

THE LONDON MAKERS OF OPUS ANGLICANUM

by

Marc Fitch, D.Litt., F.S.A., F.R.Hist.S.

The purpose of the present paper is to offer confirmatory evidence that there existed a group of craftsmen in London who were makers of *Opus Anglicanum* and also to identify some of them, at any rate, by their occupational names, derivative from their craft and; finally, to site some of their workshops.

In the London of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries there existed a number of men who bore what are clearly occupational surnames or bye-names the meaning of which, however, has hitherto remained obscure. Amongst them is a group who bore the names of 'le Seur', 'le Asseur' and 'le Setter', all three variants being applied at different times to the same individual; this fact has, inevitably, not simplified the question of the nature of their occupation. Though a considerable literature exists dealing with *Opus Anglicanum* itself, there is only occasional speculation as to the makers of this remarkable English achievement and as to where some of them, at any rate, worked. Hitherto only the name 'Setter' seems to have exercised the minds of scholars and it may, therefore, be as well to establish its meaning before relating it to the other variants.

Riley, the first to raise the question of the meaning of 'Setter', postulated an 'arrow-smith'.¹

Sharpe concurred, deriving the name from OF *sete*, an 'arrow'.²

Fransson suggested a 'silk-weaver' from OF *saietier*.³

Ekwall, citing a London example, decided, undoubtedly correctly, that the name derives from 'set', ME *setten* and hence an 'embroiderer'. He finds in OED the nearest meanings to this, under 'set', are Nos. 15: 'to put (an ornament, fitting, piece of furniture, etc.) in a place allotted or adapted to receive it; to fit, fix' and 63: 'to fix (a stone or gem) in a surface of metal as an ornament; formerly on a garment'.⁴ It may be noted that none of the quotations in OED under 15 have any reference to embroidery, although the first is dated 'c. 1205'. It would, however, be unwise to draw conclusions from this since it is generally accepted that the great period of *Opus Anglicanum* is covered by the century 1250–1350 and the time of perfected development could well have spread over the greater part of the first half of the century. As regards 63 although no specific date is assigned to the period when 'to set' meant the fixing of stones or gems on a garment it is clear that the potential for the creation of an occupational name existed. Kendrick considered that what he called 'The Great Period of English Embroidery' was limited to 'c. 1270–1330' and though such constriction is not altogether acceptable today, the dates are not irrelevant to the fact that 'setters' do not appear to be heard of either before or after.⁵

As a name 'Setter' is rare, occurring in London in the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries; in all fewer than a dozen individuals are recorded as bearing it. Of these, one, Clement le Settere, was also known as Clement le Seur and two, both called John, had even a third alternative, namely 'le Asseur' or 'le Asseyur'. All three will be dealt with below.



The Incredulity of St. Thomas, detail from the Syon Cope. Embroidered in silver and gilt thread and coloured silks. Probably London work, about 1300–1320.

(Reproduced by permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum.)

While no substantive from the verb 'to sew' is listed in OED before 1399 the verb is recorded in a quotation of 1300 as 'seu' and in the thirteenth century as 'seouwen', sufficient authority, it would seem, to postulate an occupational name such as 'le Seur' or 'le Seour', both of which exist, (e.g. Ralph le Seur⁶ and William le Seour⁷).

It can, therefore, be held that 'le Seur' implies a 'sewer', working with needle and thread, which identifies well with 'le Setter' as an embroiderer, especially of ecclesiastical vestments requiring the fixing of stones or gems. However the word, in medieval times, had another meaning, namely that of 'an attendant at a meal who superintended the arrangement of the table, the seating of the guests and the tasting and serving of the dishes'.⁸ OED records the word only in modern spelling, 'sewer(e)' and from the fourteenth century, but notes that this is an aphetic adaptation from Anglo-French *asseour*, the latter, curiously, not having been recorded as early as the aphetic form. Coincidence alone can account for this absence, particularly as with a meaning cognate to embroider, it most certainly existed as an occupational name.

