

“ THE LIBER ALBUS,”

AND OTHER RECORDS OF THE CORPORATION OF LONDON, WITH ILLUSTRATIONS DERIVED FROM THEM OF METROPOLITAN LIFE IN THE THIRTEENTH AND FOURTEENTH CENTURIES.

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THE Record-room of the Corporation of London possesses a collection of Archives, with which, for antiquity and completeness, that of no other city in the world will bear any comparison. From upwards of seven hundred years ago down to the present time it has received and preserved documents of almost every imaginable variety. Under nearly every head to which ancient instruments may be referred, it possesses most ample and precious stores; and there is scarcely a phase of our country's history—political, ecclesiastical, legal, military, or social—which may not here meet with illustration and elucidation.

Strange, nevertheless, it is, and true as strange, that very few persons are aware of the existence of these treasures; and that still fewer can read them, or know ought of the information which they could convey. Even professed scholars, to whom the usages of classical ages and localities are familiar, are singularly ignorant of the manners of their forefathers for many centuries previous to their own. The habits and opinions of the ancient residents in Athens and Rome have charms for, and engross the interest of, many to whom those of their own immediate progenitors are objects of no concern. There are many persons, however, who would gladly possess some information on these subjects, for the time is happily past when researches into mediæval literature elicited the disparaging remarks of pseudo-religious and fanatical critics; but not a few even of these suffer themselves to be appalled by the magnitude of the task, and regard as insurmountable the difficulties which besiege the entrance to the study—the language by which the knowledge is imparted, and the garb in which it is presented

to the eye. The aspect of a single page of an ancient manuscript record, composed in mediæval Latin, and appearing to the uninstructed eye little more intelligible than a tablet covered with Egyptian hieroglyphics, will in some measure explain this unhappy, but, it must be admitted, unworthy ignorance.

On many accounts, therefore, I cannot doubt that, to a Society like the present, some information in respect of the City Records will be very acceptable. To every archæological student I hardly need say that they have claims upon a degree of attention superior to that which most other subjects deserve from us. And I may truly add, that the more we devote that measure to them, the more instructive and interesting we shall find them to be.

Among the most important of the City archives are various early Registers or Letter Books; *Liber de Antiquis Legibus*, a Latin Chronicle of City History, from A.D. 1178 to 1274;* *Assisa Paris*, from 1284; *Liber Memorandorum*, 1298; *Liber Horn*, consisting of a number of miscellaneous records, dated 1311; *Liber Custumarum*, a similar collection, of nearly the same period; *Liber Albus*, 1419; Journals and Repertories of the Courts of Aldermen and Common Council, from A.D. 1417 to the present time; *Liber Legum*, a collection of laws, from A.D. 1342 to 1590; and *Liber Dunthorn*, a miscellaneous collection in Latin, French, and English, made between A.D. 1461 and 1490.

It is specially to the "*Liber Albus*" that I am about to draw attention. And I select this Record for several reasons. Among others, on account of its preciousness in the eyes of every generation of civic authorities—"a grand repertory," as it is, "of the archives of the City;" of the insight which it affords into the customs and usages of ancient London life during the period to which it relates; and also on account of the greater facility with which most readers are now enabled to acquire at their leisure a knowledge of its contents, from its having been lately selected for publication under the direction of the Master of the Rolls, and well and carefully edited by Mr. H. T. Riley, barrister-at-law, to whom I am happy to confess my obligations, in which all must unite who feel an interest in these and similar subjects.

* Already published by the Camden Society.

The "Liber Albus" is in mediæval Latin and old French, and was written, as appears by the preface, in the year 1419, being finished in the November of that year, the civic reign, be it not forgotten, of the famous Sir Richard Whittington. It was compiled under the superintendence of John Carpenter, then town-clerk, of whom Mr. Brewer has furnished us with an interesting memoir. It is a folio volume, in a rich leather binding, with bosses, which may be of the latter part of the sixteenth or the commencement of the following century. Although the numbering of the pages from 1 to 352, is incorrect, no part of the volume is wanting.

