



Gleanings from the Muniment Room of the Town Hall of the City of Chester (Stuart Period)

BY THE REV. CANON MORRIS, D.D., F.S.A.

(Read 21st October, 1902)



CANON MORRIS said his gleanings had been chiefly gathered from the Treasurers' Accounts and Assembly Orders, which, by the kind courtesy of the Mayor and Corporation, he was allowed to inspect.

He confined himself to items connected with the social life of Chester, omitting political items, such as the siege of Chester. The picture revealed to them was that of a city with streets badly paved and ill-lighted; foul and objectionable refuse; the walls decayed; the gates in a dangerous condition; disturbed not unfrequently by the turbulence of soldiers who were awaiting a fair passage to Ireland; crowded by an unsavoury horde of vagrants; and made horrible by the sight of gibbets, on which the heads and quarters of executed criminals were fixed. They saw how much there was of vigorous life in the citizens, who played no inconsiderable part in the history of England. They were brought into contact with most of the great nobles and statesmen who made history in

the Stuart period. He asked them to compare the safety and comfort of Chester in 1902 and its electric light installation, with the Chester of 1610 and for many years after, when the treasurer disbursed to one John Rees, for tending the City lantern, 2s. 6d.¹; for six pounds of candles, 2s. 3d. Four years later 12d. was paid to redeem the City lantern, impawned by the sexton of St. Peter's for 2s. They would understand how necessary it was on dark nights, when the other parish lantern—the moon—was not lighted, to have a supplementary light; and the Mayor had a frequent charge on the city funds for links to light his way from banquets and from his official visits—he never paid himself. In 1516 a dozen links cost 5s. The need of such lighting was shewn by an order issued in 1673, which directed that all benches and show-boards should be made with hinges, and folded up in the night time, to prevent any hurt or mischief that might happen to any person travelling in the rows or streets after dark.

In the daytime it was no less distressful by reason of the frequent holes and the heaps of mud and filth. There were old regulations about the cleansing of the streets, which came down from the Plantagenet and Tudor times. The order for the re-enactment of these regulations became especially stern when the scare of the plague was felt; but the City soon fell into its filthy habits of old days. In 1666 the Company of Glovers complained to the City Council that divers persons had allowed dirt to be put into the channels; and that heaps of dirt were placed at the Copplegate and at the ends of the Dee Mills, whereby the river

¹ "1617. Candells for the Citties Lanthorn at the new Staieres 2/6." "1620. Payd Adam for the Cittye Lanthorne iii^s iiiij^d." "1686. Mending the Cittie Lanthorn 1/6."

was choked, and that the fishings in the river were much impaired and damaged. The Council ordered that the offenders be fined 3s. 4d. for such offence; and that the constables give notice in their respective wards; and that the bellman publish the same. Provision was also made for scavenging. In 1670 Mr. Mayor proposed that three scavengers for the cleansing of the City be appointed. Two of them were allowed £16, and the third £20. The whole amount of £52 was set against the respective wards, with regard to the quality and ability of the persons in it. At a later assembly it was ordered that no inhabitant should be charged or rated above 1s. quarterly.

Chester had now a well-organized fire brigade; but in the period under consideration, when fires were numerous and more dangerous by reason of the abundance of wood, the City had to depend upon a scanty supply of buckets and the assistance of volunteers. Each freeman, on admission, paid 10d. towards the cost of the fire-buckets, which were kept in the Pentice. In 1638, 6d. was paid for the "carriage 50 of the City's buckets from Northgate Street where the fire was to the Pentice"; and the following year £2 13s. 4d. for the repairing of 50 buckets "which were spoyled att the fire in the Northgate Street." In 1670 it was ordered, for the security of the City, that all houses then erected, or to be erected later on, in Foregate Street, Eastgate Street, Northgate Street, Watergate Street, and Bridge Street, should be covered with slate or tiles, and not thatch.

Constant complaints were to be found of the encroachments upon the streets by posts and projections, and unauthorised building on vacant plots of ground

belonging to the City. That was particularly noticeable after the devastation caused by the long siege. A typical instance of impudent and persistent encroachment was that made by Randle Holme. It was the subject of many discussions at the Council Meetings, and in 1670 it was resolved that "the Treasurers doe forthwith cause the nuyance erected by Mr. Randle Hulme, in his new Buildings in the Bridge Street, to the great annoyance of his neighbours in hindring their prospect from their houses, to be taken down." In 1671 he was fined £3 6s. 8d. for his contempt and disobedience in proceeding with his building contrary to the commands of Mr. Mayor. In 1672 he was ordered to pay 5s. rent for his encroachment. In 1686 carpenters were paid 7s. for pulling down Mr. Hulme's encroachment.

Referring to the number of vagrants, he said that in 1628 notice was taken of the "multitude of poor, vagrant and idle people that of late resort unto this City and reside here, more than in former times, not only to the hurt of such poor of the City as by the law ought to be relieved, but also to the scandall of good government." The constables of every ward were directed every month at the least to make search in their several wards for those who did harbour or lodge such poor people, and present their names, together with the number of poor people, to the alderman of their ward. An early attempt was made in 1625 to deal with the difficulty, when the alarm of plague seized upon the citizens of Chester. In that year the gates of the City were watched night and day for a long time, that no Londoners or no wares should enter the City. Many who came from London had to stay in barns and stables for a month, to see if they were clean from infection. All householders were required to watch at the gates in their own person, and

if any were absent they had to hire, or otherwise provide, civil and sufficient freemen to watch in their place. The number of the watch at each gate was four, both day and night, and at other places so many as shall be directed by Mr. Mayor. Each watch lasted twelve hours, from six o'clock to six o'clock. Extra precautions were taken at fair time, an alderman, a sheriff's peer, and one of the Council being added to the ordinary watch three days and nights before and after the fair. The same orders were issued six years later, but discontinued in the following February, and resumed in 1636, with further precautions and heavier penalties, and the great fair of Michaelmas was stopped.

