

WARDMOTE INQUEST REGISTERS OF ST. DUNSTAN'S-IN-THE-WEST.

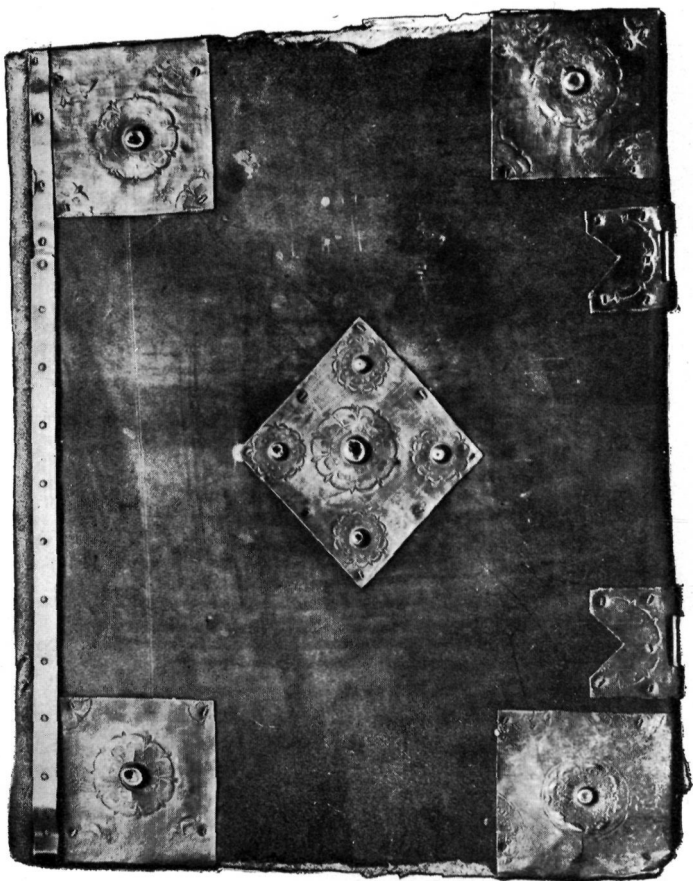
BY

WALTER GEORGE BELL.

FEW sources of London's social history give more valuable returns to the patient inquirer than the Wardmote Inquest registers. Yet they are almost entirely unknown and unexplored. I hasten to explain their limitations, lest expectation be disappointed. The outstanding events of centuries that are gone by find no mention in these time-stained pages, or at most but an indirect allusion; their scope is merely parochial. They tell only of the little things that happened, and for that reason they touch with remarkable intimacy and freshness upon the daily life of London citizens.

Many of these records, unfortunately, have ceased to exist, and it is to be feared that the Great Fire of London in 1666 consumed not a few of early date. Others which cannot now be traced have probably been lost owing to neglect and want of appreciation of their value by those in whose charge they have been placed. A few volumes, mostly of late date, are now collected in the Guildhall, and search among the records preserved in the various City churches would most likely reveal more. I propose in this paper to describe the Wardmote Inquest registers of St. Dunstan's-in-the-West.

The parish is of great interest. It lies in the Ward of Farringdon Without, and contains rather more than one half of Fleet Street, reaching to Temple Bar, and



ST. DUNSTAN'S WARDMOTE INQUEST REGISTER.

[THIS VOLUME, LEATHER BOUND, WITH METAL PLATES AND CLASPS, CONTAINS THE UNBROKEN SERIES OF REGISTERS FROM THE YEAR 1588 TO 1822. THEY ARE CONTINUED IN A SUPPLEMENTARY VOLUME.]

Handwritten text in a cursive script, likely a page from a manuscript. The text is dense and covers most of the page, with some lines appearing to be numbered or organized into sections. The ink is dark, and the paper shows signs of age and wear, particularly at the edges.

AN ELIZABETHAN PAGE, DATE 1561.

extends southwards to the Thames, and to the north as far as Cursitor Street. The legal inns of the Temple and Lincoln's Inn for the whole period of these registers have been extra-parochial, and their affairs did not come within the purview of the inquest. Whitefriars was a separate precinct, and for a long period enjoyed, and for a still longer period claimed, exceptional liberties, but the registers show that from time to time efforts were made—not very effectually—to exercise some sort of supervision over this disorderly area, where debtors, cheats, and vagabonds of all kinds kept sanctuary. It is best known as Alsatia, the name given by reason of its unbridled lawlessness, and has been described in some vivid passages by Shadwell in his play, "The Squire of Alsatia," by Sir Walter Scott in "The Fortunes of Nigel," and by Lord Macaulay.

