

King John's Sword (King's Lynn).

COMMUNICATED BY

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The sum total of what King's Lynn has lost by accident or by the carelessness or indifference of the custodians of its treasures can never be known, but judged by the lists and records to be found in the Corporation's archives, it must have been considerable. In stating this fact, I do no more than express the regrets that every lover of antiquity must feel at the disappearance of so many of these treasures, for it would be unfair to impute any special blame to the Lynn custodians when we remember that many other towns have suffered in this respect much more grievously than the town of which I have the honour to be Mayor. Rather might we praise our predecessors for not having too closely followed the prevailing fashion of neglecting or allowing to be destroyed those objects which had apparently outlived their use, and of which the historical and antiquarian value could not then be foreseen.

The purport of this paper is to submit to a closer examination the evidence in support of the tradition, not in itself to be despised, that, during one of his visits, King John took his sword from his side and

presented it to the town, as an acknowledgment of the support accorded him by the borough. This evidence has long been in existence, but it has never been set forth in such a way as to attract the attention it merits; and the tradition has only of late been allowed to die out through the comparatively recent and unwelcome discovery of antiquarian experts that the sword, which is now carried in front of the Mayor, cannot possibly date from that period. This blow to the town's historical credit seemed to have settled the matter once and for all; and though the actual period from which the present sword dates is not quite certain, I remember on one occasion hearing the late Sir Guy Laking, the King's Armourer, give it as his opinion that the blade of the sword might be referred to King Henry VI.'s reign on account of the marks upon it. It is understood that the late King Edward was interested in the sword and requested Sir Guy to make a report upon it, which probably accounted for his visit to King's Lynn, when he inspected the Regalia. This report, if it was made, is not at Sandringham, nor can it be found at Buckingham Palace or Windsor Castle, and, though I have received most kindly assistance, I have not been able to learn anything about it. Other authorities, to whom Lord Dillon, who has not himself seen the sword, refers me, are of the same opinion, and some corroboration of this may also be found in one of the Town Records, which runs as follows:—

“1446, Aug. 5: Ordered ye same day, yt ye sworde of ye Mayor shall be carried before him point upward or erect, as Our Lord ye King granted to ye said Mayor ye last time he was in ye town.”

Henry VI. was the first King to grant the privilege of the sword being carried *before* the Mayor as the symbol of his authority, and it is not improbable that

the State sword now in possession of the Corporation was presented by him for the purpose. But of this there is no actual evidence. It may incidentally be stated that the honour thus conferred on the Mayor and the town did not long endure, for the Bishop of Norwich was immediately on the war path complaining of an infringement of his prerogative. The matter in dispute was carried to London, where the King, unwilling no doubt to make an enemy of the Bishop, was constrained to decide in his favour and annul the grant to the Mayor.

It does not, however, follow that, because the present sword can be definitely referred to a later reign, the King John sword episode, like the King John cup romance, must therefore be accounted a myth. It is true that this has hitherto seemed the more probable conclusion, because in the 16th century some person unlearned in antiquarian lore, but imbued with the ancient tradition—and rightly so, as it seems to me—thought he was doing a service to posterity by causing the ancient tradition to be recorded on the crosspiece of the sword of Henry VI., which he fondly believed to be that of King John. This person Sir Henry Spelman stated to be Mr. Ivory, the schoolmaster of the town, and there is some indirect and independent evidence that the statement is correct. Though technically indefensible, his action had the advantage of keeping before us the ancient tradition, which might otherwise have been lost, and we have therefore no cause to blame him for so doing. He has been guilty of an anachronism, but he has not succeeded in falsifying history, and he has kept the old tradition alive.

In the face of the authoritative pronouncement of the antiquary and the apparent destruction of the tradition, too little attention, it seems to me, has been paid to the

actual evidence available in proof of the older belief, that King John did actually present his sword to the town. There is to be found on p. 56 of Mason's *History of Norfolk*, and also on p. 56 of Hillen's *History of the Borough of King's Lynn*, the following extract from John Speed's *History of Great Britain*:—

“King John setting forth from Lin, where for their faithful services he (had) bestowed large franchises and his own sword and a gilt belt for typification of his affection,” &c.

It should be noted that John Speed, though, according to Spedding, he retained “almost all the old blunders,” the means indeed for correcting which were probably not then available, produced a history, which of its kind was “incomparably more complete than all the histories of his predecessors put together,” and to this high praise Spedding himself subscribes. And in regard to the blunders alleged to have been repeated by him, I would point out that his statement affecting the sword cannot have been one of the blunders referred to, for no one would be foolish enough to attempt to demonstrate the opposite and so endeavour to prove a negative. The statement, moreover, on the face of it appears to me to bear the hall-mark of truth. The information Speed gives us was doubtless obtained from some older authority, and it will be noted that he is not here merely following tradition, but is giving us a version, to which, so far as I am aware, attention has never yet been specifically directed, and which has therefore never been assessed at its true value. It is not a general statement such as gossip might have originated, but a detailed statement that can hardly have been invented. If this statement stood alone, and no other evidence were available, I think it would still be entitled to very great weight; but in Harrod's *Report on the*

