

The Development of Guilds in Great Britain and Ireland

by

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In the City of London there are so many richly endowed livery halls to remind us of the long and illustrious histories of so many London guilds that we can be forgiven for forgetting or being unaware of the vast network of guilds that once existed throughout the country; in towns and villages throughout the country small guilds were formed. Indeed, during the reign of Edward III there are believed to have been some 40,000 religious and trade guilds; most of them were small, although the religious guild of Corpus Christi at York had some 15,000 members. Many of those guilds that still exist are mere shadows of their former selves. More significantly, the vast majority of guilds have disappeared altogether.

The origins of guilds go back to Saxon times when, during the reign of King Canute there were Frith Gilds or peace guilds established to maintain peace among individuals, and Monks Gilds, and there were social-religious fraternities which flourished at Abbotsbury, Cambridge, Exeter and Woodbury; there were also Cnights or Cnighthen Gilds in some towns sometime after the 9th century to which the senior burgesses belonged. Then we find Domesday Book referring to two guilds in Canterbury: one for the burgesses and one for the clergy; and by the Middle Ages, we find that merchant and craft guilds as well as religious and social guilds had been established in cities, towns and villages throughout the country. Religious guilds existed for a range of purposes, such as to build churches, as at Cambridge; to repair churches, as at Winchester; to help those wishing to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land or to Rome, as at Lincoln; to build almshouses for their own members or for the poor, as at Stratford or Birmingham; to perform religious plays, as at Dunstable; or to provide candles for the church as at Stratford-upon-Avon. Whilst most guilds, particularly the religious guilds, had at least one chaplain, there was one guild, the Guild of the Annunciation, founded in Cambridge in 1379, which expressly forbade any priest from entering the guild. Social guilds existed to build bridges, as at Stamford; to repair walls and bridges, as at Worcester; to found schools, as at Basingstoke; or to help those who had encountered great misfortune, as at Ludlow. The Guild of Garlickhythe, founded in 1375 in Vintry Ward (the Ward that I have represented on the Court of Common Council since 2002) was one of more than 60 religious guilds established within the City of London before the end of the 14th century, and this particular guild afforded weekly help to all members of seven years' standing, in old age and in sickness. Some guilds, which originally had only religious objectives, eventually became the ruling body of the town, as was the case in Litchfield, Norwich, Stratford-upon-Avon and Wisbech. In most towns only the largest guilds were allowed to participate in local government, and as a result some guilds merged in order to increase their influence locally. Businessmen from the 12th to the 17th century conducted their affairs largely within the framework of two kinds of guild: the gild merchant and the craft gild.

The old gild merchant embraced both merchants and artisans. Craftsmen were freely admitted to the gild merchant in the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries. The term merchant in those days embraced all who traded, and master craftsmen were usually regarded as merchants, and were therefore allowed to participate in the municipal privileges. The gild merchant was therefore the organization through which the craftsmen and the land owners protected their interests and carried on their business, and it was from this body that the aldermen were elected who

appointed one of their number to be mayor. The earliest mention of a merchant gild is during the reign of Henry I when one was established during the early part of the 12th century in Leicester, and others were soon established in Great Yarmouth, Preston, Wallingford, Winchester and Worcester.

During the same reign, about half a century after the first gild merchant, the earliest craft guilds were established, most notably the Weavers of Huntingdon, London, Lincoln, Oxford, and Winchester, the Cordwainers of Oxford, and the Fullers of Winchester, and they secured for the craftsmen the monopoly of working and trading in their branch of industry. By the 13th century almost every town had a merchant gild, and by the 14th century virtually all the crafts had their own guilds, to which all the craftsmen of the town belonged; and as a town's competence in industry prospered, so the guilds of craftsmen multiplied and grew in power. In the 13th century craft guilds were composed of artisans, and in a few cases they included merchants as well. In the provinces as well as in London properly organized guilds were established long before their ordinances were registered with the civic authorities. All the medieval guilds had a religious as well as a social origin; they were founded to promote the spiritual as well as the temporal welfare of their members. The members of each craft guild lived in the same quarter of the town, dined together on feast days, marched together in the town's pageant, acted together in the Corpus Christi plays, cared for the welfare of one another, and attended the funerals of their deceased brethren. This aspect of the guild was known as the fraternity; the occupational aspect was known as the mystery. By the middle of the 14th century the customs established by the guilds of the City of London had influenced the guilds in many provincial towns. By the end of the 14th century a number of the most prominent guilds in London and in the provinces, such as the Drapers, the Fishmongers, the Goldsmiths, and the Vintners of London, and the Weavers of Lincoln and Barbers of Shrewsbury had received royal charters by which the King granted them special powers. It has been suggested that these guilds obtained royal charters from Edward III under a smoke screen that they were providing relief for the poor, when in fact they were protecting their control over their respective trades by regulating apprenticeships, prices, wages, and with the power to maintain a monopoly over their trades. Already by the mid 15th century, during the reign of Henry VI, there were 111 trade and craft guilds in London and 57 in York.

