

## EARLY DRAMA IN SUSSEX

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*The purpose of this paper is to survey the documents which yield information about performances of drama and music in Sussex in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The main categories of relevant documents are civic records, ecclesiastical records, parish records and private family papers. The most useful civic records are the Rye chamberlains' accounts, which include details about money paid by the town to travelling players, to players from nearby towns, and to players employed by Rye itself. Apart from the few extant accounts from the Chichester St. George's Guild accounts, and two mentions in the Lewes Town Book, no other civic records of performances survive. The records of the ecclesiastical courts make brief mention of local entertainers, while the accounts of Battle and Robertsbridge Abbeys, and of the Dean and Chapter of Chichester, contain limited information about travelling players. The churchwardens' accounts of a few parishes yield intriguing clues about some church drama of the period, but private family documents are not very informative.*

### INTRODUCTION

The existence of dramatic activity in Sussex in the Middle Ages and Renaissance has not been the subject of much research. There have been two brief comments on the possibility of medieval Mystery Plays in Sussex. In the 1926–7 issue of *Sussex Notes and Queries*, a request for information on medieval drama in Sussex brought no replies.<sup>1</sup> The 1931 issue of *Sussex County Magazine* contained a perceptive article by L. B. Smith, in which it was pointed out that Mystery cycles like those in York, Chester, Coventry or Wakefield could not have been feasible in Sussex.<sup>2</sup> However, Smith also opened a crack in the door to evidence of early dramatic activity in the county, most notably by mentioning payments to players recorded in the Rye chamberlains' accounts. Vidler scatters references to these payments to performers throughout his *New History of Rye* as well.<sup>3</sup>

For the past two years the present writer has been searching the extant Sussex records from the period up to 1642 (the date of the closing of the theatres by the Puritans) for

evidence of public and private performances in the county during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this project it has been necessary to include musical performances as well as drama, inasmuch as it was common for performers of the period to engage in both activities.<sup>5</sup>

### CIVIC RECORDS

The paucity of civic records for our period has limited the fruitfulness of the study, but there is enough to give a reasonable picture of the different kinds of dramatic activity in Rye, Chichester and Lewes.

As has been noticed by Vidler and others, the Rye chamberlains' accounts provide a wealth of detailed evidence of dramatic and musical activity in the town in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In general, the accounts for our period specify payments to three categories of dramatic and musical performers: players or minstrels travelling under the name of a noble patron; players from

nearby towns performing under the name of that location; and performers officially linked with the town of Rye itself.

The extant Rye accounts record payments to noblemen's players and minstrels from 1448 to as late as 1617. The period of most frequent payments is from 1474 to 1540,<sup>6</sup> during which as many as eight of these companies or individuals were paid out of the town treasury in one fiscal year. The reason why these performers were paid by the Corporation appears, as is confirmed by dramatic records from other locations,<sup>7</sup> to have been in recompense for a performance before the Mayor preceding performances for the public. For instance, the records for 1570 include the following entry:

Item paid to my lord wardens players when  
they playde at ye court halle before mr  
maior xiiij s iiij d<sup>8</sup>

It was also common for the town to pay for the expenses of entertaining the players as well, as we see in an entry for 1449:

Item datum ministrallo domini domini de  
Say xx d  
Item in vino et papulo equino eidem  
ministrallo iiij d<sup>9</sup>

The name of the patron under whom the players travelled seems to have been relevant, as companies or individuals associated with patrons with strong local connections are quite regularly rewarded. For instance, players of the Earl of Arundel and of the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports appear in the records almost annually for long periods, as do the King's Players.

The records unfortunately do not state exactly what these players and minstrels performed. No play titles are given, and even the few relatively revealing entries use ambiguous terminology, as in one for 1567:

paid in reward to the Errle of Worsytors

entrelute players

vj s viij d<sup>10</sup>

This record seems to indicate only that the players were engaged in performing short plays.