There remains Fleet Street, a large part of Chancery Lane and of Fetter Lane, and the nest of courts and alleys north and south of the highway. For centuries this was one of the most populous areas of London outside the walls, for it had been densely built over, chiefly in the reigns of Elizabeth and James I. The inquest touched upon its social life at many points, and there are passages in these registers which throw a strong light upon the conditions under which London citizens of other days were content to live.

The wardmote inquest was an institution the origins of which must be looked for in the remotest periods of our history. It was claimed to be of Saxon growth, and its direct development from the ancient wardmote, a gathering of the people, cannot, I think, be questioned. As time progressed it probably lost powers that at one time it may have enjoyed, and assumed others. At the

period at which these registers of St. Dunstan's open, the first year of Elizabeth's reign, it had become very largely an advisory, or reporting, body. The inquest reported abuses to the Court of Aldermen, looking to them to enforce redress. In every case of abuse the formula is the same: "Item, we present So-and-So"—as a common annoyer, as a user of false measures, a scold, a harlot, a keeper of brothels, a recusant, and much besides.

Yet the inquest seems to have retained certain small powers. It gave doles from funds, the source of which is not clear, to widows, to the poor, and to prisoners in the common gaols. How intimate was its supervision of social affairs throughout the years of Elizabeth and the early Stuarts I hope to show by a few excerpts from the registers.

Each St. Thomas's Day (the 21st December) the wardmote inquest assembled.¹ The parishioners gathered at the parish church, the common place of assembly for the transaction of parochial affairs. There is no evidence that the rector or vicar, as the case might be, exercised authority, or, indeed, participated in the business. The record, where signed, bears the signature of the Alderman of the Ward, who presided. For instance, in these registers, the famous, or notorious, John Wilkes signs as Alderman of the Ward of Farringdon Without from 1767 till 1775; in the following

¹ It appears from a table of "Orders to be observed at the Wardmote Inquest," preserved at St. Giles's, Cripplegate, which are of early date, that the great bell, or tenor, was tolled 101 strokes for the assembly of the inquest, which met at 9 a.m. The inquest registers of St. Giles's have unfortunately been lost.

year there is an entry that the Lord Mayor "presided for the worshipful John Wilkes, esq, alderman of the ward," and in the next year Thos. Sainsbury signs as Wilkes's deputy.

The St. Dunstan's wardmote inquest registers are contained in two leather-bound folio volumes, forming a complete record from the year 1559 till 1882. They are in perfect preservation, thanks to the care with which they have been guarded by successive vicars and rectors of the parish, in whose keeping they have remained. I am indebted to the great kindness of the Rev. H. Lionel James, the present incumbent, for the facilities he has afforded me for scrutinising the entries in detail. The writing is everywhere legible, though there must be considerable difficulty in reading the earlier pages by those unfamiliar with the Elizabethan and Stuart script.

The first volume bears on the fly-leaf the following inscription :

The Register of the Appointments
of the Enquest of Wardmote in
the p̄rshe of Saynt Dunstane in the
Weste London began at the feast
of saynt Thomas thapostell in
the fyrst yere of the reign of our
Soveraign Lady Elizabeth by the grace
of God Quene of England

Anno Dni 1559.

Already the form of the register entries had become stereotyped, and it is preserved with very small variation throughout, the chief differences being that the early records are much more discursive, and the presentations of abuses more numerous. First a grand jury and a petty jury were appointed, and the names duly entered.

Those of the parish officers elected, constables, scavengers, beadles, follow. A list of innholders begins with the earliest years, and later ordinary keepers, cooks, brewers, and victuallers, licensed and unlicensed, are added. Another duty—important in its day—was the recording of names of those not free of the City (non-freemen) dwelling or trading within the parish. All these have a distinct value. But the abiding interest of the volumes, as reflecting past phases of City life, unquestionably lies in the presentations of abuses.

I begin with a few entries made in the early years, typical of many others:

Item. We present Thomas Smythe waterman dwelling in Chauncery lane for a comon annoyer of all Citizens in having [resorted] to the Temple Stayors and the White ffryers bridge to wash clothes.

Item. We present Thomas Lugor for an annoyer of his neighbours in pouring out of filthy water.

Item. We p'sent Barton's wyfe for a common skold.

