

# THE ORIGIN, PURPOSES, AND DEVELOPMENT OF PARISH GILDS IN ENGLAND.

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The subject upon which I am to speak to you this afternoon is in some respects so vast and so complex that I cannot attempt more than a sketch of it, and I must ask your forbearance if, in the course of that sketch, dogmatic assertion should sometimes seem to take the place more fitly occupied by reasoned argument.

One origin of the parish gild is, I think, to be sought in the Anglo-Saxon *frith-gilds* or associations for the maintenance of the king's peace. Under this system townsmen and villagers were associated in groups of ten, the members of which were bound to each other by responsibilities of a very drastic character.\* In the earliest days these responsibilities were entirely secular. Not until early in the tenth century is there any appearance of obligations of a religious nature which would tend to link the *frith-gilds* more closely to each other and at the same time connect them directly with the parish church. In the reign of Athelstan the bishops and reeves of London ordained that on the death of a gild-brother his fellows should each give a loaf in soul-alms and sing or cause to be sung fifty psalms on his behalf within the ensuing thirty days. I will ask you to note here that this solitary obligation is connected only with the welfare

\* Cf. Kemble: Saxons in England, i, ch: ix.

of the departed soul, for it is a point of some importance in the development of the parish gild.

The earliest example of this new system in practice belongs to the reign of Canute, when Orcy, the king's friend, founded a gild among the frith-gildsmen of Abbotsbury and endowed it with a hall as a meeting-place. In the rule agreed upon there are some significant passages.† The intercession of St. Peter is especially asked "*because for love of him we have gathered this gild. He has the power in heaven that he may let into heaven whom he will and refuse whom he will not.*" After some statutes as to the making of regular gifts to the neighbouring monastery the duties towards the sick and the dead are carefully defined. If a brother fell sick within sixty miles of Abbotsbury the gild must send fifteen men to fetch him to wheresoever he desired to go. If he were dead the number must be thirty. If death took place in the town itself then the brethren were to assemble and attend the corpse to the minster and there pray earnestly for the soul of the departed. "*This will rightly be called a gildship if we do this.*" It seems to me impossible to escape the conclusion that the primary bond which linked these men together was their belief in the doctrine of Purgatory and in the efficacy of prayer and alms as a means of deliverance therefrom. I regard this as the most potent of all the influences which went to the shaping and development of the majority of the parish gilds.

Another gild which must date between the years 1072 and 1107 deserves attention. The bishop and canons of Exeter had admitted into spiritual fraternity the gild of St. Peter at Woodbury on the promise that each brother should pay yearly for his household the

\* Thorpe: *Diplomatarium* pp. 607-8.

sum of one penny and after a death, whether of brother or sister, a similar sum in soul-alms. In return for these payments the canons engaged to perform all proper services on the gild's behalf. There are no other provisions in the rule and the gild seems to have existed for no other purpose. It is the first that speaks of women as gild-members.

It is time now to note a parallel development from the same origin, namely the gilds-merchant and the craft-gilds. Men who became citizens by virtue of their possession of town-land began to unite for the protection of their trade interests and to form gilds-merchant which developed in many cases into the governing bodies of the towns. This, however, is true only of the smaller towns. In the great cities such as London, whose population was large enough for the men of the several crafts to form craft-associations, these soon asserted their power and independence, and obtained their part in the formation of municipal government. It will be obvious that as the population of a town increased the tendency would be for craft-gilds to fill the place once occupied by the gilds-merchant and for the latter to decline in influence and in some cases to change their character, where they did not disappear altogether.

Now it is not with the gilds-merchant or craft-gilds that we are much concerned this afternoon, though we shall have occasion to notice them again. Their story has been adequately written. The fact however that they made ordinances of a similar character to those of the religious gilds has led to a vast amount of confusion. To the ordinary mind to-day the word gild in history is inevitably associated with the idea of the craft, yet the number of gilds which had no connection whatsoever with a craft was far larger than those that were formed of craftsmen.