In all some 350 payments are made to minstrels or players travelling under the name of a patron. Significantly, the last payment in the records, to the Queen's Players in 1617, is ominously marked with the marginal note 'not to be allowed',<sup>11</sup> which probably indicates either severe financial conditions or the growing influence of the Puritans.

Equally noticeable, and perhaps in the context of the history of drama in England more significant, are the payments made to players from nearby towns and villages. From 1456 to 1560 just short of a hundred payments are recorded for players from various locations in Sussex, Essex, and, most often, Kent.<sup>12</sup> The most frequent visitors are from New Romney, Brookland, Canterbury, Lydd and Tenterden, but players also come from: Maidstone, Hythe, Newenden, Wittersham, Appledore, Fritten-den, Reading Street, Malling, Benenden, Ashford, Goudhurst, Cranbrook, Dover, Great Chart, Bethersden(?), Sittingbourne, Rochester, Ivychurch, Mersham, Peasmarsh, Faversham and High Halden in Kent; Winchelsea, Chichester, West Tarring, Lewes, Hastings, Mayfield, Horsham(?) and Robertsbridge in Sussex; and Colchester and Billericay in Essex. As well, a company named for the county of Essex makes three appearances in the records. The fact that so many of these small communities sustained their own companies of players suggests an enormous amount of dramatic activity in a small area.

The nature of these dramatic performances is likewise not made explicit, although the circumstances under which they took place are sometimes described:

Item paied by the maieres commaundement  
and his brethern to men of Lede that come  
to shew a contynance of their play in the  
market place iiij s<sup>13</sup>

In some cases the payments are not for actual performances of a play, but for individuals crying the banns, as in this entry from 1520:

Item spent at Master Wymond vpon  
theym of Broklond proclaymig ther banyes  
for ther stage pley                      iij s viij d<sup>14</sup>

In one case, in 1508, (admittedly for performers named for a county rather than for a town) it is even specified that the players did not perform a stage play:

Item paied to the players of Essex that  
pleyd with swordes at the stronde    xiiij d<sup>15</sup>

Rye itself appears to have had entertainers with some official connection with the town. Beginning in 1480, payments to individuals who are called minstrels, waits or players of the town appear sporadically throughout the records:

Item datum in remuneracione ministralli-  
bus ville                                      ij s<sup>16</sup>

These payments are not regular for most of the period, being awarded in 1480, 1482, 1483, 1486, 1488, 1490, 1494, 1505, 1513-17, 1527, 1560-1, 1570, and from 1573 on. Some of the payments are in fact for the purchase of clothing or livery, as we see in the records for 1570:

Item paid the waites at Mother Stronges  
that Mr Maior and the Iurates did allowe  
them therof for there liuery            xxx s<sup>17</sup>

In the late 16th century the payments are made regularly every quarter, beginning with 1573:

Paid to Philipe Fayrefyld & Angell Shawe  
the waytes of the towne, accordinge to a  
decre    xl s<sup>18</sup>

However, as the records continue, it becomes clear that these waits are in fact musicians who play on the fife and drum, probably at musters, as we see in 1577:

Paid Angell Shawe & Thomas Stronge the  
drome and phiff eury of them v s  
accordinge to a decre made this openinge of  
the box    x s<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, Angel Shaw also served as the Mayor's serjeant, as is mentioned in the accounts for 1594.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from these easily categorized performers, various other players and musicians appear in the Rye records. For example, in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, there are annual payments to players (sometimes named for a nobleman or a town, but most often anonymous) for what appears to have been a Christmas play performed in the church. Thus in 1488 we see the following record:

Item paied in Cristmasse halidaies to the  
pleieres þat pleid in þe church.            v d<sup>21</sup>

In the accounts for 1518 (and for 1519 as well) there is mention made of a strange kind of entertainment whose character can only be guessed at:

Item expendid at Iohn Wynters at dyuerse  
tymes when the foot pleyes wer pleid  
ther    xx d<sup>22</sup>