In any case it is clear that as occupational names 'Asseour' and 'Seour' as well as 'Seur' could and, in fact, did exist coevally; this is sufficient to account for the identity of Ralph son of John le Seur of St. Mary-at-Hill of 1288⁹ with Ralph son of John le Asseur of the same parish in 1291.¹⁰

Even though, it seems, there are two meanings of the name, i.e. embroiderers and meal superintendents, the latter certainly would be even less numerous than the former. The product of the embroiderer, however exclusive, was bound to be in greater demand than the services of a specialist steward. Indeed there is no record of such an official in the City before the end of the fourteenth century.

The form 'asseyur' adds another element to the puzzle, as OED notes under 'Assewer'. It is suggestive of the assay of metals which, in a thirteenth century context, could only mean gold or silver. Anyone whose occupation this was might reasonably have been expected to be resident in or near the main colony of goldsmiths on the north side of Cheap and in the region of Wood Street, but none have so far been found and it may be that, in fact, their occupation never gave rise to a name.

Both the Johns mentioned above, who were sometimes known by this as a third variant to 'Setter' and 'Seur', are found on the south side of Cheap in adjacent parishes, All Hallows, Bread Street and St. Mary le Bow, the very district with which, as Ekwall noted, 'setters' are mostly associated.¹¹

Dealing now with individuals:

(i) Clement first appears in the record as 'le Seur' in 1285 and as a creditor of Nicholas le Seur.¹² Again as Clement le Seur he is named as one of the representatives for Lime Street Ward in 1298.¹³ The following year, as Clement le Settere, he appears as witness to a transfer of property on Cornhill by Ralph de Alegate to his son Walter de Gloucester.¹⁴ This property was very considerable and its position is worth outlining approximately as being part of the argument that, as a neighbour, Clement le Seur, the Lime Street representative, was identical with Clement le Settere who witnessed the transfer. In 1299 Ralph de Alegate refers to it as 'my principal dwelling house on Cornhill with houses and rents adjoining in the parish of St. Peter and St. Michael, Cornhill, St. Benet Fink and St. Martin Outwich . . .'.¹⁵

The boundaries of Cornhill and Lime Street Wards are contiguous at the crossing of Cornhill and Bishopsgate but 'as late as the sixteenth century Cornhill (the street) seems

to have extended further east and to have included part of Leadenhall Street to Lime Street and St. Andrew Undershaft church'.¹⁶

As Clement le Settere he was witness to a deed relating to other property in the parish of St. Peter, Cornhill in 1300.¹⁷

In 1309 Clement le Settere witnessed an agreement with regard to rents from tenements in St. Mary le Bow in company with John Hayroun who was also a 'setter'.¹⁸ As previously remarked it was in this parish that the 'setters' seem, in general, to have congregated and Clement, although living elsewhere, may well have been called upon as witness being, perhaps, the foremost and most senior citizen of his occupation.

The tenement 'lately belonging to Clement le Settere' in the parish of St. Andrew, Cornhill is given as an abutment in a property transfer of 1313.¹⁹

Finally, and conclusively for the identification of Clement le Seur with Clement le Settere, is the will of Clement le Seur bequeathing to his wife Cecily a tenement in the parish of St. Andrew, Cornhill.²⁰

(ii) A number of transactions in All Hallows, Bread Street dealing with the same or adjacent properties remove any doubt that 'Setter', 'Seur' and 'Asseur (Asseyur)' may be used to describe the same man.

Shorn of detail unnecessary to the present argument they are as follows:

A quitrent is cited in 1281 from the tenement of John le Asseur in All Hallows, Bread Street whose abutments were, on the east, a tenement once of John Pas and, on the west, the tenement of Walter de Bradstrette, cordwainer:²¹

Walter de Bradstrette		John le Asseur		formerly of John Pas
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The same year, 1281, a quitrent is cited from the tenement of John le Asseyur which lay between that of Walter le Cordwaner on the west and that formerly of John Pas on the east:²²

Walter le Cordwaner		John le Asseyur		formerly of John Pas
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Again in 1281 there is a grant of quitrent from the tenement in which Walter de Bredstrate, cordwainer lives and which lies between the tenement of Henry the Welshman on the west and that of John le Setter on the east:²³