It is to the gilds unconnected, so far as can be ascertained, with craft interests that I desire to direct your special attention. To understand them we have to take note of two primary influences. To one of these I have already made reference, and I propose now to amplify my remarks. No one can understand the inner life of the Middle Ages without realising the quite extraordinary importance attached to the doctrine of Purgatory and the means of release therefrom. An abbot would, when he could, make grievous exactions from the revenues of his office rather than that his anniversary should go uncelebrated. Throughout the whole story of my own abbey of Westminster, so far as it can be recovered, there is only one instance where such provision was not made, and the reason there was that the abbot already owed more than he was able to pay. It was the commonest thing for a layman to provide money for the foundation of a chantry for his soul. There must be few of our older churches which did not contain one or more of these. There was the common practice of a monastery admitting outsiders to what was called spiritual fraternity in return for some service or benefaction. This entitled them to a share in the merits of all masses, prayers, fasts, and other spiritual works within the monastery and to the enrolment of their names on the abbey martyrology after their deaths. The same idea underlay the uniting of monasteries in spiritual confederations and the sending round of mortuary rolls from one convent to another. For example it will be of interest to a Suffolk audience to know that Westminster bound itself with Bury St. Edmund's, as well as with the priories of Worcester and St. Victor at Paris, in an obligation of mutual prayer for the departed, so that the death of a monk of Bury was to Westminster as the death of one of its own family.

Is it any wonder then that poorer folk, unable to provide chantries for themselves by reason of their poverty, should unite together to form what may conveniently be called a "co-operative chantry"—a phrase which, in spite of some criticism, I believe to be the best and simplest definition of the nature of a very large number of the mediæval parish gilds? Men united to obtain corporately a much desired object which individually they were unable to afford. It was the ambition of such gilds to have their own priests, but where this was not possible they managed to arrange with the parish clergy for the provision of the desired offices.

The second great influence in the formation of gilds was, I believe, that great storehouse of mediæval lore known as the *Legenda Aurea*—the Golden Legend—written somewhere about the second half of the thirteenth century by Jacobus de Voragine, a friar of the Order of St. Dominic, who afterwards became Archbishop of Genoa. Portions of this were widely distributed over England and must have started a number of cults organised in the gild form. It was of course a series of "Legends of the Saints," which indeed was its original title. You will remember that Caxton thought it worth while to print it in English in 1483. I ought to couple with the Golden Legend such stories as The Martyrdom of Becket, which immediately seized hold of the popular imagination. Records of gilds in existence prior to the Black Death in 1349 are very scanty, but it is probable that Gilds of St. Thomas were common enough. The earliest I have been able to find was that at Wymondham in Norfolk, which was founded in 1187, two years before the death of Henry II. On the Feast of the Translation of St. Thomas all the brethren assembled and went in procession with a candle presumably to be placed before an image of the saint in the chapel. On

the Monday following they held a requiem mass and each offered an oblation of a halfpenny. The customary provisions were made with regard to masses for dead brethren. There were no less than five gilds of St. Thomas at Lynn, the earliest of which was founded in 1272.

One factor that doubtless had force in determining the formation of a cult was the picturesque character of some of the legends. Such stories as those of St. George and St. Margaret with their respective dragons lent themselves easily to the mediæval love of pageantry and many a gild was the happy possessor of a dragon which duly appeared once a year in the gild procession. There was even a certain traffic in the hire of dragons ! In connection with this love of pageantry one inevitably thinks of the many gilds formed to honour the festival of Corpus Christi. These gilds deserve a paper to themselves and I cannot do more than touch upon them now. The festival was founded by Pope Urban IV., somewhere about the year 1264, and by 1278 there was a gild of this dedication at Norwich, founded by the chaplains of the collegiate church of St. Mary. Another such gild was founded at Bury St. Edmunds in 1317. I mean no sort of slight upon the pious motives of the founders of such gilds when I say that the solemn dignity which was made to surround the Processions of Corpus Christi through the streets of a town had its own dramatic appeal apart from the desire to do honour to the Sacred Body of Christ. I attribute part of the popularity of such gilds to this.

