bells, but half the names are illegible; the donations amount to 53s. and 7d.

I have now completed my account of these ancient documents.

I have not omitted one single point of antiquarian interest. Had I given more minute details I should have wearied you, and had I been more discursive I should not have done justice to the rolls themselves. I have endeavoured to attain the desirable medium.

There are but few parishes in England able to exhibit any records of such high antiquity, and I trust they may long be preserved.

Our best thanks are due to the Churchwardens of S. Laurence for the loan of these documents this evening.