A rather unique performer appears twice in the records for 1514:

Item paied to Walter the stameryng myn-  
strell in rewarde                              iij s iij d<sup>23</sup>  
Item paied to the stameryng mynsrell in  
rewarde    ij s<sup>24</sup>

Travelling bearwards make frequent appearances as well, as do itinerant camels (in 1510 and 1521), and the occasional juggler or jester. A record in the 1555 accounts also shows the depths to which performers occasionally had to descend for an audience:

To iij mynstrelles playeng before the  
laborers comeng from the mending of the  
highe waies                                      xij d<sup>25</sup>

The only other civic records from the county which can be said to offer comparable detail about travelling performers are the accounts of the St. George's Guild of Chichester.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately the accounts exist only for the years 1517–23 and 1543–4. Most of the payments in the extant accounts are to players (usually called 'mimis') travelling under the name of the Earl of Arundel. Payments are made to trumpeters, jugglers and bearwards as well.

The Lewes Town Book, which is extremely informative about other matters, provides only two instances of payments to entertainers; a payment was made to a musician of the King in 1551–2 and another to the Duke of Norfolk's players in 1557–8.<sup>27</sup>

#### ECCLESIASTICAL RECORDS

There are two categories of ecclesiastical records which contain references to dramatic and musical entertainers: the notes of proceedings of the ecclesiastical courts, and the account books of ecclesiastical institutions.

The records of the ecclesiastical courts sometimes contain references to individuals called before the courts for performing in dramatic or musical entertainments during divine service time, and thus can be quite informative about local and small-scale forms of entertainment. These references are to be found in the correction causes in detection or act books.

The extant records for the diocese of Chichester kept at the West Sussex Record Office contain few references to actual performers, though many individuals are brought up before the courts for activities like dancing, may-gaming, and singing during divine service. There are a few citations of people who appear to be professional performers, as in these examples from the archdeaconry of Lewes detection books:

Robert Bridger keepeth ill rule in playenge

as a musicion in service time<sup>28</sup>

John Dunke presented for kepinge mynstrelles playinge in his howse on the Saboth daie<sup>29</sup>

Philippum Alchorne de Retherfield detectum for keeping of pipes and much company in his house in evening prayers vppon Sunday and fighting & brawling<sup>30</sup>

In the archdeaconry of Chichester detection books, we see a reference which provides very indirect evidence of dramatic activity:

Iohanna Pay vxor Henrici Pay for vsing irreuerent wordes against our vicar Mr William Mattock videlicet she did except against a sermon which he made the 23th of Nouember and affirmeth that he preched like a foole in a play, and that he is fitter to make a fidler or a tincker then a minister<sup>31</sup>

The few extant registers of presentments also can be useful, as, for instance, an entry in the archdeaconry of Chichester register for 1573 demonstrates:

we presente that Thomas Lusy a vycutler retayned a mynstrell to playe in his house and suffred him ther to playe in the seruyce tyme<sup>32</sup>

As far as ecclesiastical accounts are concerned, the only monastic institutions from which records still exist are Battle Abbey and Robertsbridge Abbey. The accounts of the former are, of course, scattered among the Huntington Library, the East Sussex Record Office, and the Public Record Office in London.<sup>33</sup> The extant Abbot's accounts do record payments to travelling players, but usually only in summary form, as in the accounts for 1364–5:

In donis datis diuersis ministrallis hoc anno tam in festis Sancti Martini quam extra  
xl s.<sup>34</sup>

The records for 1382–3, 1498–9, 1499–1500, 1502–3, and 1508–9 do, however, mention performing companies by name. There are a few payments scattered throughout the treasurer's and the seneschal's accounts as well. The chaplain's accounts for 1520–1 show that the abbey also was entertained by some of the town players from the surrounding area:

Et in rewardo hominibus de Cranebroke  
ludentibus coram domino iij s iiii d Et in  
consimili rewardo lusoribus de Tenterden  
iij s iiii d Et in huiusmodi rewardo lusoribus  
de Mallynge iij s iiii d Et in dono domini  
lusoribus de Maydestone iij s iiii d<sup>35</sup>

The Robertsbridge Abbey accounts, which are deposited among the De L'Isle manuscripts in the Kent Archives Office, contain records of payments to travelling players in the early 15th century. Again, the payments are usually given in summary form, although a few companies are mentioned by name.<sup>36</sup>

The Chichester Dean and Chapter accounts have a few references to travelling performers as well. Among the records for 1543–4 are payments to players of the Earl of Arundel for performing at Christmas,<sup>37</sup> and to the 'mimis et histrionibus' of the Prince.<sup>38</sup> There were also three payments to the King's minstrels in the period 1533–8.<sup>39</sup>

#### PARISH RECORDS

Churchwardens' accounts sometimes contain records of payments for actors or equipment involved in the production of church plays. The sorts of record that are most useful are those like the one occurring in the 1522–3 Rye churchwardens' accounts, already noted by Holloway:

Item payd for a coote made when the  
Resurreccion was playde for hym that in  
playing represented the part of almighty  
god xij d<sup>40</sup>

Subsequent references to this Resurrection play occur later in the accounts, specifically payments for making the stage and for plates.<sup>41</sup> There are also references to parish plays in the churchwardens' accounts of West Tarring,<sup>42</sup> and of St. Michael's, Lewes.<sup>43</sup> The church of Steyning appears to have had a play of the Three Kings in the early 16th century, along with wardens specifically responsible for the production of it:

The same yere and day come Rychard  
Pellett and Wyllyam Gardener lat wardens  
of the Kyng Play and yn lyke maner made  
ther accompt<sup>44</sup>

#### FAMILY RECORDS

Although private family records often do contain payments to travelling entertainers, the only Sussex records the present writer has found with such references (other than a mention of an itinerant two-headed calf in the Petworth steward's accounts)<sup>45</sup> are the accounts of the Roberts family of Boarzell. However, in spite of the fact that minstrels appear to have visited the family estate fairly frequently, the usefulness of the references is limited by the fact that the minstrels are not identified any more specifically than by the use of that word, as, for instance, in 1570:

Item payd to ye minstrells xij d<sup>46</sup>

The accounts do show that the family made payments for clothing for a minstrel in 1572, which may indicate that he was either used for a special occasion, or was in long-term residence at the estate.<sup>47</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Compared with the records surviving for other locations, such as the great cities of York, Chester, Norwich and Coventry, the evidence for medieval and Renaissance dramatic activity

in Sussex may seem disappointing. However, to a large extent the reason is not so much a lack of activity as the prejudice of the extant evidence. The great number of references to town players in the Kent and Sussex area in the Rye and Battle Abbey records seems to be indicative of an enormous amount of drama on the local level. Unfortunately the surviving records are not of the type that would give us more information about what exactly these players were performing. In addition, Sussex does not seem by any stretch of the imagination to have been neglected by travelling players, as almost all the

likely records from the period do contain records of payments to these companies. In short, if more town records from the period had survived, a clearer picture of the dramatic activity in the county might emerge.

