

A BUSINESSMAN IN ELIZABETHAN SOUTHWARK: OLYFF BURR

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Generally speaking, the writing of biographies becomes more difficult the further back one goes over the centuries, merely because of the smaller range of source-materials available. For the Tudor period, for example, there are no newspapers; very few diaries; little in the way of continuous correspondence; and a great dearth of personal reminiscences. There are some substantial archive collections (such as those of the departments of central government, and the livery companies), but when all is said and done the information provided by these records is very patchy, and seldom capable of providing a coherent picture of a career or private life. In any case, the great majority of the population (in particular, those who did not possess considerable wealth, especially in landed property; engage in litigation, or overseas trade; or commit some serious offence) are unlikely to come to the historian's notice. (Indeed, given the poor survival-rate for complete runs of parish registers, even the mere facts of their births, marriages and deaths may be lost to us.)

Within this context, the members of the middle classes are of great importance. Many of them made wills and paid taxes, and their various other types of activities have often produced documents which throw further light upon them, both as individuals and as members of society, although—since these people played essential roles in maintaining and developing the economic, social, administrative, financial and religious life of London—that is as it should be. Even so, if we can find some Elizabethan for whom there is evidence, albeit sometimes very slight, of his childhood; the offices he held within his own community; his business activities; the residential and other property he owned and leased; the ships he possessed; and of opinions of some who knew him, we are fortunate indeed. Such a man was Olyff Burr, of Southwark.

Olyff Burr's Christian name has posed a problem both for his contemporaries and for modern editors (some of whom call him Oliver, or even Olive), but its origin is quite plain. If his antecedents are unknown (the suggestion that he might have been of alien extraction¹ is based merely upon his seemingly un-English name), there can be little doubt that he was born in the place where he lived all his life, namely, in the parish of St. Olave in Southwark, from which circumstance he derived his cognomen. There were three parish churches with this dedication in the city proper—in Hart Street, Silver Street, and Old Jewry—but the fact that no fewer than three other persons mentioned in Burr's will² bore the same distinctive forename suggests an unusual degree of parochialism. Two depositions he made are signed quite uncompromisingly

'Olyff Bur'.³ Nevertheless, he was sometimes known as 'Tooley', and more frequently termed 'Oliff Burr alias Tooley' (the first word of which represents a form of Olaf, while the last was a contemporary corruption of St. Olave, as preserved in the name Tooley Street). The dual form, with its alias, was plainly very convenient, and it continued to identify him, even in his own parish, till the day he died.⁴

Burr was probably born about 1514, since in 1576 he testified that he was then aged 62 years, although in those days memories were notoriously fickle about such matters. Of his youth, we know only that he often played at quoits on the nearby recreation-ground, the acre of land known as Abbot's Close, which had belonged to Battle Abbey: this appears to have been south of Tooley Street, near the local mill-stream. At any rate, the earliest reference to him found so far relates to the year 1551, at which time his servant, known to us only as Harry, was assessed for subsidy in St. Olave's parish.⁵ Although Burr is most often called a coppersmith, one never encounters him actually engaged in such work, but debts outstanding to the city's Bridgemasters in 1558/9 included one of 4s 8d owed by 'Tooley Coppersmythe'.⁶ There seems to be no reason to doubt that this was the occupation he had followed in his earlier days.

It was almost unthinkable for a man to hope to succeed in business without being free of one of the London livery companies: that Burr did not, so far as is known, obtain this freedom is probably due at least in part to his place of residence. During the Tudor period, as at other times, many members of the 'superior artisan' sector of the working classes (from which Burr himself must have originated) preferred to live in the suburbs of London rather than in the city itself, away from the irksome restrictions on trade and manufacture imposed by the livery companies. Southwark was especially popular in this respect because, although technically part of the city of London from 1550, it suffered little interference from the civic authorities, while giving ready access to the metropolis by way of London Bridge and the numerous wherries which plied for hire. Again, there was no livery company directly applicable to his craft, so that he was able to retain his independence.

