



The Chester City Companies

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EMINGWAY, in his "History of Chester" published in 1831, says, "The number of the Companies has formerly somewhat varied: they are now nominally twenty-five, though two of them no longer exist in fact." These ancient companies, which still survive, were chartered, some by the Mayor and Corporation, and others by the Crown itself, many of them perhaps having themselves, or by their predecessors, been in existence before municipal life, as we now understand it, was known.

Mr. J. Cordy Jeaffreson, the commissioner appointed by the Historical MSS. Commissioners to inspect the Chester city records, in his report, says that the charters and books belonging to nine of the twenty-three companies were brought to him for inspection, viz. :—

1. The charters of the Company of Cordwainers or Shoemakers. The first is dated at Chester 24th May, 44 Edward III. (1371), and is granted by the Black Prince by virtue of his office of Earl of Chester. The second is dated at Westminster 24th October, 3 Edward VI. (1550), and confirms a previous charter of Henry IV., dated at Chester 14th May, in the eleventh year of his reign, to the "Skinners and Shoemakers of Chester." The third charter is by King James I., and confirms the

charter of Edward VI. All these charters are fully set out in the eighth report of the Deputy-Keeper of the Public Records, but I am glad to say we have the originals themselves here to-night. The first charter has the seal of the Black Prince appended to it. I have not seen the books of the Company, but I understand they go back to a very early date. We have here their seal bearing the Company's coat of arms.

2. The charter of the Bakers' Company is dated at Westminster 5th July, 6 Edward VI. (1553), confirming a previous charter of the 18th December, 11 Henry VII. (1496), whereby Arthur Prince of Wales, eldest son of the King, by virtue of his office of Earl of Chester, confirmed the bakers of Chester in their ancient monopoly and privileges, and reconstituted their Company. Mr. Jeaffreson says that this charter "has been greatly injured by fire and moth and mould, and is in a filthy state." Mr. Hemingway says of it that "it was written partly in abbreviated Latin and partly in English, and the great seal appending is in good condition"; and he goes on to say that he gathers from a MS. of the late Rev. Thomas Crane "that the Company of Bakers existed in Chester long before there was a Mayor in the City, for the Company is acknowledged by the highest authority to have existed from time immemorial." Mr. Crane is evidently right, for on the Chester Palatinate Recognizance Rolls I find the following entry:—

"21 June, 1463. The Mayor and Sheriffs of the City are ordered to enforce the ordinance which had prevailed *time out of mind* in the City, that no one but such as had joined the craft of bakers of the City, and deposited their mark in wax that their bread might be known, should make or sell bread in the City, and that bread baked out of the City should not be sold in the City excepting on market days, and that all bakers of the City should grind their corn at the Mills of the Dee." [10 and 11 Edw. 4th.]

3. The charter of the Company of Weavers was granted by the Corporation on the 10th June 25 Elizabeth (1583), and is on vellum, with the common seal of the City attached. I hope this charter is here to-night; also the banner and the common seal, and two vols. of accounts and proceedings, dated January, 1607.

4. The charter of the Company of Innholders, Victuallers, and Cooks, was granted by the Corporation 10th June, 25 Elizabeth, and reconstituted the Company in accordance with the long-existing rights and privileges of the fraternity. It was subsequently confirmed by letters patent on the 20th January, 34 Elizabeth. In Vol. II. of the old series of our Journal will be found a very interesting paper on this company by the late Mr. Thos. Hughes, F.S.A.

5. A book of the Company of Joiners, Carvers, and Turners, for the period 1576—1756, being the register of proceedings and disbursements of the Company, containing curious matters illustrative of the government and policy of trades unions in Elizabethan England. Mr. Thomas Hughes, in the *Cheshire Sheaf*, speaking of this Company, says, "They were in effect the architects who designed, and the skilled workmen who decorated those timber palaces, the town residences of the country gentry and city merchants, which, three centuries ago, and ever since, have given to old Chester so historic a fame in the antiquarian and building world."

6. The Company of Brewers. A book of the proceedings of this Company for the years 1606—1641; also their charter, dated at Canterbury the 6th September, 10 Charles I. (1635), for the incorporation of the Company with a master and two wardens, under the title of "The Master, two Wardens, and Community of the Mystery or Art of the Brewers of Chester." The charter

appoints Thomas Eaton of Chester, brewer, to be the first master, and William Streete and Ralph Drinkwater of the same city, brewers, to be the first wardens of the new society, which is endowed with the monopoly and invested with the government of the trade in beer in Chester. I am sorry to find that the books and muniments of the Company were recently in Liverpool, but I hope they are here to-night, and will not be taken from Chester.