During the 14th and 15th centuries authority gradually moved from the gild merchant to the craft guilds as the latter reached the height of their power and influence. In some towns where the crafts took the place of the gild merchant, the latter wholly disappeared. In other towns such as Reading, the gild merchant was demoted to a general assembly whose main object was the regulation of trade or the discussion of matters in which all the crafts were interested. By the 15th century the economic function of the craft fraternities in regulating standards within the trade and maintaining a monopoly had surpassed in importance their religious and social practices.

By the 16th century we find significant numbers of English guilds also well established in Bristol, Chester, Coventry, Durham, Exeter, Gateshead, Kingston-upon-Hull, Leeds, Lincoln, Ludlow, Norwich, Shrewsbury, Worcester; significant numbers of Scottish guilds established in Aberdeen, Dumfries, Dundee, Dunfermline, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Perth; and a significant number of Irish guilds established in Dublin.

By the mid 16th century men were trying to gain membership of the guilds by means other than by apprenticeship and during the reign of Elizabeth I legislation was enacted forbidding persons to practice a craft unless they had served a seven year apprenticeship. However, this Act was largely ignored and was finally repealed in 1814.

The earliest review of the guilds in existence throughout the land was in 1388 during the reign of Richard II, when a parliamentary meeting in Cambridge directed the sheriffs in each

county to call on the masters and wardens of all the guilds to supply information concerning their foundation, statutes and property, and to send the king copies of the charters or letters patent by which they were founded.

More than 200 trades and crafts were represented in the merchant and craft guilds throughout the length and breadth of the country, and in different places the same or a similar trade or craft would be known by very different names. Thus, in Norwich the tanners were known as barkers, the butchers as bochers, the tallow chandlers as rafmen, the ironmongers as ferrous, the innholders as ostelers, and the skinnners as pelterers; in Newcastle-upon-Tyne the plasterers were known as dawbers and the musicians as waits, whereas in York the musicians were known as minstrels; and in Scotland the butchers were known as fleshers, the fishmongers as feschers, the bakers as baxters, the brewers as brousters, and the weavers as websters.

Provincial craft guilds would be very much smaller than their counterparts in London. Not only was there far greater wealth in London, but the wealthy London merchants spread themselves amongst the major London guilds. The leading provincial guilds were patronized in a similar manner by those with wealth and influence, so that some of these craft guilds changed from societies for the protection of labour into societies of capitalists; indeed kings and princes who had joined some of the major London guilds, became members of some of the major provincial guilds also; thus, for example, both Henry IV and Henry VI were members of the Gild of the Trinity in Coventry, and Prince George of Denmark was a member of the Gild of Merchants in Winchester.

Many guilds had registered their ordinances with the civic authorities by the end of the 14th century; thus in York most of the crafts had registered their ordinances between 1380 and 1400 and in 1436-7 Parliament passed legislation making it mandatory for all guilds throughout the land to do so. These ordinances regulated the guilds to the minutest degree, prescribing the quality and value of the work, and the hours of work. The wardens and a quorum of the guild brethren formed a Court, which enforced the ordinances, punished disobedience with fines, raised a common fund through subscriptions from its members, and appointed searchers to inspect the work done by its members.

The powers of search were more extensive for some companies than for others. Thus the powers of search of the Tilers & Bricklayers' within a radius of 15 miles around London was not as extensive as some others such as the Horners who had a radius of 24 miles, or the Girdlers who in 1332 were found to be busy as far away as the Wye fair, or the Goldsmiths and the Pewterers whose area of search covered the whole of England. Suffice it to say that the wider the area of search the more difficult must have been its enforcement. The powers of search were finally abolished by Act of Parliament in 1828.

Women were members of the early frith guilds, but they never took part in the administration or the governance of these guilds. There was a Maiden's Gild at Croscombe, and a guild by the name of Our Lady's Maidens at Stratton in Cornwall, both of which were guilds exclusively for young girls. In only five out of 500 guilds existing in the 14th century were women excluded.

There is no evidence of women holding office in any guilds, at least not until we reach the 20th century, and then only in a few of the modern London guilds. However, as we entered the 21st century this had become more widespread, and in 2014 the Mercers, ranked first amongst the London livery companies, had elected a lady as their Master.