In 1557, the master and purser of the *Mary Fortune* of London, which belonged to Burr, entered into a bond in Danzig for repayment of the £50 the latter had borrowed from John Levytt. Burr's trading ventures included the export of a load of timber to Morocco, and a consignment of 44 cloths to the same and other destinations. In 1565, he was importing eight bolts of medernix canvas from St. Martin's, 'for sails for his ship', possibly the *Trinity* of London, which brought them here, as well as four hundred lings (i.e. codfish) from Haarlem, all as duty-free goods; and in the same year he (described this time not as a coppersmith but as a brewer) was listed in a port book '*pro ij doll' pipe servic per lic' Thom' Astley*', showing that Burr was exporting two tons of 'pipe' (presumably, the Latin *piper*, 'pepper') remaining on the licence granted to Thomas Astley. Two years later, Burr—a coppersmith again—imported 1,400lb of hops from Amsterdam. He was one of the investors in Martin Frobisher's second voyage towards the North-West Passage (1577), subscribing £100 for the purpose.⁷

Thus, in the course of time, Burr became preoccupied with other, more lucrative activities than coppersmithing. As indicated above, another of his interests was brewing, and his name appeared in a list of brewers, both native and foreign-born, who were allowed to retain more alien servants than the four permitted by law. Nevertheless, his real livelihood seems to have become the fitting-up and hiring-out of ships, and it was in this connection that he presented one of several petitions to the Privy Council, in 1579. He had, he claimed, obtained a living for forty years 'chiefly by the maintaining of shipping and the navigation', but by now had 'sustained divers and sundry losses as well by the Portingals, the French king and Prince of Condé, as otherwise, to the value of four thousand pounds at the least'. Moreover, he was 'now charged with a number of ships which for want of traffic lie still, to his great hindrance and charges, forasmuch as they are not set on work as they have been heretofore'. Accordingly, Burr's present object was to persuade the council to authorise 'the merchants of Spain' (elsewhere termed 'the President and Assistants of Merchants trading [to] Spain'), who were about to require transportation of 1,200 tons of freight through the Malaga straits, to employ his ships—either there or for Spain (*recte*, southern Spain), Biscay or Portugal—in preference to those of other men. No other details of his ship-hirings have been found, and the outcome of his supplication is not known. He had better luck when, over two years, he obtained the bounty given (at the rate of five shillings per ton) to encourage the building of vessels of 100 tons and over, on 790 tons of shipping.*

It has been said that Burr was a tenant of the Copleys, a family well known in Southwark; on the other hand, he is known to have secured his title to two messuages in St. Olave's parish which he had obtained from Thomas Copley by means of the usual (fictitious) fine, registered in February 1558, and his will refers to properties purchased from Sir Roger Copley, and Thomas, presumably the son who died in Flanders in 1584. His residence was in Mill Lane, which connected Tooley Street with Battle Bridge, where he possessed a 'wharf upon the backside of the Chequer against the Thames', as well as the Chequer itself, in addition to other lands abutting on the Spital Mead at Deptford and 'against the Hawthorn Bush' in Rotherhithe, although he was behind in the payment of some small quitrents on properties ('three tenements at 3d by year, and for twelve years') he held of Thomas Copley and Humphrey White.⁹ In 1561, he took over a property on the south-western part of London Bridge, on the death of its previous tenant, Thomas Burfield, grocer, by lease for 21 years, at a fine of £33 6s 8d and an annual rent of £4 6s 8d; he held these premises until c. 1567. As well as the dwelling-house he was occupying at the time he died, Burr held 'the High House alias the Garner', which lay to the east of the moated mansion that had belonged to Sir John Fastolf (?1378–1459), the distinguished soldier and government official.^{10,11}

Burr was of high standing in his locality, where he was assessed for subsidy on goods worth £67, in 1576. He was one of the two Members of Parliament for Southwark in 1562–63 and 1572, a commissioner for sewers, a governor of St. Olave's Grammar School, and a collector for subsidy and of poor-relief.

Moreover, by virtue of holding other offices in St. Olave parish (notably, churchwarden, during the period 1552–58), he was responsible for effecting the ritualistic changes brought about by the various stages of the Reformation. These included making arrangements for replacing the altar in the chancel by a Communion table in the nave (1552); maintaining the lights on the beam (above the rood-screen) and sepulchre (1554); and approving an inventory of the church's furnishings on the very eve of Elizabeth's Church Settlement. On one occasion, he was required to provide the equipment for a 'lance' and a 'light horse' (i.e. two mounted soldiers) as his contribution towards the county muster, but the two horses he supplied were 'disallowed',¹² presumably for being below the standard expected.