Henry the Welshman		Walter de Bredstrate		John le Setter
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In 1293 the will of Peter, son of John le Long was enrolled;²⁴ Peter bequeathed a tenement he had had by grant of his father between that of Henry le Waleys on the west and that formerly of John le Seur on the east in the parish of All Hallows, Bread Street; Peter, it should be explained, was the stepson of Walter de Bredstrete, his mother, Margery, having married Walter sometime after 1275 when the will of John le Long, 'frueter' was enrolled:²⁵

Henry le Waleys		Peter, son of John le Long		formerly of John le Seur
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Nine years later, in 1302, the executors of the will of Henry le Waleys sold a quitrent deriving from a tenement which William le Settere held in Watlingestrete in the parish of All Hallows, Bread Street, between the tenement late of John Pas on the east and the

tenement of Walter de Bredstrate on the west:²⁶

Walter de
Bredstrate

William le
Settere

formerly of
John Pas

It will be noted that John's former premises were occupied by William le Setter who may be identical with a man of this name who acted with John Heyroun, *settere* in 1314 (see below).

(iii) Another John figures in a grant of 1285 when Lucy, daughter of John le Seur, leased the tenement she inherited from her father in St. Mary le Bow to Nicholas le Seur; the abutments of the property are given as the tenement of Adam Broc on the south and the lane leading to the church of St. Mary le Bow on the north, Cordwanerstrate (now Bow Lane) on the east and the cemetery of the church on the west:²⁷

lane leading to St. Mary le Bow

Cemetery of St. Mary le Bow	Lucy, dau. of John le Seur	Cordwanerstrate
	Adam Broc	

In 1286 the will (n.d.) of Adam Brock was enrolled in which he bequeathed to his wife his house near the cemetery of St. Mary le Bow, lying between the house of Robert de Kidemenstre on the south and the tenement late of John le Settere on the north:²⁸

formerly of John le Settere
Adam le Brock
Robert de Kidemenstre

The same year a grant was made by Robert de Wlvenwyke and his wife Lucy, daughter of John le Asseyor, citizen deceased, of a quitrent from their tenement in St. Mary le Bow between the lane which goes to the said church on the north, the tenement once of Adam Brok on the south, an empty place belonging to the said church on the west and Cordiwanerstreet on the east:²⁹

lane leading to St. Mary le Bow

empty place belonging to St. Mary le Bow	Robert de Wlvenwyke and his wife Lucy, daughter of John le Asseyor, deceased	Cordiwanerstreet
	formerly of Adam Brok	

The above examples are sufficient proof of the interchangeability of the names Se(o)ur, Asse(y)ur and Setter(e).

While scribal error must always be taken into account the number of examples of interchangeability given above would impute an unreasonable degree of confusion to the scribes and it is fairer to them and more sensible to suppose that those men whose name

was susceptible to the three variants were, in fact, embroiderers: Se(o)ur and Asse(y)ur being treated as variants and descriptive of sewing; Setter(e) being an extension of the same occupation whereby stones or gems were fixed to a garment.

Nicholas le Seur, for instance, has only been noted twice in the record, on both occasions as 'le Seur'. Nevertheless, it is clear that he was an embroiderer since each time he was associated with men of the craft, in the first instance as debtor to Clement le Seur/Setter,³⁰ and then as lessee of the former premises of John le Seur/Settere.³¹

Doubt must exist as regards Ralph, son of John le Seur/Asseur, firstly as to whether Ralph was known by his father's name or not and, secondly whether he followed his father's occupation whatever this may have been. The fact that he is not known in association with other members of the craft and that his place of residence in St. Mary-at-Hill was far removed from the group in Cordwaner Ward is negative evidence from which nothing can be deduced. It is, of course, true that Clement, the most prominent member of the craft at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, was established on Cornhill, also well away from Cordwaner Ward.

Thus far the philological evidence; the practical evidence of identity between those bearing the name variants just discussed with the craft with which they are associated, though no more prolific, is quite as conclusive.

