

The Election of Thomas Clerke to be Mayor of Reading by the Abbot John Thorne I. A.D. 1460.

Dr. Hurry has generously presented to the Corporation a picture representing an important event in the history of the town of Reading, forming one of the series of historic paintings which adorn the walls of the Art Gallery. These form a valuable record of the chief annals of the town, and the donor deserves the grateful thanks of the people of Reading for his generous benefaction.

This picture, painted by Mr. Stephen Reid, and exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1922, represents the Abbot's appointment of the *Custos Gilde* or Mayor of Reading, from amongst three burgesses nominated by the Guild Merchant. The date is September 29, 1460, the feast of St. Michael the Archangel.

In the centre may be seen the Abbot of Reading, John Thorne I., wearing his ecclesiastical robes, before whom stand the three burgesses, Thomas Beke, Thomas Clerke and William Rede '*qui electi sunt in officium Majoris ville de Redyngia per omnes Burgenses, who have been selected by all the burgesses for the office of Mayor of the town of Reading, and who await the appointment from amongst them of the actual Mayor.*' The Abbot's choice falls on Thomas Clerke, the central of the three figures.

Near by stands William Pernecote, the retiring Mayor, who is waiting to hang the chain of office round the neck of the incoming Mayor. In the back ground to the left of the picture is seen the cofferer or keeper of the town chest, Stephen Dunster, with the chest in his hands; near to him is the assistant cofferer, William Wilcokes. Behind the retiring Mayor are the two tipstaves. Amongst other burghers are the two constables, John Walker and Robert Stapper, together with some of the 'keepers' of the wards (Mynster ward, Castel ward, London ward, Hyghe ward, Newe ward and Olde ward.)

On the right of the picture is seen the prior with his hand on the charters; in front of him are the sub-prior and the steward. On the table may be seen the mace, three municipal

silver cups, one of them gilt, a purse, the common seal and various charters.

The scene of the picture is laid in the Abbot's manorial hall at the Inner Gateway of the Abbey which is happily still standing.

HISTORY OF THE MAYORALTY OF READING.

Reading may be regarded as a typical example of a town that grew up around a powerful Abbey, to which it owed much of its prosperity and wealth. As the town grew in power there was naturally some antagonism between the rising borough and the authority of the Abbot. The same struggle took place at Canterbury and in many other cities. The Abbot regarded the townspeople as his children who often rebelled against his authority. Only after a long and bitter struggle lasting for two hundred and fifty years did the burgesses acquire their freedom and the privilege of self-government.

Three periods in the civic evolution of Reading may briefly be described :

I. DEPENDENCE ON THE ABBEY.

When in 1121 King Henry I. founded the Abbey and annexed Reading to it, the burgh lost its favoured position as a ' villa regia ' and was placed under the complete control of the monastery. For many a year the Abbot ruled as feudal lord. He owned the soil of Reading, its streams, its fisheries, its mills; he regulated both its industry and its trade. He appointed the Warden or *Custos* of the Guild Merchant (afterwards the Mayor) as well as its inferior officers. Every guildsman or gildanus paid him a yearly tax of 5d. known as *chepyn-gavell*, for the right of buying or selling in the borough while the admission of new gildani was subject to his veto. The borough motes or courts were administered by his bailiffs, any fines imposed for breaches of the law going to feed the monastic treasury. In brief, the authority of the Warden was nominal when compared with that of the Abbot, before whom alone might be borne the symbols of supremacy. The Warden was merely allowed to have two tipped staves which were carried before him on state occasions by the Abbot's bailiffs.

II. PARTIAL EMANCIPATION.

During the reign of King Henry III. a revolt broke out against the supremacy of the Abbey, and culminated in a

struggle for at least an instalment of that civic independence which other towns were enjoying. The Abbot, on the one part, relied on the various charters granted by King Henry I. and his successors as evidence of his prerogatives and jurisdiction. The burghers, on the other part, with self-conscious dignity, pleaded still more ancient privileges and rights of self-government, dating, they maintained, from the reign of Edward the Confessor and the days when Reading was a 'villa regia.'

By the year 1253 the dispute had grown so fierce that the burghers actually lay in wait day and night for the Abbot's bailiffs and assaulted them in the execution of their office.

Eventually peace was restored by the precept from King Henry III., which on the one hand upheld the supreme authority of the Abbot, while on the other it granted a Charter of Incorporation to the Guild Merchant, and conferred legal sanction for privileges which hitherto had been enjoyed on sufferance.

In the following year (1254) further wranglings arose, many points relating to the Guild Merchant and to the Abbot's cherished prerogatives being in dispute. As a result a 'final and endly concord' was drawn up, by which the burghers secured the right to own their common Guild Hall, to hold their market in its accustomed place, and to maintain their Guild Merchant as of old. In return for this amongst other concessions, the burgesses acknowledged the Abbot's right to select one of three gildani to be the *Custos Gilde* or Mayor, who should take an oath of fidelity to the burgesses as well as to the Abbot.

This Charter indicates a great advance in the prestige of the Guild. Henceforward the powers of the Mayor and Guild gradually increased, in spite of many rebuffs.

III. COMPLETE SELF-GOVERNMENT.

Not however until the voice of the Abbot was silenced in death and until his Abbey was dissolved in 1539 was victory won. King Henry VIII.'s Charter of Incorporation, granted in 1542, conferred on the burgesses the right to elect 'one of the more discreet and capable burgesses to be Mayor of the Borough,' with full executive authority and jurisdiction. Thus the long-drawn struggle between the Abbey and the Guild Merchant ended in the triumph of the corporation.