As will be seen, Burr was concerned in several lawsuits, in the Courts of Requests, Star Chamber, Admiralty and Marshalsea. We can never be certain of the rights and wrongs of the various cases, because the surviving evidence only ever represents the claims of one side. In one instance, which is unusually well documented, Ancell Beckett, haberdasher, Hugh Lea, grocer, and merchants John Swynnerton and John Collett, all of London, were in contention with Burr over some bales of cloth shipped from London—or, at least, 'in the River of the Thames'—in August 1582 to the port of Bayona, in north-west Spain, which arrived damaged; surprisingly, the action was not brought till two years later. It would seem that Burr was sued in his capacity as carrier; certainly the vessel concerned, the *Golden Noble* of London, was owned by him. By mischance, 'sixteen London sorting cloths' in the consignment (identified by Beckett's merchant's mark and 'No. 2', on both goods and documentation) 'were in truth marvellously misused and badly conditioned at the time of their unloading from the said ship', so that four Englishmen resident in Bayona—two of them (Thomas Owen and Robert Short) nominated by the master and purser of the *Golden Noble*, and two (Gaspar Morman and Peter Holmes) by Thomas Kyng, who, as consignee of the cloth, was most likely Beckett's agent there—had to be brought in to appraise the damaged merchandise. In due course, Kyng, the master and purser appeared before a local notary, who wrote down their statement in Spanish; one of the documents in the case is an English translation of this, signed and attested by Paul Typoots, a well-known Dutch notary working in London. One of the other deponents, a London grocer named John Dorrington, testified to having known Burr for 'eight or ten years'. It was stated in evidence that the sixteen cloths 'were rotten by lying upon the ballast', and 'damaged by reason of certain oils that the same ship carried in the voyage before And the master and mariners of the said ship confessed that the said ship wanted caulking and that she was leaky in the stem'. This had meant that cloths 'worth 36 ducats were sold for 13 and 14 ducats by means of the said damage'. The actual loss, inclusive of costs of washing and scouring damaged cloth (and for 3 ducats 'paid for making the Testimonial', presumably the Spanish notary's fee), was reckoned at 171 ducats 2 reals, which was converted to £43 16s 1d sterling, although in reality it should have worked out at a little more. As well, there were the legal fees incurred in the Admiralty and Marshalsea Courts, so that the '*Summa totalis* lost in the *Golden Noble* [and]

lost with my charges in suit of law' was £81 19s 1d.¹³ As usual, the verdicts of the courts are not known.

Another case related to the High House mentioned earlier, late in the tenure of William Burnell, which Burr retained till he died. Elizabeth Thomas, widow of Thomas Thomas, a leatherseller of Bermondsey Street, accused Burr of having leased the property to Clement Finch of Milton, Kent, and so jeopardising her interests. The facts of the matter are rather obscure, but questions were asked about a sum of £40 which 'was tendered in the Easter week in the night time' in 1576, and even the rental was uncertain, amounts of £2 and £5 per annum being mentioned.¹⁴

On another occasion, Burr was accused of bringing an action out of malice, simply to cause annoyance to William Curle, an Enfield yeoman, who was one of the defendants. Burr's own version of the story was quite different. William Ledger (or Legiert) of St. Giles Cripplegate, who had married one of Burr's daughters, owed Burr something in the way of 'ready money, cask, corn, hops, beer and other goods' worth no less than £2,000. Being his father-in-law, Burr 'was not hasty in calling him to accompt', so that Ledger found him 'rather a father in deed than by law'; unfortunately, Ledger had died, and his son—another William—had, said Burr, obtained 'by indirect means . . . the books of accompt and other tales of reckoning', and had enlisted the aid of Curle and two Southwark men to help him fight his case. William Ledger, senior, had fallen on hard times following his marriage, but it was alleged that in response Burr had merely told another of his sons-in-law, John Hodge, another Enfield yeoman, 'to take his gelding and travel into the country and get some honest man to give his son-in-law Legiert credit for so more malts as shall amount to 200 marks [£133 6s 8d] or £200.' The general implication was that Burr had 'milked' the Ledger estate of funds, in the way of 'ready money, beer, goods or chattels' obtained from the elder Ledger, and had persuaded the heir to sign an acquittance of any future claims on the estate in return for the sum of £300.¹⁵