The clearest connection of the name with the craft occurs in 1307 when Alexander le Settere received payment of £10 'from Sir Poncius Roandi chaplain to Master William Testa . . . in part payment of £40 for an embroidered choir cope bought of the said Alexander, who will well and befittingly complete it of the same breadth around as a certain cord, sealed with the seal of the said Sir Poncius at both ends'.³²

A few years later, in 1314, John Heyroun, settere, and William le Settere were called upon to make a valuation of a silk-embroidered cope.³³

A cope that could cost so large a sum as £40 at the beginning of the fourteenth century could only have been a vestment of extreme magnificence (and it may be noted that the purchaser was an Italian cleric), the sort of product that was so highly esteemed by continental prelates, in quality apparently unobtainable elsewhere, that it became known by the country of its origin—*Opus Anglicanum*.

If this conclusion has not been previously arrived at it is principally because of the lasting influence of two of the pioneer historians of London. When Riley postulated 'arrow-smith' as being the meaning of 'setter',³⁴ and Sharpe, in 1900, concurred, deriving the name from OF *sete*, an arrow,³⁵ their authority was such that more than a quarter of a century elapsed before any different theory was put forward. Sharpe had, indeed, repeated his belief when recording the incident relating to Alexander le Settere and Sir Poncius Roandi above; this really made nonsense, for why should an arrow-smith be thought to be the maker of an embroidered cope?

Lethaby, writing in 1928, shrewdly observed that ' . . . the most remarkable embroideries, wrought from say 1250 to 1350, would best be accounted for by the supposition that they were, for the most part, produced by a group of London workers who at some (possibly later) time formed the Gild or Mistery of the Broiderers'.³⁶

Ekwall first recognised that Alexander le Settere was being paid for his own work, but being primarily a philologist he did not follow up the implications.³⁷

In 1938 Mrs. Christie in her monumental work dealing almost entirely with the

technique of English medieval embroidery and the description and whereabouts of surviving examples, quoted Matthew Paris in her short historical section: 'When in 1246 Innocent IV ordered English vestments, this command of my Lord Pope did not displease the London merchants who traded in embroideries'. However, she ignores Lethaby's far-seeing statement when she says '... practically nothing is known about the designers of medieval embroideries or about where they were made'.³⁸ It is true no tangible evidence is available as regards designers unless it can be supposed that the makers, themselves, fulfilled this function to a large extent. However, she continues '... about the middle of the thirteenth century the demand had become so great that while at first mainly in the hands of individual workers, scattered in different places it became an organised commercial activity in definite centres.'³⁹ Such organisation must surely imply the employment of a designer, even if he was not the principal himself.

Margaret Rickert, in 1954, effectively placed 'the flowering of English embroidery' in the late thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth century,⁴⁰ and felt able to date the making of the Ascoli Cope between 1275 and 1280,⁴¹ one of the few closely fixed dates available for an individual piece of embroidery. Since the great Vatican inventory of 1295 mentions *Opus Anglicanum* 113 times⁴² it may be taken as certain that English work had reached a degree of such unsurpassed magnificence and desirability only after a number of decades of development. Miss Rickert goes on to remark that 'although no known centre has been established for the production of *Opus Anglicanum* London has been suggested as the most likely'.⁴³

Finally Donald King, in his Introduction to the Catalogue of the *Opus Anglicanum* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1963 writes categorically that 'the bulk of the work was produced in professional workshops, most of them in the City of London'.⁴⁴ He continues 'the international reputation of English embroidery grew rapidly during the reign of Henry III'⁴⁵ and, in summing up, 'the Black Death, the prolonged foreign and civil wars of the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the social and economic stresses consequent on these events, tended to depress the standards of the arts in England, including embroidery'.⁴⁶

It may be added that although secular clothing of an ornamental character was being made in England during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the country 'had a lower standard of luxury (than France), and the life of its upper classes was based rather on the castles and manors than on Windsor and Westminster'.⁴⁷ In relation to English secular clothing Miss Staniland has pointed out that there is 'evidence of extensive production of embroidery for secular use at, e.g. Rotherhithe ...' and asks pertinently, 'what, when not employed at Court were all these people doing?'.⁴⁸ It may, indeed, be that the Master craftsmen of London employed, from time to time, embroiderers from the Surrey bank when pressure of work demanded. Any attempt at a solution to the interesting problem as to what constituted a London 'workshop' at the period is fraught, through lack of evidence at the present time, with hazardous assumptions. (See Appendix for a tentative suggestion.)