7. Three books of the Company of Tanners for the period 1591—1877.

8. A book of the Company of Clothworkers, being a record of the proceedings of the guild for 1737—1877.

9. The register book of the Society and Company of "Barbers, Chyrurgions, Waxe Chaundlers, and Tallow Chaundlers of the Cittie of Chester," for the years 1606—1698, and two other books. The late Mr. Thos. Hughes, in the *Cheshire Sheaf*, says: "Chester barbers were prominent citizens, ranking with, and exercising most of the functions of, surgeons and physicians. They dressed wounds, drew teeth, bled their patients in more ways than one, made up ointments and pills calculated either to kill or cure in all sorts of disorders as were to be found anywhere within our ancient walls. Excellent artificers in the making of wigs and perukes, they earned full many an honest penny in the plaiting and adornment of pigtails—another of the vanities affected by our grandsires." Alluding to the first of these three volumes, Mr. Jeaffreson says: "This volume contains matters that deserve the consideration of writers of the social history of Chester in the 17th century." I have had the advantage of a peep through it, and I have no hesitation in saying that it ought to be edited and printed. May I venture to hope that some local medico-antiquary may

be forthcoming in the near future who will take the matter up. The first part of the book contains the orders made for the government of the Company, and the forms of oath to be taken by the brethren on admission to the fraternity, and by the officials on acceptance of office. Then follow the minutes of each meeting, with the names of all those present; the account of the receipts and disbursements for each year; and at the end is a register of each apprentice taken by every member. One of the early entries is a full minute of an agreement made at the Common Hall of Pleas of the city, between the Company and that of the Painters, &c., on the one part, and the Mayor and Corporation of the other part, in 1613, whereby on payment of a fee-farm rent 2/-, the two companies were to have the joint use, as a meeting house, of the tower on the walls now known as King Charles' Tower (which was then in a ruinous state), on condition that they put it into good order and so maintained it. Subsequently they appear to have allowed several others of the city companies, viz., the bakers, coopers, butchers, weavers, joiners, and clothworkers, to hold their meetings in it on payment to them of an annual rent, so that the tower became quite a guild-house. It was called—as its real name is to this day—The Phoenix Tower, from the stone over the lower door bearing the arms and crest (the latter a phoenix) of the Painters' Company. The date on the stone is 1615, which I take it is the date when the companies had completed the repair of the tower and taken possession. I find the following entry in the book, which shows that Randle Holme (the third of that name, and the author of the celebrated "Academy of Armory") was the sculptor of this stone.

" 1692—1693 Jan. ye 10th Paid Mr. Holmes for ye stone
 which stands over ye phoenix doore . . . 00 18 00
 " Paid Edward Nixon towards ye putting it up . . . 00 06 00

I have chosen the following entry as being at an interesting period, to show how each minute of a meeting is headed.

“Memorandum that on the second day of July being our Election and Court day for the Companie of Barbers Chirurgions Wax and Tallow Chandlers within the Cittie of Chester Mr. Robert Thorneley Barber Chirurgion and Robert Stone Tallow Chaundler were elected Aldermen and John Looker Tallow Chaundler and John Throp Barber were chosen to be Stewardes and Serchers for one whole year from the second day of July 1646 until July 1647 Mr. Charles Walley the Mayor of the Cittie this year being yelded uppon conditions to the Parlement and Mr. William Edwards made Mayor to next Michaelmas after and Mr. John Win Ironmonger and Mr. Richard Sproston Draper Sheriffs 1646.”

The members of the Company were undoubtedly staunch royalists, as evidenced by the following entries made on the coronation of King Charles II. :—

“1660 Spent at Mr. Morreys on the Coronation day..	.. ..	is.	vi ^d .
“ Paid for Musick at Mr. Morreys ..	.. ..	..	vi ^d .
“ Item for a Banquet ..	.. ..	vi ^s .	viii ^d .
“ Paid to the Cryer at the barrs ..	.. ..	..	vi ^d .
“ Paid for beere at bars ..	.. ..	..	ii ^d .
“ Spent in the Forrest streete ..	.. ..	..	vi ^d .
“ Spent in the Watergate streete ..	.. ..	..	vi ^d .
“ Spent in Nicholas streete ..	.. ..	..	iv ^d .
“ Spent at John Fletchers house ..	.. ..	..	vi ^d .
“ Spent without the Northgate at ye Maypole	.. ..	..	iv ^d .
“ Paid to the Musik and for Ribanning ..	.. ..	..	is.
“ Paid at Richard Francis's at bringing the child home ..	.. ..	..	ii ^s .
“ Item at dressing of the child in wine ..	.. ..	is.	x ^d .
“ Paid to the fiddlers ..	.. ..	vs.	ii ^d .
“ Paid in hiring the Musik ..	.. ..	..	vi ^d .
“ Paid to Bolland for the Staff ..	.. ..	..	vi ^d .
“ Paid at Richard Francis' house ..	.. ..	..	is.
“ Paid for gloves ..	.. ..	..	iv ^s .
“ Paid for a pottle of wine at the banquet ..	.. ..	..	ii ^s .