Thomas Goffe, fishmonger, alleged that over the twenty years he had had dealings with Burr, who owed him 'for divers sundry parcels of money, ware and other commodities amounting far above the sum of thirty pounds', the latter 'hath always delayed your said subject from time to time and since, sometimes making one excuse and sometimes another . . . yet the said Olif (meaning nothing but fraud and delays) hath gone back from his word, broken his promise and discharged . . . arbitrators contrary to all honest dealing'. Other lawsuits included one concerning a sum of £100 which the late Henry Wallis, fishmonger, had lent to Burr, at 10% interest; and the purchase by Burr of 20 quarters of wheat and 45 quarters of malt from William Bigge of Wallingford, Berks.¹⁶

Of course, it is always possible that Burr's detractors were telling the truth when they accused him of double-dealing; at the same time, he may well have suffered from the envy of less-successful contemporaries, while there can be little doubt that some of his sons-in-law had been 'trying it on'. Some of the charges the latter made had been quite preposterous, and the money which John

Hodge the elder (who married Burr's daughter Barbara) took up on a bond of £320 under statute staple from his father-in-law remained unpaid at the time of the latter's death. It is noticeable that those of his daughters' husbands who had not engaged in attempts at extortion were suitably rewarded in his will,¹⁷ while the others seem merely to have killed the goose which had laid the golden eggs.

At the time of making his will (21st August 1585), Burr was advanced in years (if our earlier surmise is correct, he was turned seventy), and 'weak in body', and the register of St. Olave Southwark records the burial of 'Olyfe Burr al[ias] Toley, Copersmithe' on 23rd August 1585. By his will, he left an annuity of £320 and other bequests, including a cow, a bay nag and a weekly barrel of small beer, to his wife Anne. Although the 'message or tenement wherein I lately dwelt' had been leased to Richard Horsley, hatbandmaker, his widow was to enjoy the use of the garden and certain rooms which had been reserved to himself. To his daughter Elizabeth and her husband John Bird, draper, he left his property called the High House with all buildings and wharves belonging, 'which I lately purchased of Clement Finch, gentleman', and to Gillian and her husband John Newton, mercer, 'all such lands, tenements and hereditaments which I lately purchased of Sir Roger Copley, knight, Thomas Copley and others, lying near Bermondsey Street in the parish of St. Olave Southwark'. Apart from several other bequests, wherein he remembered the children of his sons-in-law John Bird, John Newton, John Hodge and William Ledger, deceased, he left the residue of his estate to his executors, Bird and Newton, and this must have included his ships, at least two of which (the *Bark Burr*, 130; and the *Golden Noble*, 200 tons) occur subsequently in their joint possession.¹⁸

Even after Burr's death, the squabbles over his money continued. In 1593/4, Thomas Drew, merchant taylor, was suing Newton and Bird over some financial matters arising over Burr's will, which included considerations of the release of Roger Walters, haberdasher, who was in prison for debt, and a tenement in Bermondsey Street called the Blue Anchor which Burr had demised to Walters; and if Burr did in fact 'leave them [i.e. Bird and Newton] great store of wealth', or whether this had been whittled-down through funeral and other expenses, as was alleged.¹⁹ However, by now, Burr was removed from the scene of these sordid wrangles. Still, although his death prevented him from participating in the privateering ventures which the Spanish War (1585–1604) engendered, two of his ships—the *Golden Noble* and *Bark Burr*—were set forth on such voyages soon afterwards; indeed, the former vessel served against the Armada of 1588, while the latter was blown-up during an engagement off Cuba three years later.²⁰

NOTES

1. As in *Victoria County History* (hereafter, *V.C.H.*), *Surrey* II, 414. In fact, port book E.190.1.4, in the Public Record Office (PRO), which is mainly a record of alien exporters, shows Burr (f.8r) as one of the native Englishmen.
2. PRO, 1585 PCC 41 Brudenell.
3. PRO, Req[uests] 2/41/99 (re 1576); PRO, Star Chamber (STAC) 5/C32/33 (1583).
4. It was used in the St. Olave Southwark parish register, in the Greater London Record Office (GLRO), when recording his burial.
5. PRO, Req 2/41/99; W. Randle and P. Norman, *The Inns of Old Southwark* (London, 1888) 38/9; J. E. B.