At the luxury end of the market France and England pursued different ends; the former producing richly embroidered clothing for the nobility while the best of English production was destined for the Church whose prelates, far and wide in Europe, appreciated its superb qualities and were prepared to pay for articles not, evidently, to be found elsewhere. In France, consequent upon a 'period of pure fashion'⁴⁹ the *Livre des Métiers* of 1260 recognised various guilds of textile workers and by the end of the century

that of the embroiderers had been incorporated. The lower standards of luxury in English secular dress, combined with the concentration of brilliant craftsmanship on ecclesiastical vestments would go some way to accounting for the delay in the incorporation of the 'broderers' of England until three-quarters of a century later. From what has so far come to light it seems unlikely that the workshops of London exceeded half-a-dozen in number at any given time during the period. It is significant that the very word 'broderer' is an adaptation from French and, as a description of the craft, completely supplanted the ME words so that even the meaning of the latter was lost for centuries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- ¹ Riley p. 60.
- ² L.B.B. p. 23n.
- ³ Quoted by Ekwall p. 358.
- ⁴ *Ibid.* and O.E.D.
- ⁵ Kendrick Chapter IV.
- ⁶ H.R. 18/59, 1288.
- ⁷ H.R. 24/39, 1295.
- ⁸ O.E.D.
- ⁹ H.R. 18/59, 1288.
- ¹⁰ H.R. 20/80, 1291.
- ¹¹ Ekwall p. 358.
- ¹² L.B.A. p. 89.
- ¹³ L.B.B. p. 246.
- ¹⁴ H.R. 28/49, 1299.
- ¹⁵ H.R. 28/48, 1299.
- ¹⁶ Harben p. 173.
- ¹⁷ L.B.B. p. 183-4.
- ¹⁸ L.B.D. p. 213.
- ¹⁹ H.R. 41/78, 1313.
- ²⁰ Will (n.d.) enrolled H.R. 43/22, 1314.
- ²¹ H.R. 12/28, 1281.
- ²² H.R. 12/33, 1281.
- ²³ H.R. 13/16, 1281.
- ²⁴ H.R. 22/52, 1293.
- ²⁵ Will (n.d.) enrolled H.R. 7/67, 1275.
- ²⁶ H.R. 31/4, 1302.
- ²⁷ H.R. 16/31, 1285.
- ²⁸ H.R. 16/41, 1286.
- ²⁹ H.R. 16/59, 1286.
- ³⁰ L.B.A. p. 89.
- ³¹ H.R. 16/31, 1286.
- ³² L.B.B. p. 191.
- ³³ L.B.E. p. 50.
- ³⁴ Riley p. 60.
- ³⁵ L.B.B. p. 23n.
- ³⁶ B.M. Vol. 53 (1928) p. 173.
- ³⁷ Ekwall p. 358.
- ³⁸ Christie p. 17.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 18.
- ⁴⁰ Rickert p. 151.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 152.
- ⁴² *Ibid.* p. 153.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 153.
- ⁴⁴ King p. 5.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 6.
- ⁴⁶ Evans p. 79.
- ⁴⁷ Miss Kay Staniland, Curator of Costume, Museum of London; private communication.
- ⁴⁸ As note 47.
- ⁴⁹ Evans p. 26.

APPENDIX

Note: Hitherto it has never been remotely possible to make any assesment of an *opus anglicanum* workshop. Indeed, the conception of an organised, professional group dates only from 1963 (v. Donald King above). An analysis, however, of Hustings Rolls entries with fairly full, though sometimes confusing, property descriptions has made this first attempt an irresistible temptation.

The block of inhabited property of which that of John le Seur (iii above) formed the northern part was bounded on the east by Cordwanerstrate (Bow Lane), on the south by an, at that date, apparently unnamed lane (later Twelve Bell Court), on the west by Goselane (later Goose Alley) and on the north by 'the lane by which one goes to the church of St. Mary Bow' as well as by the cemetery of the said church. The measurements of this block today (omitting for the moment the actual property of John le Seur for reasons that are given below) are approximately 50 ft. from east to west and something over 65 ft. from north to south.