In the forty-four years which Elizabeth's reign covered are to be found recorded many incidents that disturbed or scandalised the parish. First the streets. Their condition was appalling; an open kennel, or sewer, ran down the centre; whole rows of poor tenements, densely packed with people, were without sanitary arrangements even of the most primitive kind. The not uncommon practice was to hurl everything into the street, often from the windows (with small care as to what happened to persons passing below), trusting to the rain to wash some of the refuse down the kennels to the River Thames. The more solid matter accumulated until it was collected by the parish "rakers," by whom it was heaped up in poisonous laystalls, to rot under the

influence of sun and weather. One of these heaps of indescribable filthiness was accumulated on land at Whitefriars, by the river.

A single record of the unsavoury practice referred to will suffice for illustration :

1560. Item. Wee p'sent all those dwelling in the Cock and Key alley wth their windowes sinke or gutters into Water Lane ¹ for daily casting out of the same their windows sinke or gutters fylthy water ordure duste and rubbysh whereby they doo moste defile the said lane and greatly annoye the queene's subjects dwelling by or passing through the same.

In 1584 the inhabitants of Water Lane are reported for throwing down refuse "upon the heddes of the people passing that waie in the daytime, to the great annoyance of those passing." Ten years before there had been a complaint against people in Fleet Street who greatly annoyed the street by throwing "bottles and pottles" continually out of doors and windows in the night.

The conditions were made still worse by the state of the road surfaces. Pavements for pedestrians were unknown. A length of broad freestone began to appear before some of the best shops and dwellings in early Stuart times, but this was exceptional, and the narrow roads stretched from house to house, paved with rough cobble-stones rammed in with sand and gravel. Such a surface was soon worn into holes. Apparently it was the duty of householders, or owners, to keep the paving in front of their dwellings intact, for presentations against such persons for "defective pavements" are to be found in scores of cases in these volumes. One hopes that the Court of Aldermen was strong enough

¹ Since 1844 Water Lane has been renamed Whitefriars Street.

to enforce redress, but it was not always so. In 1610 the inquest reported of Water Lane, above mentioned:

the waie being soe stopped with dung and dirte that the passengers can hardlie passe, and the pavement soe broken and ruyned that if speedilie redresse be not had neither horse can drawe his loade nor passengers goe that waie.

Various Elizabethan houses are presented as "very dangerous for fyre", a peril always present in the timber-built City; others for broken roof gutters which precipitated showers of dirty water on passers by after rainfall; others for having cellar shops wherein lewd persons were received "to eate and drinke", and frequent disorders took place¹; for wells which were "dangerous and noysome"; one Coute (1571) for a house next Temple Bar divided into several chambers and lodgings for gentlemen, "the dore whereof comonly standeth open all nyght to the danger and annoyance of the neighbours next unto the same by reason of Roges and beggars standinge and hydinge themselves in the entrye therof in the night season"; Widow Young and two others (1595), inhabitants of Boar's Head Alley, "for havynge not chymneys in their houses"; Joseph Lord (1594) "for a nyght walker."

Here, too, was a frequent cause of scandal:

1564. It. they judye John Fabyer for a comon annoyner [suffering] appentyses into hys Chamber to play at dyse and loose theyr masters money.

And an unsuspected peril to countrymen visiting

¹In 1598 the inquest presented one Masterman for keeping a cellar under the house of Richard Blackman in Fleet Street, "wherein is much figytinge quarrelinge and other great disorders to the great disquiet of his neighbours."

London in the great days of Elizabeth is indicated in this entry :

1596. We p'sent John Tailor dwelling in Mayegood alley in fletcher lane vehementlie supposed to be a bawde and a comon robber of men and women passed into his house at unlawfull houours and also for a — and a disquieter of his neyhbors.

I sought for a witch of St. Dunstan's, finding none. But scolds were unhappily common :

1561. It^m. We p'sent Dayton's wyffe for a comon scold and before tyme p'sentyd for the same and nott amendyd.

1603. We also present Joan Sproney to be a woman given to slanderings skoldings and babbling to the great disturbance of her neighbors and others.

1593. Item we p'sent Mare the wife of Thomas Barton to be a comon skold compleyned of upon divers tymes as well before the alderman as before thenquest and also often warned yet not amended.

1617. Item, we present M^e Thimblethorpe dwelling in the High Street in Fleet Street much suspected by subtile means to be a troublesome woman and of an ill disposition amongst honest and quiet neighbours as we are informed.