The Merchant Adventurers were established during the first half of the thirteenth century as private companies which had the monopoly of exporting manufactured goods, especially

clothes. There were companies in London (based until 1666 at Mercers' Hall), York, Norwich, Exeter, Ipswich, Hull, Bristol, Chester and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. During the 16th and 17th centuries new Companies of Merchant Adventurers emerged, such as the Russian or Muscovy Company, the Turkey or Levant Company, the Eastland Company, and the East India Company. A few of those that have survived, such as the Company of Merchant Venturers of Bristol or the Company of Merchant Adventurers of York, exist today with social and charitable objectives similar to other guilds.

The influence of the London guilds on those in the provinces was significant. The coats of arms of London companies were copied by the provincial companies. The Statute of Artificers 1563 required that the custom of London regarding apprenticeships should be observed throughout the realm. The establishment of schools and almshouses by the London companies encouraged philanthropy elsewhere in the country. However, one of the greatest handicaps under which the English provincial guilds suffered, was that London guild membership gave exemption from tolls elsewhere in the country.

Over the centuries the guilds had come in for regular criticism. In the early medieval period, Gerald of Wales wrote about the mischief resulting from the popular religious gilds. "The clergy, he says, get up feastings and potations by subscription, by occasion of which men and women promiscuously assemble and misbehave themselves; such meetings are called speciously fraternities. Even though the result of such unions be more masses, prayers and psalms for the living and dead still, he urges, this does not counterbalance the evil of these gild-potations."

Over time other arguments were put forward that guild monopoly hampered freedom of trade, that prices were manipulated for personal gain and against the common good and that a closed shop or protected trade was the cause of significant exploitation. Even in the 21st century, in the City of London, we still find vestiges of the early exploitation of communal power with the livery companies reserving to themselves alone the right to submit two suitable candidates from which the Court of Aldermen will select one to be the Lord Mayor. At least during the 16th and 17th centuries some 75% of all men working in the City were members of livery companies, whereas today perhaps only 1% are liverymen. Contrast this with the provinces where the Mayor or Lord Mayor is elected by the whole body of citizens directly or indirectly through their elected representatives.

The Sovereign too was well and truly implicated in the plot in the early days, for it was Edward IV who prohibited imported goods in order to keep out competition. Monopoly and the opportunity for exploitation inevitably also gave rise to corruption and fraud, so it is not surprising that we find the Haberdashers of Shrewsbury accused of corruption, the Brewers of London accused of bribery and the Litsters of Edinburgh, in conjunction with the Weavers and Walkers of that City, accused of fraud to the almost ruin of the woollen manufacturers of Edinburgh.

In 1436-7 a petition was presented by the House of Commons to Henry VI declaring that craft guilds throughout the land had abused their privileges, and this gave rise to enactments to limit the powers and privileges of the guilds.

Little more than a century later the young King Edward VI, the only son of Henry VIII by his marriage to Jane Seymour, was to play a major part in the destruction of the guilds, following his father's infamous dissolution of the monasteries. Edward VI came to the throne at the age of 10 and died five years later of what was believed to be a combination of tuberculosis and measles. He is credited with humility and intelligence, and in his short reign he founded, together with the Lord Mayor and Corporation of London the great foundations of Christ's Hospital and Bridewell Hospital, as well as other educational foundations in Bath,

Birmingham, Bury St. Edmund's, Chelmsford, Lichfield, Louth and Southampton. Yet in 1547 this same King, seized the possessions of the guilds. The provisions of the Act of Parliament secured the practical annihilation of all the guilds except those of the merchant and municipal classes.

The provincial guilds were not quite extinguished by this same Act. Some of them at least continued to hold their meetings for purposes of conviviality and mutual support. In his History of Norfolk, Blomefield mentions several that survived - one of these in a Norfolk village, whose lands were seized, retained their Guildhall until 1650, when the effects were sold. These included 30 lbs of pewter vessels; 92 lbs of lead; 4 spits weighing 169 lbs; a metal pot weighing 44 lbs; 2 pots of brass weighing 89 lbs; and a brass pan weighing 9 lbs, - clear proof of the festive proceedings of the guilds.

The final nail in the coffin came with the Municipal Corporations' Act 1835 when almost all the guilds throughout the country were required to surrender whatever vestiges of control they still retained over trade and industry. Thus many if not most of the provincial guilds had disappeared completely by the middle of the 19th century and, with few exceptions, the surviving guilds in the provinces and in London now exist predominantly as social and charitable institutions.

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