I come now to our main source of information as to the gilds of the fourteenth century, namely, the returns made by the gilds themselves in response to a writ of Richard II. The reasons that prompted the issue of the writ in 1388 were doubtless various, but I think the chief one was the royal suspicion that

seditious societies were in being under the guise of religion. For our purposes to-day I need only say that in the 507 returns that survive at the Public Record Office to-day we possess a source of invaluable information as to the nature and purposes of the parish guilds of the fourteenth century. These returns must be, however, lamentably incomplete. They come, indeed, from twenty-five counties, but seven of these are represented only by a single gild. Norfolk has 164 returns, Lincolnshire 123, Cambridgeshire 60, and Suffolk 39.

In the endeavour to interpret these returns one enters at once the field of controversy. The main question is the true character of the societies here depicted.

A number of the simpler Suffolk guilds had notably as their first object the provision of lights to burn before images. Among these were the guilds of the Assumption in St. Mary's, Bury St. Edmunds; the gild of St. Anne in St. James' Church in the same town; and the Gild of the Passion of St. Edmund in the Abbey itself. Four of the Bury guilds made it a condition of membership that brethren should leave bequests to the guilds in their wills. This was also required by the Corpus Christi gild at Multon in Norfolk, and in one or two other cases. To make such bequests voluntarily was common enough but it was not a common ordinance to require them.

One source of confusion, of which the student of guilds will do well to take note in determining the character and purpose of the societies he is reviewing, was the custom of forming a religious fraternity of some of the members of the same craft. In certain cases as I have already pointed out, the craft-guilds made religious ordinances which were incorporated

in the gild statutes, but in other cases members of a craft combined together merely to form a religious fraternity with no craft statutes at all. For example, some glove-makers united in 1354 to form a fraternity to maintain a light in a Lady Chapel in West Smithfield, London. They were known as "the little company of glovers," but were not at the time a craft-gild at all, though they may afterwards have become so.

It is possible, I think, to note in the fifteenth century a gradual change in the character of the gilds, though it is not very easy to define it with any exactness. As would be expected such change was more marked among the fraternities of the larger towns than among those in villages. Impressions are not always capable of proof, but they may not be the less valuable for that reason. Anyone who has to deal as I have, day by day, with long series of documents spread over comparatively wide areas of time cannot fail to notice changes real enough and yet incapable of exact definition, incapable because they are changes in the spirit of man rather than in the facts and events about man which can be more easily described. What I am about to say therefore, I must ask you to regard as an impression.

I seem to see in the fifteenth century and early sixteenth century a somewhat more mechanical spirit pervading gild life, a gradual intrusion of what may be called the business element in its management, a greater emphasis on the social rather than the spiritual side, a slow decay of what I may call the mystical outlook on life. This latter, indeed, is capable of proof though I must not stay longer than to remark that the idea of symbolism in ecclesiastical art had almost disappeared by the middle of the fifteenth century. Gilds continued indeed to be formed in apparently increasing numbers. Their rules contained the same, indeed even more elaborate, provisions for their ritual



observances; but something of the old spirit was gone. Numbers and influence slowly became of more importance than the spirit of devotion. It may be that life itself was busier. It was certainly more concerned with the things of this life rather than that life beyond, which in the earlier centuries had loomed so large. As a climax, membership of certain gilds began to confer a social status.

One characteristic however of the later gilds is praiseworthy enough. Gilds sprang up to supply the increasing demand for education; as for example the gild of the Holy Ghost at Basingstoke, whose school has its legitimate descendent to-day. Instruction was provided by the gild chaplains and the reports of their work and attainments may be read in the returns of 1547 among the papers of the Augmentation Office. Another kind of gild deserves both attention and its meed of praise. The provision of what to-day would be called almshouses does not indeed belong solely to the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, but it was, I believe, especially characteristic of this period, and was generally, though not always, the product of gild generosity. It is not possible however to draw any distinction between the activities of craft gilds and parish gilds in this connection, and it must suffice to say that the almshouse was carried on as if it were a gild itself. It had its own priest and the brethren were under the obligation of prayer for the members of the gild that supported them, both living and departed.

The most characteristic devotion towards the close of the fifteenth century was that to the holy name of Jesus and gilds with that dedication sprang up all over the country.