One other matter that greatly troubled these honest Elizabethan citizens was the presence of evil characters in their midst. Complaints are expressed with a bluntness of language characteristic of its day, and I can only indicate by a few selected extracts from the registers how intimate was the supervision over public morals :

1561. Item. We p'sent the wyfe of Wm Pyatt to be a woman of evil living for that she hath played the harlot often times.

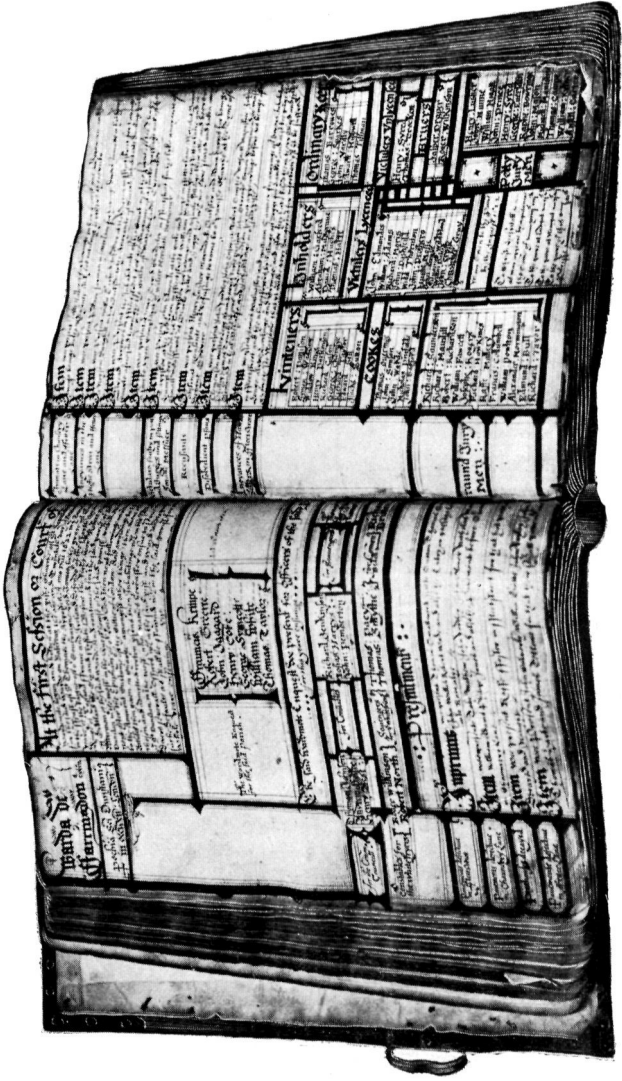
1571. Item we present Elizabeth Cohen for that she is vehemently supposed to be an evill woman of her bodie and also a Bawd.

1575. We present the wife of William Creslyn dwellinge in fletcher lane vehementlie supposed to be a common hawd.

1603. Item. We p'sent the wife of Will^m Hous nere Temple Barre vehemently suspected of incontinence.

At times parochial indignation flared up, as in 1599, when there was a special inquisition held, at which twelve persons were presented for their evil lives; Watkin Cutter, "a comon adulterer," John Twisson, of the parish of St. Bridget, "for a pander," others women. No indication is given of the punishment ultimately meted out to such people, save in a particular case in the year 1581, when there is a memorandum, following the inquest record, that the inquest had presented to the Queen Thomas Griffin, of Fetter Lane, and Eleanor, his wife (the case is unusually repulsive), who, after trial and conviction at Guildhall, "were from there carted and conveyed through divers streets of the cittie unto Bridewell from whence they came." It was the common practice to make a public exhibition of wrong-doers by conveying them through the streets in a cart, their hands tied, and with placards explaining their crime fastened to the chest and back. The inquest reported in 1609 of Anne Flore, an illicit dram-seller in Whitefriars, that "she hath heretofore been carted for a disorderlie course of life."

The pressure of London population, which drove people to settle outside the walls in the liberties, brought great congestion into Fleet Street, the one highway of St. Dunstan's parish, and its adjacent alleys. This is reflected in many entries in the registers. The inquest made grave complaint of great houses being divided into tenements, whereby many poor people were brought into the parish, and against residents for harbouring "inmates" and "foreigners" (non-freemen). The house of Sir John Parker, Knight, in Whitefriars, was (1609) "nowe divided into twentie small tenements," and that of Francis Pike, victualler, into no fewer than thirty-



ILLUMINATED PAGES, DATE 1622.

nine tenements. "Theis two landlords (say the inquest-men) are those that doe breade much poore people in the same precincte and much annoyance."