In contrast with the name by which it was at first honourably distinguished, and which is again once more restored to it, it is usually called "Liber Niger," from the defiling treatment which it has undergone from some thousands of greasy hands. This fact is bewailed by a classical scribe of the sixteenth century, in some lines on the fly-leaf at the commencement of the volume, where the "unctuous thumbs" of successive generations of City dignitaries are stated to have turned the pristine whiteness of the leaves into the contrary colour, and an urgent entreaty is added to copy the contents of the peerless pages while they yet retain the power of imparting their information.

In agreement with the advice thus given, a transcript was made by Robert Smith, Comptroller, in 1582, which still exists among the Corporation Records, though hardly worthy of a place there from its very indifferent execution.

The period to which the Liber Albus refers dates from the early years of the reign of the first Edward to the middle of that of Richard II., from 1285 to 1385, or about the space of a century—a period not sufficiently protracted to witness many changes in the regulations, customs, and usages of those slowly-advancing times. Of the faithfulness of the picture there cannot, from the nature of the testimony, be so much as the shadow of a doubt.

It is divided into four books, the first and third of which are subdivided into several parts. The three first books treat of the Mayor, Aldermen, and Sheriffs, wager of law, *Inquisitiones post mortem*, the charters granted by various sovereigns, customs, ob-

servances of various trades (millers, brewers, butchers, fishmongers, &c.), weights and measures, laws relating to the construction of houses, party-walls, to landlord and tenant, the conservancy of the Thames, and a multitude of other topics. The fourth book is a very valuable and interesting abstract or calendar of the then existing books and rolls in the Corporation archives. The whole is a vast magazine of information on almost every topic connected with the London of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

As the preface of this venerable record very clearly as well as briefly explains the intent of the work and the arrangement of its several parts, I shall need no apology for giving it to you in a literal English dress. It is as follows:—

“ Forasmuch as the instability of human memory and the shortness of life allow us not to possess certain knowledge in respect of matters of each several kind which deserve to be remembered, even if those matters be committed to writing, especially if so committed in an irregular and confused manner, and still more in respect of matters which are not committed to writing; and since, by reason of the frequent pestilences, all the aged, more expert, and discreet rulers of the Royal City of London being removed as it were together, the younger men succeeding them in the government of the City are on various occasions, and especially through the want of written directions, frequently in doubt; from which circumstance, in the administration of justice there is constant controversy and perplexity among them, it hath seemed necessary from a long while past, as well to the higher as to the lower residents in the said City, that a certain volume, which, from containing therein the laws of the City should be called a Repertory, should, from notable memoranda both in the books and rolls, and also in the charters of the said City, now lying without arrangement and scattered hither and thither, be brought together in one compilation. And because the said purpose (why we know not, save by reason of the great labour which such a work would involve,) hath not been up to this date put into execution, in the time of the mayoralty of the noble man Richard Whityngton, mayor of the said City, that is to say, in the fourteen hundred and nineteenth

year of the Incarnation of our Lord, the seventh of the reign of King Henry the Fifth after the Conquest, in the month of November, a volume of this kind is, by the favour of God, compiled, containing in itself both praiseworthy observances, not written, customary, and approved in the said City, so that oblivion may not come in time to wipe them out of memory; and sundry notable memoranda, written in the manner aforesaid, without collection and without arrangement: in order that, by the knowledge of them, both the persons in higher and those in lower stations in the said City may know more safely, for the time to come, what course of procedure is proper in rare and unusual cases, &c.

“ And in order that the requirement of the readers may with greater ease be discovered in this book, the present volume is divided into four books, and each book into certain parts by their own articles and headings; which, by means of different tables and calendars placed at the commencement of the aforesaid books, will more clearly appear, &c. And first, the calendar or heading-table of the first book, which is divided into two parts, forthwith conspicuously followeth.

“ A preface is prefixed, in which is contained the reason why this book hath been compiled, &c.

“ It contains the division of the whole work into books, of the books into parts, of the parts into headings and articles, &c.”

The work then proceeds in regular order.