From north to south on the east, with frontages on Cordwanerstrate, the owners or occupiers at dates roughly between 1280 and 1300 were John le Seur, Adam Broc and Robert de Kidemenstre; on the west with frontages on Goselane, again from north to south they were Maud, widow of William de Holeburn (HR 29/33), Robert de Hockelee and Hawise his wife and Robert de Kidemenstre (HR 28/55).

The northern abutment of Maud's property on the occasion of its sale to Richard de Welleforde (HR 29/33, 1300) is given as 'the cemetery of St. Mary Bow' without mention of John le Seur, although that on the east was 'the tenement late of Adam Brokes'. From this it may be deduced that John le Seur's property did not stretch as far west as Goselane and if it is assumed, therefore, that its west side coincided longitudinally approximately with the eastern boundary of Maud's property which may be thought to have occupied about half of the width of the block, then John le Seur held property measuring some 25 ft. from east to west.

The property immediately to the south of Maud's was sold by Robert de Hockelee and his wife to Henry de Guldeford called le Mareschal (HR 28/55, 1299). In this case detailed measurements are given from which it emerges that the frontage on Goselane was $6\frac{1}{2}$ ells (24 ft. $4\frac{1}{2}$ ins.) while the width to the boundary with Robert de Kidemenstre was 8 ells (30 ft.); thus Robert's property would have been 20 ft. wide to Cordewanerstrate, some 5 ft. less than half the total width of the block. It is, of course, debatable whether this longitudinal line continued north as Maud's eastern boundary and so, by extension, the western boundary of John le Seur; it certainly did not continue southwards since Robert de Kidemenstre's holding formed both the eastern and southern abutments of Henry de Guldeford's purchase. Robert's property was, therefore in the shape of a reversed letter L, stretching in the southern part from Cordwanerstrate to Goselane and northwards on the Cordwanerstrate frontage to that of Adam Broc.

As it would seem from paragraph three above that Maud's northern boundary was a continuation westward of that of Adam Broc then all the odd 65 ft. of the block's eastern frontage was divided between Adam and Robert; John le Seur's property would have been a northern extension on the eastern side, the north-south width of which can only be guessed at although clearly there must have been enough space between its northern line and the southern line of the block to the north for 'the lane by which one goes to the church of St. Mary Bow' to have existed. It is unlikely that John's property exceeded 25 ft. from north to south or less than 20 ft. If, therefore, 22 ft. is assumed for this then what may be called John le Seur's workshop measured 25 ft. by 22 ft. or 550 sq. ft. If a third to half of this area was occupied by craftsmen sitting cross-legged at work and requiring some 12 sq. ft. of space each, then John employed between 15 and 20 workers. It must not be forgotten that, although nowhere mentioned there may have been a solar over the whole or part of the workshop but this may have been used as accommodation by John, his wife and daughter.

At the present time no estimate at all can be made for the size of the other John's workshop (ii). As for Clement le Setter his workshop has not yet been identified but from the greater importance of the man it may well have been on a larger scale. If John (iii) employed 15 to 20, John (ii) 10 to 15 and Clement 20 to 25 with possibly several smaller undertakings the total of persons employed on making *opus anglicanum* in the City might be estimated as between 70 and 80.

ABBREVIATIONS AND SOURCES

MS:

HR = Hustings Rolls, Corporation of London, Records Office.

Printed:

BM = W. R. Lethaby, in the *Burlington Magazine*.

Christie = (Mrs.) A. G. L. Christie, *English Medieval Embroidery*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1938.

Evans = (Dame) Joan Evans, *Dress in Medieval France*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1952.

Ekwall = Eilert Ekwall, *Two Early London Subsidy Rolls*, Lund, 1938.

Harben = Henry A. Harben, *A Dictionary of London*, Jenkins, 1918.
 Kendrick = A. F. Kendrick, *English Embroidery*, London, 1904.
 King = Donald King, *Catalogue of Opus Anglicanum Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum*, The Arts Council, 1963.

Marc Fitch, D.Litt., F.S.A., F.R.Hist.S.

LBA, LBB, etc. = R. R. Sharpe, *Calendar of Letter Books of the City of London*, 1899 et seq.
 Rickert = Margaret Rickert, *Painting in Britain, The Middle Ages*; The Pelican History of Art, 1954.
 Riley = H. T. Riley, *Memorials of London Life*, London 1868.