That the stern care for public morals was not entirely disassociated from fear of charges which Elizabeth's Poor Law had thrust upon the parishes, various entries seem to show:

1598. Item. We present Rychard Cathow dwellinge in Fletestrete for that he doth [? harbour] one Gabriell Redman a fforeinor at the Inne called the Red Lyon in Flete strete contrarie to his othe and the ffreedom of this citie. And we p'sent him for that he being a Constable and having a warrant from Sir John Hawke for the app^ehending of M^e Corken's man in Chancerwry lane charged with adulterye and the offender being in his custodie he let him goo, and the harlott is great with childe likely to be charged upon the parishe.

Fleet Street, in Stuart times a busy marketing thoroughfare, not only attracted customers to its shops, but stalls, booths, and baskets of itinerant traders were crowded together on the highway so thickly as to be a nuisance:

1619. Item. We p'sent John Mason for letting his stall and cellar to one Adam Harison a fruterer and wee p'sent the same Adam for thrusting out his fruite into the high street there so far as is to the great annoyance of the king's people passing on that side the way.

Complaints are made in 1623 against women selling fruit in the open street of Fleet Street, for setting their stalls far into the road from the houses, to the hindrance of passengers; against Adam Harris, fruiterer (1627), for putting his baskets in the street; against apple sellers, and vendors of oysters. It is curious to find protests against the use and sale of tobacco, which by the time of James I was largely smoked. Three entries occur at the inquest held in 1630:

Item. We p'sent Thomas Bowringe and Phillip Bowringe

for keeping open their shoppes and sellinge Tobacco at unlawfull howers and havinge disorderlie people in their houses and shoppes to the greate disturbance of all the Inhabitants and neighbours nere adjoyninge.

Item. We p'sent John Twinco, James Platt, Thomas Witomye (?) and John Knolles for sellinge Ale and Tobacco unlicensed and for annoyenge the Judges of Serjeants Inn whose chambers are nere adjoyninge.

Item. We present Timothie Howe and Humfry Fenne for anoyenge the Judges at Serjeants Inn with the stench and smell of theire Tobacco.

Earlier, in 1618, there had been a presentment against Timothy Howe and John Barker, of Ram Alley, at the relation of three parishioners, "for keeping their tobacco shoppes open all night and fyers in the same without any chimney and suffering hot waters [spirits] and selling also without license to the great disquietness and annoyance of that neighbourhood."

Right through the age of the Stuarts down to as late as 1681 the inquest registers bear evidence of the persecution of Roman Catholics. It became the duty of the inquest—which they performed most indifferently—to report the presence of recusants in the parish.

1621. Item. Wee present Henry Luthow, apothecary over against the [? Three] Kings in Fleet Streete, for being an obstinate recusant in not coming to the parish church nor will not come by words of his owne writing.

1622. Item. We present Jocy Holloway for having in her house in Chancery lane two recusants and for inticing other recusants.

Item. We present Henry Luthow Marmaduke Bartholomew and Adam Harris for being obstinate Recusants and refusing to come to the parish church at the time of divine worship.

1630. Item. We present Richard Lovett, Henry Luthow and the wife of William Adams for that they are recusants.

Again and again the same names appear, indicating

that little that was effective could be done with these obstinate religionists. A stimulus was given to the campaign in 1672, when there is a special entry that King Charles II, for the more effectual suppression of Popery, had ordered that names be taken and a return made. The Lord Mayor (*Wagstaffe*) and the Court of Aldermen accordingly commanded the immediate summoning of an inquest of the Ward. It was held on December 6th, and returned the names of ten persons as suspected to be Papists or Popishly affected.

The Great Fire of 1666 swept over London, stopping short of St. Dunstan's Church, but destroying more than one-half of the parish. In the previous year the registers had listed the names of fifty-two vintners, innholders, victuallers, etc. In December, 1666, the numbers had been reduced to twenty-eight, the houses of the remainder having been burnt. The customary doles to charities and prisoners were suspended, and, instead, money was given to relieve distressed widows in the parish. Fleet Street and the neighbourhood, however, were quickly rebuilt, and two years after the Fire the number of innkeepers, etc., had risen to thirty-nine, and it was deemed advisable to revive the gifts hitherto made to Christ's Hospital and Newgate. Half a century later the unhappy prisoners of one at least of the London gaols became apprehensive that the traditional gifts would be waylaid by their gaolers, as this pathetic appeal shows:

To the Worth Inquest of every ward London.