It was interesting to compare the modern system of ambulance with the rude provision made in 1693, when "Christopher Back, Constable of Northgate Ward, disbursed since May 23, fourpence for conveying a sick woman on a barrow in June"; and twopence for the same duty on August 8; and August 15 threepence for a barrow "for 2 poor gerles"; and "August 25 for a barrow" to carry "two sick women." The same constables reported that there were in St. John's Ward 14 bachelors, no widows, one widower, from whom they obtained fines of 1s. each, except from Mr. Randle Ravenscourt and Mr. Robert Warburton, who were mulcted in 6s. each. St. Michael's Ward had eight bachelors, who paid 6d. each, except Councillor Lloyd, who paid 13s.; St. Mary's Ward four bachelors, who were fined 1s. each.

With reference to the attendance at Council Meetings, the speaker remarked that in 1630 the attendance was very lax, and fines were frequently imposed. The same complaint was made in 1641, 1666, and 1667; while

there was no record of meetings between November 1667 and May 1668; and between February 1673 and September 1674. That irregularity seemed to point to a very unsettled state of affairs in Chester. The citizens were either very much engaged in business of their own, or were anxious to evade responsibility for measures passed, by absence from the meetings.

In 1672 more than one citizen refused to take the oath of allegiance, notwithstanding heavy fines of £40 and £50. In 1628 the tailors complained that there were too many of them to live comfortably in the City, and, after a long dispute, the alderman and steward of the linen drapers were committed to prison in the Northgate for defiance of the Mayor.

With regard to the City's finance, the Treasurers' accounts in 1639 shewed the comparative prosperity of the City. The total income was £593 3s. 1d., and the expenditure £664 6s. 7d. The Mayor's salary was £13 6s. 4d. The Roodee suffered severely from high tides in 1614 and 1620, and large sums were expended on making it safe. In 1625 two labourers were paid 2s. 6d. for mending the cross on the Roodee, and for filling up and levelling the ground where the stones were taken up. In 1631 serious complaints were made as to the condition of the Eastgate; and in 1667 the under-keeper of the Northgate petitioned that the prison be repaired sufficiently for the safe custody of the prisoners. In 1671 the prisoners were removed to the Eastgate, which was to be the City prison until further orders. In 1675 £255 1s. 6½d. was spent upon the Northgate, shewing that the citizens were rather slow in making repairs. The largest items of expenditure were on the many entertainments given to great nobles and other distin-

guished visitors.¹ Half-a-pound of the best tobacco cost 20s. ; while in 1639 sugar was 2s. 3d. a pound.

Canon Morris then read several interesting items provided at an entertainment, consisting of sack, claret, white wine, and loaves of sugar and almonds. The most costly entertainment was that given on the occasion of King James II.'s visit in 1687, when the expenses amounted to £257 17s. The City flag or "ancient" used on these occasions was "monstrous fine." Randle Holme was paid 7s. for devising the City's Arms upon the flag; and in 1622 he was paid £4 18s. 11d. for a new "ancient." The City drum was a much-suffering instrument, and had to be repeatedly renewed.

The Midsummer Show became a time of great riot, and in 1666 it was ordered that members of the "Forty," or belonging to any company, should, during the time of the show, accompany the leavelookers, or pay 10s. each fine. Any member of the companies behaving disorderly was fined 5s. The wooden glove, now in the Liverpool Museum, has had a chequered career. It was the usual custom to give notice of the fair, held on the last Thursday in February, by hanging the glove out. In 1685 two gentlemen were sent to the Castle to demand the glove from the Governor, who had caused it to be taken down.

We had this year been celebrating the Coronation of King Edward VII., and people of all classes had

¹ "1609. Sugar bestowed on the Prince of Germany." "1618. Banquett to entertain Earle of Oxford £3 10 0. Wyne & Sugar 22/8. Beare & Rushes 2/6. A loaf of Sugar given to the Earle 13/2 at 16_d. Scouring the 25 dozen of pewter plates 12_d, for oyle 2_d." "1619. 15 July, Wine & Suger sent to Earl of Derby; 16 July. Suger and divers sorts of sweete meates sent the Countes from ye Maior £3 4 7." "1625. To Mr. Wm. Gamull's man for wyne bestowed on the Lord Prymate when he was in Chester by Mr. Maior's appointment iiij_s, 1^h Sugar bestowed on the Lord Prymate xvj^d." "1668. 200 and a half cheese to send to London £1 10 2."

celebrated it loyally. Very different was the case 300 years ago. King James I. died in 1625, and the accession of Charles I. was proclaimed by the Sheriff, who stood at the foot of the Cross, to the sound of drums and trumpets, the Mayor and the Earl of Derby and other citizens standing round about. In 1630 all knights and freeholders and many aldermen and "subsidie" men were called before the Commissioners for the non-appearance at the Coronation of the King, and paid £10 and £5 apiece, as they could agree with the Commissioners.

They would conclude with him that, prosperous as the citizens were then, and despite the pomp and ceremony and banquetings and junketings, at the expense not of the Mayor but of the worthy citizens themselves, and merry though England was for the most part in that period, our lot had fallen in pleasanter places, and that we indeed, in most respects, were better off than our fathers as regarded the comforts and conveniences of life.