Each year there is a payment "given to the Ringers of Bow bell," and "Paid towards St. George's plate, v^s." but later on, when the subscription towards the race had been increased, the following resolution was passed:—

"July 13th 1762 It was at a Meeting held at the Phoenix agreed and ordered 'that no more than the sum of ten shillings be paid toward the City Plate for the future and it is further agreed that there be not anything paid for the future towards the Nine o'clock Bell.'"

The Company appear to have been very zealous in the maintenance of their privileges, and frequently had recourse to the law. The following entries throw a side-light upon the manners of the times:—

" Paid Mr. Holmes his chardges and fees in our sute	02	04	00
" Item for a pottle of sacke to bestowe upon Mr. Recorder for his trouble in our sute	00	02	08
" Paid Mr. Recorder when we joyned issue ..	00	10	00
" Paid for a sugar loafe to be sent the Recorders wife	00	04	08

The fraternity were careful to suppress all outsiders:

" 1658 October 11th Spent about putting downe a forren barber in handbridge at John Fletchers fathers.

" 1664 October 17 given and spent about a barber that trimmed at St. Martins Church."

Yet it is evident that the Company were not averse to admitting strangers within their community on their paying the regulated fee, as numerous entries in the book testify.

The members of the Company were strict observers of the Sabbath:

" 1680 seconde of July. Ordered that no member of the Company or his servant or apprentice shall trim any person on the Lords day commonly called Sunday."

These extracts from this register book have been made somewhat at random on a very cursory perusal of the book, but time does not permit more in a short paper like this.

Referring to the Company of "Smiths, Pewterers, Braziers, Plumbers, Carmakers, and Spurriers," Mr. Hemingway describes the curious silver medal which was presented to them by Prince Arthur, eldest son of King Henry VII., when he visited this city as Earl of Chester in 1498, as about three inches across, having several implements rudely cut on the convex side descriptive of their craft, and surrounded by *fleurs de lys* in relief. It weighs about four ounces, and has a thin silver chain appended to it. I am glad to say it is here to-night for exhibition. I hope the members of the Company will allow us to photograph it. The following entry was made in the books of the Company at the time of the presentation:—

"Thomas Edyan Smith to Prince Arthur being atte the Castle of Chester in the 14th yeare of the reigne of Henrie the seventh his father being king of England and att the same tyme Prince Arthur gave unto the said Edyan a crown of silver guilt, a hammer with horshe and pincers, the arms of the Smiths to them and their successors for ever."

The books of the "Paynters Glasiers Imbroderors Stacioners Company" have twice been exhibited to this Society, once by the late Mr. Thomas Hughes, F.S.A., whose able paper will be found in the second volume of the old series of the Society's Journal, and recently by Mr. J. P. Earwaker, F.S.A. They are very interesting and instructive. You will remember that it was with this Company that the family of the Randle Holmes' were for generations so intimately associated; and the arms of the four associated companies, as shown on the paper I

now exhibit, are copied from an original drawing by the second Randle Holme attached to one of the Company's earliest volumes of accounts. Speaking of the incongruous association of trades in this company, Mr. Hughes says, "In an age when ignorance so largely prevailed, the painters must have been men of more than ordinary intelligence, having certainly a fair general acquaintance with the mother tongue, and the taste to adapt that knowledge to the requirements of their customers. The glaziers, again, when stained or painted glass was so much in fashion, and the embroiderers, when that art was in the zenith of its glory, would be little behind their brethren, the painters and stationers, in either education or taste."

As to the Saddlers' Company, I find on the Chester Palatinate Recognizance Rolls the following entry:—

"1471-2 March 8 Charter of liberties to the saddlers of the City of Chester to endure for forty years that no one should exercise the art of a saddler within the city without permission of the stewards aldermen masters and occupiers of the said art under a penalty of 100/-"

half of which was to be paid to the Earl of Chester and the other half to the said stewards for the support "pagine luminis et ludi Corporis Christi," which evidently refers to the Midsummer plays.