As our object at these meetings is to popularise archæology, so far, at least, as that object can be attained without the omission of the necessary scientific details, the absence of which, I hardly need add, would reduce that which should be learned investigation to the level of mere child's play, I am unwilling to offer you what might be considered as a dull essay on the peculiarities of metropolitan usage in the thirteenth century, as contained in the record, and would far rather present you with the same amount of information conveyed in a form which to many of my audience would be more attractive. I consider that we who desire to instruct our age in the habits and modes of thought of their forefathers, are quite justified, to say the least, in departing from that dry routine in which antiquaries have so often appeared to delight, and in endeavouring to invest our

fascinating study with the garb which it most eminently deserves. The subject in either case is the same, but the mode in which it is presented to the student is widely different. And the mode in which a subject is presented is, as all good teachers know, a matter of infinite importance.

In the present case, the subject is London life and London usages in the reigns of Edwards I., II., and III. Instead of presenting these details under separate heads, I will endeavour to weave them into a consecutive narrative. I will imagine a stranger coming to town, living at an inn for a day or two, walking about on his various avocations, and, when he sees anything that strikes him, making a note of it.

Our friend has entered the City through "Bisshoppesgate," kept in repair by a composition with the Hanse Towns,* but supplied with hinges by the Bishop of London,† and has taken up his quarters in a hostel situated on the banks of the Thames, from the windows of which he can inhale the sweet breezes, and watch the waterfowl which disported themselves in that then pellucid stream! His host was neither Portuguese nor German,‡ but a freeman of the city, and well known to the authorities.§ He has been reminded, we will suppose, of that singular enactment, the exact parallel of the old law of frank-pledge, the revival of which would be likely to cause no small amount of consternation among innkeepers of these degenerate days, namely, that the host was held responsible to the magistrates for any ill-doings of which his guest might be guilty.|| Or it may be as well, perhaps, that we suppose him ignorant of this agreeable state of things, and that we thus give him all the grace of voluntary good behaviour. Whether, however, this be so or not, our stranger has been made to feel that he is lying under evil suspi-

* f. 247.

† f. 282.

‡ f. 249.

§ I am unwilling to overload the feet of my pages with references to the original MS. I have accordingly selected a few of the most important only out of the large number which I had originally made. These, however, will no doubt be found abundantly sufficient for all practical purposes; and the Record itself can, by the favour of the authorities, be easily examined by any who desire to make themselves more fully acquainted with the exact situation of the statements given in the text.

|| f. 213.

cion of being in the metropolis for no good, and that, upon the slightest breach of the peace, punishment is a certain consequence. The host has at least been sufficiently candid with his guest to inform him that he can remain but one day and one night without special permission from the authorities*; that he must leave his arms behind him when indulging in a walk along the streets, that severe penalties will be the result of drawing a sword or of too freely using his fists within the City boundaries†; that no visor nor mask may be worn; that how much soever he may be oppressed with the heat he must not bathe in the Tower fosse under penalty of death; that by no means is any weapon to accompany him after the ringing of the curfew, and that, in short, early hours are absolutely indispensable. For the night's lodging his charge is one penny. It was probably added that there is no inducement to remain in the streets after the curfew has pealed forth its authoritative clang.‡ All wine taverns, he says, are closed at the same hour, and suspicious characters of all kinds are subjected to every species of indignity to force them to keep at home.§

His bread and ale have been sent for from the bakers and brewers, as the hosteller is forbidden to make and sell them to his guest.|| He might have had "demeine," or lord's bread, "fraunceis," or french bread, and "pouffe," or "puffe."¶ It is stamped with the baker's seal; the loaves are either two or four a penny, and, we will hope, of good quality.** This was not the case at all times. Sometimes the members of the white fraternity made their loaves fine without and coarse within; a trick that reminds us of certain wooden "nutmegs" of immortal memory. On another occasion, a baker was so far lost to a sense of propriety as to insert a piece of iron in his bread to increase its weight, and had the pleasure of standing in the pillory as a reward of his meritorious exertions for the common weal.

But our countryman is now in the street. The footpath on which he walks is about seven feet in breadth in the wider thoroughfares. He has hardly gone a dozen yards, before he

* ff. 199 b., 213.

† f. 224.

‡ ff. 223, 224.

§ f. 201.

|| f. 216 b.

¶ f. 215.