#### Acknowledgement

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>H. V. T., 'Sussex Miracle or Mystery Plays', *Suss. N. & Q.* 1 (1926-7), 157.
- <sup>2</sup>'Sussex and Religious Drama', *Sussex County Mag.* 5 (1931), 53-6.
- <sup>3</sup>L. A. Vidler, *A New History of Rye* (1971 edn.), *passim*.
- <sup>4</sup>The records will be published *in toto* by the University of Toronto Press in the Records of Early English Drama (REED) series. Inasmuch as the parameters of the REED volume will be slightly different from those of this article, much of the material to appear therein is not mentioned here.
- <sup>5</sup>Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre* (1974), 191-2.
- <sup>6</sup>The records are missing from 1463 to 1474, among other years. Indeed, the accounts for the years 1474-7 are known only from H. T. Riley's transcriptions in *Hist. MSS. Com.* 4, *5th Report*, Appendix 1, *Rye Corporation*, pp. 488-96.
- <sup>7</sup>Mary A. Blackstone, 'Notes towards a Patrons Calendar', *Records of Early English Drama Newsletter*, no. 1 for 1981, 1-11.
- <sup>8</sup>E(ast) S(ussex) R(ecord) O(ffice), RYE 60/8, f. 162v.
- <sup>9</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/2, f. 6.
- <sup>10</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/8, f. 61v.
- <sup>11</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 61/23, f. 16.
- <sup>12</sup>Further information about these local players from Kent can be found in Giles E. Dawson, *Records of Players in Kent 1450-1642* (Malone Soc. Coll. 7) (1965), 182-211.
- <sup>13</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/3, f. 56.
- <sup>14</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/5, f. 81.
- <sup>15</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/4, f. 216.
- <sup>16</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/3, f. 6.
- <sup>17</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/8, f. 164v.
- <sup>18</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/9, f. 16.
- <sup>19</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/9, f. 92v.
- <sup>20</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/10, f. 14.
- <sup>21</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/3, f. 74v.
- <sup>22</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/5, f. 67.
- <sup>23</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/4, f. 317.

<sup>24</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/4, f. 323.

<sup>25</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 60/7, f. 125.

<sup>26</sup>W(est) S(ussex) C(ounty) and D(iocesan) R(ecord) O(ffice), Chichester City Archives AE/1, 2. On the St. George's Guild of Chichester see Edward Turner, 'The Merchant Guild of Chichester', *Suss. Arch. Coll.* 15 (1863), 165-77; James Dallaway, *A History of the Western Division of the County of Sussex*, 1 (1815), 163; and *Victoria County History, Sussex*, 3 (1935), 92-3.

<sup>27</sup>E.S.R.O., LEW C1/1, ff. 5, 8.

<sup>28</sup>W.S.R.O., Ep. II/9/2, f. 38.

<sup>29</sup>W.S.R.O., Ep. II/9/2, f. 38v.

<sup>30</sup>W.S.R.O., Ep. II/9/14, f. 1v.

<sup>31</sup>W.S.R.O., Ep. I/17/12, f. 45.

<sup>32</sup>W.S.R.O., Ep. I/23/2, f. 2v.

<sup>33</sup>Judith A. Brent, *A Catalogue of the Battle Abbey Estate Archives* (1973).

<sup>34</sup>H(untington) L(ibrary), BA 140, m. 2.

<sup>35</sup>H.L., BA 278, m. 2.

<sup>36</sup>Kent Archives Office, U 1475/Q1-5.

<sup>37</sup>W.S.R.O., Cap. 1/51/10 (transcript of Cap. 1/23/2), p. 19.

<sup>38</sup>W.S.R.O., Cap. 1/51/10, p. 21.

<sup>39</sup>W.S.R.O., Cap. 1/51/14 (transcript of Cap. 1/23/1), pp. 5, 18, 34.

<sup>40</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 147/1, f. 39, noted in William Holloway, *The History and Antiquities of the Ancient Town and Port of Rye* (1847), 491.

<sup>41</sup>E.S.R.O., RYE 147/1, ff. 39v., 50v.

<sup>42</sup>West Tarring, St. Andrew's Church, book 1, f. 50. These references have been published in *Churchwardens' Accounts of West Tarring, 1515-79*, transcr. and ed. W. J. Pressey (priv. print.).

<sup>43</sup>E.S.R.O., Par. 414/9/1/3a, f. 81v.

<sup>44</sup>W.S.R.O., Par. 183/9/1, f. 9v.

<sup>45</sup>W.S.R.O., PHA 574, m. 10.

<sup>46</sup>E.S.R.O., DUN 37/2, f. 57.

<sup>47</sup>E.S.R.O., DUN 37/2, f. 71v.