- Gover *et al.*, *The Place-Names of Surrey* (Cambridge, 1934) 31; R. E. G. and E. F. Kirk, *Returns of Aliens I* (Huguenot Society X; 1900) 229.
6. Corporation of London Records Office (CLRO), Bridge House Rentals 1554–68, f.64Av. (He is not named with other Surrey coppersmiths of the period: *V.C.H. Surrey* II, 413/4.)
 7. R. G. Marsden, *Select Pleas in the Court of Admiralty II* (Selden Society XI; London, 1897) 72; T. S. Willan, *Studies in Elizabethan Foreign Trade* Manchester, 1959) 110; PRO, E.190.5.1, 190.3.2 and 190.1.4; B. Dietz, *Port and Trade of Early Elizabethan London* (London Record Society, 1972) 34; R. Collinson, *Three Voyages of Martin Frobisher* (Hakluyt Society, 1867) 109.
 8. *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1566–1569* 19; R. H. Tawney and E. Power, *Tudor Economic Documents II* (London, 1924) 123/4; M. Oppenheim, *Administration of the Royal Navy I* (London, 1896) 167.
 9. *Collectanea Topographica et Genealogica VIII* (London, 1843) 259; C. A. F. Meekings, *Abstracts of Surrey Feet of Fines* (Surrey Record Society XIX; 1946) 121; PRO, 'Transcript of second payment of lay subsidy granted 18 Elizabeth', typescript c. 1945, f.129; G. L. Gomme, *Court Minutes of the Surrey and Kent Sewer Commission* (London County Council, 1909) 55, 139.
 10. CLRO, Bridge House Rentals 1554–68, ff.82v, 128v, 150v; *loc. cit.*, Repertories of the Court of Aldermen 1558–60, f.459; PRO, 1585 PCC 41 Brudenell. (No doubt the Enfield maltmen who were unloading malt at Battle Bridge in 1584 were some of Burr's suppliers: J. C. Jeaffreson, *Middlesex County Records I* (1886) 145/6.)
 11. Some authorities (e.g. Randle and Norman, *The Inns of Old Southwark* 41, 33) have confused Burr's 'High House alias the Garner' with the High Beerhouse (also known as the High House), although these were on opposite sides of Fastolf's Place. I am grateful to Miss Martha Carlin, a doctoral candidate at the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, for correcting me on this point.
 12. PRO, 'Transcript', f.129; *Return of Members of Parliament* (1878) I, 406, 411; *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1569–1572* 219, 298; *Surrey Taxation Returns* (Surrey Record Society XI; 1932) 111; Southwark Archives Collection, St. Olave vestry book 1551–1604, ff. lv, lr, 3r, 3v, 13r; *loc. cit.*, St. Olave churchwardens' accounts 1546–1610, page 83; *Surrey Musters* (Surrey Record Society III; 1919) 186.
 13. British Library, Lansdowne MS.143, ff. 344–358.
 14. PRO, Req 2/41/99.
 15. PRO, Req 2/125/58 and 2/189/64; PRO, STAC 5/C.25/12 and 5/C.11/30.
 16. PRO, Req 2/93/36, 2/126/53 and 2/173/83.
 17. PRO, 1585 PCC 41 Brudenell.
 18. GLRO, St. Olave Southwark parish registers; PRO, 1585 PCC 41 Brudenell; K. R. Andrews, *Elizabethan Privateering* (Cambridge, 1964) 103.
 19. PRO, Req 2/28/104.
 20. Andrews, *op. cit.*, 103, and his *English Privateering Voyages to the West Indies* (Hakluyt Society; Cambridge, 1959) 101.