** f. 215 b.

passes under a long pole projecting from a house, supporting a bush or a bunch of leaves; and declaring thereby that good wine may be drunk on those premises. An unhappy horseman has just knocked his head against a similar pole a few doors off, the frequent occurrence of which interesting fact will presently cause a stringent enactment against their projection beyond the line of the footway.* The houses themselves next claim his attention. Most of them are of one story only; the "solar," or upper room, being furnished with a gable, faced with plaster, and ordinarily whitewashed. The ground-floor rooms are usually from eight to nine feet high, over which the first-floor projects. Some few of the houses have two or even three stories; but these are not unfrequently in the possession of other parties than the citizens who occupy the ground and first-floors, and are entered by stairs constructed on the outside. The houses are for the most part roofed with tiles, since the thatched roofs contributed so fearfully to the conflagration in the reign of King Stephen† as to bring that material into disrepute and disuse. The roofs run up to a point, with the gables towards the street. Each house is divided by party walls, some of which are as much as three feet thick and sixteen high.‡ A nuisance at this point provokes his ire, and one, I regret to say, by no means confined to the period of our traveller,—a yawning abyss, leading, by means of a steep flight of steps, to a capacious undercroft. The hoarding which surrounds this § forces him into the roadway, and when there, into a more close contact with one of the privileged pigs of the Renter of St. Anthony's Hospital—whose swine, as belonging to the patron saint of that animal, were permitted to roam wheresoever they would—than could be at all agreeable to any gentleman taking his morning stroll.

Shops are now on all sides of him. They consist merely of open rooms, and windows without partitions and shutters. Their tenants are required to keep them, and the spaces immediately before them, unexceptionably clean, and on no account to place any filth before the doors or windows of their neighbours.

* f. 213b.

† f. 212.

‡ f. 211.

§ f. 244b.

No one may throw water out of his chamber windows under a heavy penalty ; indeed far greater care is taken of sanitary matters than we may suppose, or give those times credit for. The Bakers, who were the scavengers of later ages, have been actively employed in removing all refuse to places without the walls,* as none is permitted to remain within the City. He now enters a market. It is that, probably, of Chepe or Cornhill, where there is abundance of bread and cheese, poultry, vegetables, and fruit; or of the wool mart on the space by St. Mary Woolchurch; or before the convent of Friars Minors at Newgate; or by the Graschirche; or, if the purchaser need flesh or fish, then of "Stokkes" market, near the present Mansion House; or of St. Nicholas Shambles, on the site of the present Newgate Market. Carts with wood and charcoal for sale he can observe at Smithfield and on Cornhill, and sea-coal at Billingsgate. Several of these localities were, during this period, roughly paved, and on the pavements the traders congregated and exposed their wares for sale.

As he walks along, he indulges himself with a few purchases. He is taken with the pattern of a pair of spurs, and gives the enormous sum of 12*d.*, beyond which price none may be sold. He eats a pie, for which he pays one halfpenny. Ale may also be bought at three farthings or a penny per gallon. As he passes the Stocks Market, he sees as fine a display of fish as any that has since made the vendors of that article famous. It is the ordinary food of the lower orders, and the fast-days of the Church made its consumption general among all classes. No boiled whelks, however, are allowed to be carried about for sale.† Almost every kind of freshwater-fish has been brought either from the Thames or its tributaries; and of sea-fish the supply is ample. Not one shrimp, crab, or lobster, however, does he notice; the Londoners have yet to learn the existence of these delicacies. He is asked 6*d.* for a cod, 1½*d.* for a stock-fish, and could have bought a thousand herrings for 6*s.* Then he goes to the great cattle-market in Smithfield. He might purchase an ox for 13*s.* 4*d.*, a cow for 10*s.*, a best pig for 4*s.*, and a best sheep for 2*s.* There are more pigs than any other animals, and the same is a peculiarity of the meat-market. Londoners were then much addicted to pork and bacon ! One regu-

* f. 213.