One example of development of an interesting character is that of the gild-merchant at Ipswich.

Here I am probably on dangerous ground, and it may be that some member of the Institute will be able to amplify or correct what I am going to say. So far as I have been able to find, King John granted it a charter as a gild-merchant in 1200. I am not sufficiently acquainted with the history of the town to say how soon the gild-merchant gave place to the craft-gilds, but in 1325 it received a regular constitution from the priors of Holy Trinity and St. Peter, and though its dedication included the Holy Trinity, the Blessed Virgin, and All Saints, it would be better described as a gild of Corpus Christi, for its main observances were definitely connected with that feast and its proper ritual. In 1492 some thirteen craft-gilds assisted, by permission of the borough court, in adding dignity to the procession. The burgesses of Ipswich and their wives were alike members of the gild so that it had evidently lost its character as a gild-merchant, and, it may be, should rank as a religious and social gild composed mainly of the more influential of the townsmen.

In 1516 a gild was founded in the collegiate church of St. Martin-le-Grand in London in honour of the patriarch Job. This is the only English instance I have come across of such a dedication, and there is evidence that the gild was not composed of Englishmen. At this period St. Martin's was an appanage of Westminster Abbey, and consequently any gild formed in it had to obtain the abbot's license for its priest. Fortunately this license has survived,\* and in it the abbot provides that the priest to be presented to him must be learned in the *Lingua Teutonica* in order that he may be able to hear the confessions of Teutons and other aliens unable to speak English.

The master, wardens, brothers, and sisters of the

\* Westminster Abbey Muniments, Register Book II, pp. 106, 106b.

gild were to receive the abbot and his monks into fraternity and pray for their spiritual welfare in this world and the next. On the eve of the feast of the blessed Job the canons, vicars, clerks, and choristers of the collegiate body of St. Martin were to assemble at a certain nave altar and sing an antiphon in honour of the saint followed by the office of the dead and a requiem mass on the day following. The gild was to be possessed of any oblations made at this time, but must pay ten shillings yearly to the abbot and convent of Westminster in lieu thereof.

I cannot find that the festival of Job is kept in any English service book, but instances of it occur on the continent. For example Job is honoured as prophet and confessor on May 10 at Toul and at Agram, the capital of Croatia; on May 14 at Hamburg; on May 22 at Cracow; and on November 15 at Gnesen.

It will be obvious that if I am right in asserting that the doctrine of purgatory was the corner-stone of the foundation of parish gilds, any attack upon that doctrine was an attack also upon the gilds. I need not enter into the complicated controversies on religious doctrine which raged after the first quarter of the sixteenth century. It must be enough to say that by 1545 the royal needs were so pressing and in the royal view the doctrine of purgatory so sufficiently discredited, as to warrant an Act conveying to the king the properties of the gilds and all kindred foundations, though it is to be noted that Henry VIII. was careful to provide in his own will for the very services and ceremonies that he made an excuse for the confiscation of gild property. Before, however, this property could be seized Henry died and the Act of Suppression had to be renewed in 1547. In all 2,374 gilds are known to have been destroyed as well as various kindred foundations. The destruction was not readily

accomplished, because of opposition in many quarters, notably from the burgesses of Lynn and Coventry. If it be asked how such suppression was possible at all, the answer must be that that it was easier to annex corporate property than to tax the individual pockets of men less accustomed to pecuniary exactions than we are to-day.

In conclusion let me say that I am painfully conscious of important points omitted in this paper. Had I had time I should like to have dealt more with the development of gild-rules and observances. Moreover I have said nothing about the many gild meeting-places which still remain, such as this most interesting building in which we are met,\* or that other, not less interesting, though so different, which Canon Warren is labouring to restore at Bardwell. If it has not already been done, I should like to suggest that a paper full of interest could be written on the gild-houses of Suffolk alone, and there must be many in your virile Institute who would be competent to do it. East Anglia is singularly rich in the number and character of its memorials of the past. It is also singularly fortunate in the number of its folk who appreciate and value them.

\*Gildhall, Hadleigh.