The Merchants' Company appears to have been wide awake to the interest of its members, judging from the following entry on these Recognizance Rolls:—

"1593 May 2nd. Inspeximus & exemplification of the Chamberlain's Accounts of Edward 3, Richard 3, Henry 6, Edward 4th & Henry 7th at the instance of the merchants of Chester of the prisage of wine received by the Earls of Chester."

As to the Goldsmiths' Company, we find from ancient deeds that goldsmiths were settled here at a very early

date, and must have had a guild, but the earliest of the two books of the Company only begins with the year 1573. These books prove that the Company assayed and stamped plate with the arms of the city, accompanied by a date letter and the maker's mark, long before 1701. Chester was reappointed an assay office by the Act 12, William III. (1700). King William visited the city, and there are entries in these books showing how the company received him in state. I am glad to say that Mr. James Lowe, the assay master, is here to-night with his banner painted by Randle Holme, and with the two books I have mentioned, for inspection. The Goldsmiths' Company may be considered as the only active trade guild now in the city.

The books and banner of the Skinners and Feltmakers' Society were exhibited to our society in February, 1889, and I hope they are here to-night.

These companies for many generations in mediæval times took part in the annual pageants of the celebrated Chester Miracle Plays and Midsummer Show. They walked in the procession with their respective banners and devices. Some of these banners still exist, and I am glad to say we have several of them here to-night, and it would be well if they could be left with our society for safe custody; we would undertake to return them whenever they are required, and in the meantime preserve them from that state of decay into which they are rapidly falling.

I find the following entries in the Barbers, Surgeons, &c., Company's book, 1661-2:—

“Chardges of Midsomer Show

“For stockings for the boy that rid for the Company [each company had to provide a boy on horseback, under a penalty of £5]	00	03	00
“For shoues for him	00	02	00

" For 4 p[air] of gloves for Aldermen & Stewards	00	08	00
" For a p of gloves for the man that carried the banner	00	00	06
" For ribbans for the horse	00	02	06
" Given to the man that led the horse	00	02	06
" Spent at the house at the bars waiting on Mr Maior	00	02	06
" Given to the Cryer at the bars	00	00	06
" Given at the Glovers stone to the Castle Prisoners	00	00	06
" Given at the Northgate to the Cittie Prisners	00	00	06
" Spent in St. Nicholas streete	00	00	06
" Spent at Widdow Hinds	00	00	06
" Given to the man that hould the boy on horse	00	00	06
" For a quart of wine at dressing the boy	00	00	08
" Given to the musik	00	04	06
" For drink at the banquet	00	04	10
" For the banquet	00	06	08

But not only did the companies join in this picturesque pageant and procession, but they took a leading part in those celebrated plays which may fairly rank as one of the foundation stones of the British drama, and even of English literature. The early Chester Plays, as is well known, have been printed by the Shakespeare Society, in reference to which, showing the influence they had on English literature, Mrs. Sandford recently gave us an interesting paper. The performance of these Chester Plays occupied three days (see Hemingway and Ormerod for list.)

This necessarily short description of our old city companies, I know, gives only the faintest idea of the importance of the subject from a historic and an archæological point of view. Few cities had so many and influential trade companies as had Chester, and yet perhaps less is known of them than of any other trade guilds in the country. It is surprising to find that,

considering the books and documents of the fraternities are in private hands, so many of them are in existence. I know that the members are averse to trusting their muniments within these walls, and they are rightly suspicious of those who they think are seeking to disendow them and appropriate their funds. This is only natural and human. I would ask them, however, to have confidence in us who have no other object to serve than to glean information from their books and documents for the use of students of about as picturesque and interesting a period as any in the history of our country, and particularly of that of our ancient city. I assure the brethren that we archæologists have no designs upon their funds—we are not scientists or technologists. As far as I can gather, the companies acquisition of funds from beneficent testators in the past has been a curse to them rather than a blessing. So long as they were dependent upon themselves, judging from the books I have seen, they were active and useful, but as soon as they became possessed of means they were lethargic and almost dormant. Instead of reforming themselves from time to time to suit modern requirements, they became close clubs for the receipt of doles.

The thought has struck me—is it not possible even at this late hour to reform these ancient institutions, and restore them to their pristine usefulness and importance, apart from this wretched question of funds? Have we not our local Law and Medical Societies? Why should not these ancient companies be formed into societies for the regulation of their several trades, for the settlement of trade disputes, for superintending the training of youths in each particular craft, and as benevolent societies for sick and decayed artizans?