Deeds and Records of the Borough of King's Lynn (p. 6) there is to be found a certain extract from one of the rolls in the archives of the Corporation which may possibly supply some corroboration. It is given as follows:—

“A small parchment roll entitled ‘Roll of defaults of the Guildhall in the time of Thomas de Couteshale, Mayor 11th Richard II.,’ among the Memoranda of which is one that William Erl, who was one of the Chamberlains, received the silver zone of ‘a certain sword’ and the silver mace to be new made, and the same has been delivered to William Spicer to sell. And in a rough note of Mayor’s Memoranda of the same date is an enquiry ‘about the zone late belonging to the sword of the Mayor whether it ought to be sold, and when and by whom.’ No answers to the questions are to be found, but in the Chamberlain’s accounts for the 12th & 13th Richard II. occurs a payment of 2s. 5d. for ‘a scabbard to the sword of the Mayor with Goldsmith’s work for the same.’”

Before analysing this extract from the roll and indicating to what extent it bears on the question with which I am dealing, let me briefly sketch the previous relation of the Bishop of Norwich to the Corporation as abundantly evidenced by existing records. It was one of steadily growing jealousy on the one side and increasing hostility on the other. But though the Mayor and Corporation were incessantly striving to burst the feudal bonds that bound them to the Overlord, the power of the Bishop in the borough that bore his name remained paramount right down to the period of the Reformation. And one of the very first quarrels that arose between the Mayor and the Bishop was upon the Mayor’s claim to have the sword carried in the State processions of which he was the head; and it was just

this that the Bishop claimed to be his special prerogative. At so early a period of the Corporation's existence, there can be no question but that the Bishop enforced his claim, for his power was overwhelming. The curtain is only lifted at a much later date, when, in 1 Richard II., a most unseemly fracas occurred between the Mayor and Corporation and their supporters on the one side and the Bishop and his followers on the other. On this occasion there was no attempt to carry a sword in the procession, but only a wand or mace. Even this was resented by the Bishop and was sufficient to cause the affray. We are not, for the moment concerned with the result of the quarrel, but only with the evidence here presented, that, in this particular, the Bishop fiercely resented the smallest infringement of what he held to be his rights.

Now, if the Bishop, who had built his episcopal palace at Gaywood in close proximity to the town, insisted that the sword of King John should be carried before him and not in any procession of the Mayor and Corporation, as assuredly he did (assuming the presentation of the sword), then we are supplied with a sufficient reason for the disappearance of King John's sword from the archives of the Corporation, the tradition only remaining. But what about the gilt belt that Speed states to have been also presented? What had become of this? Is this by any chance the silver zone of "a certain sword" referred to in the extract from the roll?

Let the vagueness of the reference first be noted. The scribe has evidently not the least idea of the history of the silver zone, the sale of which is in contemplation, and the rough notes of Mayor's Memoranda of enquiry "about the zone late belonging to the sword of the Mayor, whether it ought to be sold, when and by whom," sufficiently indicate that the story of the zone, whatever it may have been, had passed from municipal memory.

The Corporation had no use for the zone in 1216 or at any subsequent time. If the sword was carried on State occasions, whether by authority of Mayor or Bishop, the gilt belt was not required. It was over the sword and not over the belt that the dispute arose, and if the symbol of authority was wrested from the Mayor and Corporation, all interest in the belt would gradually be lost. It must also be remembered that, so long as the Merchants' Guild endured, the Mayor and Corporation were but little better than tenants at will of the Merchants' premises. It is true that in practice there was little distinction between the two bodies, but this close association in comparatively restricted premises rather tended towards confusion than otherwise. So that it is small wonder if, after the lapse of 160 years or so, when we know by the records still available that the affairs of the Corporation were "indifferently well" conducted, the story of the gilt belt was forgotten, and the silver zone when it was discovered (the gilt having worn off the silver) was something of a puzzle to the Corporation, who could not make up their minds about it, whether it ought to be sold, and if so, when and by whom.

It is unnecessary to state that I do not advance this theory as more than a distinct possibility, verging, nevertheless, on probability.

Harrod in his report puts forward what I may call the suspicion of a suggestion that the sword carried *with* and *after* the Mayor, in the reigns of Richard II., Henry IV. and V., may have been King John's sword. In view of what I have written above, I cannot accept this even as a suspicion, and I will not therefore discuss it.

Though the evidence here presented is not absolutely conclusive, yet I am inclined to think that it is sufficient

to justify the good people of Lynn in holding to their tradition, albeit not justified in regard to the sword now in possession of the Corporation. It is certainly curious that, in all the recent references to King John's sword which have come to my notice, no mention is made of the "gilt belt," though this is the one portion of the gift that seems to receive some support from the information to be found in the quotation from Harrod. Reviewing all the evidence available, I myself incline to the older belief, which I had hitherto discredited, now that I have discovered it to be based on something more solid than the ancient tradition retained throughout the centuries as a pious memory.