Whereas wee the prisoners in the Charity Wards of the Poultry Compter Being apprehensive and informed that application by our steward hath been made to y^r wor^{ps} for y^r wor^{ps} Charity to us at this time of our great want and extremity. Wee only add and pray that now and for the future

whatsoever y^r wor^{ps} please to bestow upon us may be sent and delivered to no other but only to the Constable within side of the prison in presence of some other of the prisoners.

Signed at the request of the prisoners,

B. Gledman, Const.

Poultry Compter, 4 January, 1708-9.

The inquest went forward with its work throughout the eighteenth and the greater part of the nineteenth centuries, but it became more and more routine—the listing of innkeepers and non-freemen trading in St. Dunstons, with occasional presentations of defective pavements and gutters, users of false measures, and like duties. Collectors of lamp duty are added. Scolds and recusants had gone, but less desirable characters and keepers of disorderly houses still continued to trouble the parish. Ram Alley's infamous reputation was upheld till last century was well advanced.¹

A few excerpts from the registers in these later years will indicate the progressive changes that have taken place in Fleet Street.

In 1740 it is recorded that Richard Hoare, Esq., Alderman of the Ward—a member of the great banking family so long and honourably associated with Fleet Street—in his charge to the jury expressed the hope “that they will complain of the great number of sheds, props to houses, wheelbarrows and chairs placed in the street to the obstruction of the passage of the people.”

The change effected in the old shops by the introduction of pretty Georgian bow window fronts did not pass uncondemned. In 1745 the inquest presented the inhabitants of the south side of St. Dunstan's Church

¹ Ram Alley has been renamed Hare Place. For an account of this City plague spot see the author's "Fleet Street in Seven Centuries," pp. 293-6.

“for bringing out, projecting, and enlarging the windows, window cases, and show glasses in the street, to the great annoyance and obstruction of the passage of all his Majesty’s subjects passing and repassing.”

Auctions made a more substantial nuisance. This occurs in 1759:

Likewise they Present as a Comon Nusance the publick Meetings that are held in the last above named house (late in the possession of Thomas Bartlett, stationer, and very defective) under the denomination of auctions, for that many persons have been there cheated and defrauded by the scandalous and deceitful practise of the agents belonging to such auctions commonly called puffers, and the same is a great hinderance and prejudice to the shopkeepers and fair traders who are freemen of this city.

Little can the inquest men who in 1814 assailed the first use of gas-lighting have foreseen the great advantages it would give to the City. They were furious:

We present William Hurt of 183 Fleet Street for continuing for the space of three months now last past the making of gas light and making and causing to be made divers large fires of coal and other things for the purpose aforesaid in and upon the premises, and with the said fires and also with divers materials liquids and preparations . . . sending forth and emitting divers great quantities of noisome, offensive, and stinking smoke smells and vapours, by means whereof the air there during all the time aforesaid was and yet is filled and impregnated with divers noisome and offensive stinks, smells and vapours, and the dwelling houses near the same were and are thereby rendered and become unhealthful, unwholesome, and uncomfortable to his Majesty’s subjects residing therein and passing and repassing, a public nuisance.

James Templeman, who had acquired Mrs. Salmon’s famous waxworks and removed them to No. 67, Fleet Street, was in that year presented for trading, being a

non-freeman, and William Hone the same. There is another complaint against Hone :

1815. We present William Hone, of 56 Fleet Street, bookseller and stationer, for placing, exposing, and exhibiting divers large, scandalous, malicious, and defamatory placards on the outside of his shop on Sundays, keeping them there during the whole of the day.

Richard Carlile, the freethinker, when his stock of almanacs had been seized (1834) for unpaid Church rates, with great daring exhibited in the window above his shop at the Bouverie Street corner stuffed figures of a bishop in full canonicals and the devil linked arm in arm. The inquest presented him for so doing, thereby "causing a great assembly and obstruction."

It is noteworthy of the conservatism of City customs that the inquest went on presenting non-freemen till half a century ago. Power effectually to prevent them trading had lapsed long before, and among names of the peccant non-freemen in 1850 I find partners in the great banking firms of Childs, Hoares, and Goslings. The inquest that year asked the Court of Aldermen to relieve them in future "from this most unpleasant and apparently useless duty," and as a protest made no presentations next year. The practice was abandoned altogether a little time after.

I have necessarily omitted a vast deal in this survey of the contents of two portly registers which cover an unbroken period of three and a quarter centuries, but enough has perhaps been given to emphasise what I said at the outset, that they touch upon past phases of London life with an intimacy that is not to be found in other sources. A thorough exploration of such wardmote registers as survive would, I am confident, yield material that would be of the greatest value to historians of our famous city.