† f. 221.

lation of the period deserves special mention. St. Nicholas's butchers were positively forbidden to transport the filth and offal of their business to the Thames; and it was imperatively enacted that no large cattle should be slaughtered within the walls of the City. The next market which he visits is that for poultry, on the west side of St. Michael, Cornhill, or on the pavement at Newgate, before the convent of the Friars Minors. The lords and servants of the King have already completed their purchases, and he, one of the smaller fry, may now select his dinner. A goose will cost him 6*d.*, a hen, 6*d.*; a snipe and a woodcock—hear this, ye lovers of gentle cheer—the former 1*d.*, the latter, 3*d.*; a partridge, 4*d.*; a chicken, 2*d.*, a teal, 2*d.*, a pheasant, 12*d.*; a bittern, 18*d.*; four larks, 1*d.*; and a dozen pigeons, 8*d.** So far as the record informs us, our friend could see no English fruits, save apples, pears, and walnuts. Then, also, potatoes were unknown, and asparagus had yet to be turned to use. He might, indeed, have nicely discriminated between the allied flavours of onions, leeks, and garlick, and with this gustatory effort he must perforce have contented himself! Strange to say, he does not notice any milk for sale. There was, however, another delicacy in which he might have indulged—the luxury of butter. But when I am constrained to add that it was sold by liquid measure, his *penchant* would not appear to have derived from the dainty a very superlative gratification!

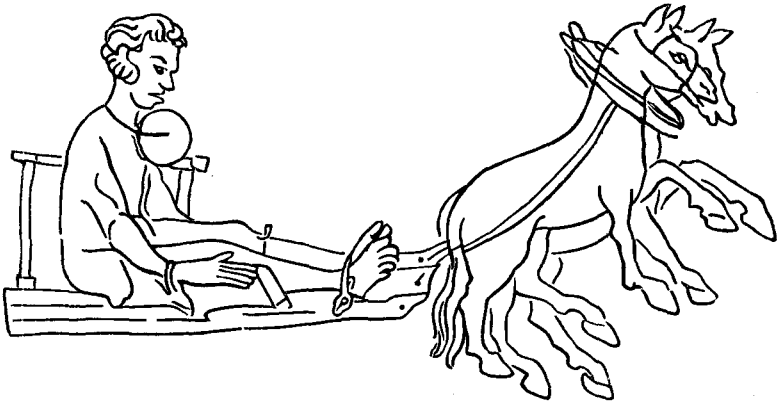
We should do injustice, however, to our friend's good taste if we thought that he could leave the metropolis without paying a visit to his tailor. That personage and his art were of at least equal importance to the rank which they hold in our present estimation. Both the gentlemen and the ladies were indebted for their attire to the skill of this artificer; and, truth to say, he seems by his elaborate constructions to have done his best to please them. Our friend has bought what his wife will call a perfectly lovely robe, garnished with silk, the making whereof has cost 18*d.*; and has also invested 2*s.* 6*d.* in a long dress, similarly garnished, for that lady at home.† Motives of economy, which, it would seem, had even then some few devotees, have induced him to purchase in addition, at the cost of 4*d.* “a pair of sleeves for changing.”

* f. 242.

† f. 346 b.

A new coat, as every body knows, necessitates the addition of sundry other novelties. Thus, ere he returns, a finely embroidered pair of boots of cordwain have stood him in 3s. 6*d.* and a pair of gloves of the best sheepskin in 2*d.* I must not take you further into the inventory of his wardrobe, except simply to say that, what, with his new hose, his embroidered girdle, and ornamented pouch or purse, his day's visit to London will be very conspicuously and gloriously notified to his country neighbours at home.

But our gentleman's walk is not quite concluded. He is very much tired with his sight-seeing and marketing, but all of a sudden an object arrests him, which, if it has not special charms, is one which he will not soon forget. He is passing through Chepe, and, amid a warm volley of jokes, an unfortunate baker is going on a journey with which his own will has not overmuch to do. He has been convicted of selling bread of undue weight and quality, and



PUNISHMENT OF A FRAUDULENT BAKER.*

this is the result. There he is, drawn on a hurdle, through the very dirtiest parts of the street, with his hands tied down by his side, and, by way of adding insult to injury, the loaf that is the cause of all his woe is hanging from his neck! He is on his way to

* I am indebted to my friend F. Woodthorpe, Esq. Town Clerk, for ready and courteous permission to make a tracing of the pen-and-ink drawing in the original MS. (Assisa Panis, 12 Edw. I. 1284), of which the accompanying woodcut is an exact fac-simile.

the pillory, where he will have the satisfaction of standing for a not very agreeable hour.* His oven has been pulled down, and he will never be permitted to exercise his craft again within the limits of the City. An apprentice comes next, who has refused to swear to obey his master.† Another victim follows, whose offence consisted in selling oats, good at the top and bad below; while proclamation, or what is called a good hue-and-cry,‡ is made not only of these, but of sundry other delinquents, by whom unsound articles, rotten meat, poultry, herrings, “false” breeches, girdles, gloves, caps, &c., have been attempted to be imposed on unwary customers.§

He is considerably astonished, and not a little edified, by accounts which he receives of other offenders, whose evil deeds have made them notorious. They must have been shrewd knaves some of them. One was adjudged to the pillory for pretending to be a Sheriff’s serjeant, and meeting the bakers of Stratford and arresting them, in order to extort a fine; another for pretending to be the Summoner of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and, in execution of his office, summoning the Prioress of Clerkenwell; another for pretending to be a physician; another for stealing a leg of mutton at the Flesh-shambles of St. Nicholas; and others for pretending to be an officer of the Marshelsea; for pretending to be a holy Hermit; for pretending to be begging for the Hospital of Bethlehem; for counterfeiting seals and exhibiting counterfeit bulls; for rebellion against the Alderman of Broadstreet; for rebellion against the Sheriffs, who are complimentarily called “the eyes of the Mayor;”|| for opprobrious language to a Serjeant in the presence of the Mayor; for cursing the Mayor, but, it is added, in his worship’s absence; for insulting words to William Wotton, the Alderman of Dowgate; for telling lies about Mr. Recorder; and for insults, lies, and scandal about Mr. Alderman Falconer.¶ The punishment for scandal varied in some measure from that for other offences. The pillory was, of course, a part of it, but the culprit was subjected to a previous imprisonment of a year and a day; and then, if he had not endured a similar in-

* f. 199.

§ ff. 290, 293b.

† f. 291b.

|| f. 11.

‡ f. 202.

¶ ff. 290, 290 b, 291.

fiction at the end of every quarter, he was to stand in the pillory with a whetstone hanging from his neck—a sly allusion to the sharpening process which the scandal-monger's tongue had evidently undergone.

He is just at the hostel from whence he started, when he thinks that he may as well get a look at the "Tun." This he knows is in Cornhill, and is the prison of City offenders in general: especially all disturbers of the peace, either by day or by night, there find a safe if not a pleasant custody. As he passes he is witness of the entrance of some of these. Among them are conspicuous several women, with their hair cropped close, and clad in the dress (but especially not minever nor other furs, nor silk,*) which declares their shame, and which they are compelled to wear by several repeated enactments; and, together with them, a man, in whose house they have been harboured; his hair and beard closely shaven, with the exception of a noticeable and ridiculous fringe on his head of two inches in breadth. Escorting this rout there is a company of musicians, "mynstralx,†" in order, perhaps, to call attention to their captives, and to make the neighbourhood aware of their presence by drawing out the horrors from instruments on which they have *not* learned to play!

Thus our friend has walked from place to place amid the many-coloured groups of London, and yet all along he has endured nothing that, so far as legislative enactments could provide against it, was calculated to annoy or disgust him. No dealers have forced their wares upon him, for a reference to authority would have resulted in the loss of the articles so obtruded. No thieves have picked his pocket, whom constables could have prevented and have not cared to do so. No filth has greeted him from the windows. No lepers have been suffered to meet him or to beg in the streets.‡ Not so much as a dog has snarled at him, except one or two at the outside; and those, he gratefully remembers, were "*chiens gentils*," genteel dogs, beasts that belonged, not to the mob, but to the great lords of the land! Our country friend turns into his hostelry with a due sense of the greatness of the scene in which he has been moving, of the few drawbacks and

* f. 203.

† f. 240.

‡ f. 200 b.

many and real comforts of London life—of the security and abundance on every side; in short, of the manifold excellences of his country's metropolis—qualities as conspicuous in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, if comparison be made with provincial districts during the same period, as they are in our own age.

Such, briefly and unworthily described, was a day in London—without, however, the ecclesiastical element, which gave all things a sacred and solemn glory of its own—during the reigns of the first three Edwards; and such is the matchless *Liber Albus* by whose precious pages the record has been transmitted.

THOMAS HUGO.
