

A short Report on some MS Accounts of the Commonalty of Bridgwater

by

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Proceedings. Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, XXIII, 23, (1877), pp 38-48

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THE rolls which form the subject of the present brief memoir contain certain annual statements of receipts and expenditure made by an officer called, in the earliest instance, the Receiver of the Commonalty of the Town of Bridgwater ; and later, the Bailiff of the Commonalty, the Common Bailiff or simply the Bailiff, Probably the office thus designated was the usual stepping-stone to the position of Mayor, or Portreeve (as it was in the earlier days) of our ancient borough. The collection to which my remarks have reference consists of seventeen of such yearly accounts ; the sequence is rather broken, as may be seen from the fact that they range from the 47th year of Edward III (1372) to the 6th and 7th of Edward IV (1466-7). We have thus specimens of annual expenditure taken at random over a period of nearly a century.¹

The rolls are of very various size and length; but, as a rule, each consists of a single sheet or strip of paper, or parchment—generally the latter, for which we may be thankful, as the paper ones are, with a single exception, ragged, and in bad condition. This exception occurs in the case of one account, which consists of five octavo sheets of paper, and is noteworthy as being the only one written in English throughout. The majority endeavour to stick to Latin, and only have recourse to English when in distress ; this one sticks to English, and only employs a Latin word or phrase here and there for convenience. Instead of calling itself the “*Computum Communis Ballivi*,” it begins, “*Thes bith the parcelles that John Aileward hath resseved fro the ffest of Seynts Michell anno sexto Henrici Sexti unto the same ffest ther aftur next follewying prout patet.*”²

As to the general features of these documents— they begin, naturally, with a statement of the year’s receipts, usually arranged in this way:—(1) Receipts from house and garden property belonging to the Commonalty, (2) Moneys contributed for special municipal purposes, (3) Dues paid for the freedom of the borough or of a guild, (4) Income from the port and harbour, whence we get some idea of the trade of the town. Then follow the items of expenditure, which

scarcely admit of any definite arrangement. In one instance they are accurately divided, according to quarters or terms, viz., of our Lord’s Nativity, of Easter, of Nativity of S. John Baptist, of S. Michael (Robt, Beaumont, 20 Henry VI) ; but in most cases there seems to be no attempt at date or classification, and repairs, fees, and hospitalities are noted probably just in the order of disbursement.

I propose to give a few extracts, first from the receipts, and then from the expenditure accounts, and shall attempt to rescue them from confusion, by following, in the case of the former, the rough fourfold division I have made ; and with regard to the latter, by grouping together items that present some similarity or relation to each other. My object in making these extracts is, of course, to note those particulars which may best help us to think of the town as it was four and a half centuries ago.

(1) Receipts from property. Under this head we find sum entries as the following :— “*Received of John Hurdecombe for a tenement without the West Gate on the West side of the West Wayre*” (sometimes spelt *Wayhur*) *xvid.* “*Received for the Shamelis*” (shambles) “*this year, iis. vid.*” For a parcel of land in the street called the Wear late of John Hoggis *iid.* “*Received of Moricia Cardemaker for a tenement near the bridge on the south side thereof, iiis. vid.* Of “*Margaret Screvenr*” (again spelt *Skryvenere*) “*and little Alice*” (parva Alicia) “*for a tenement, iiis. viiid.*” “*Of William Ceddesey, ivs.*” “*Of Richard Smith for a chamber with one traveys, ivd.*” . “*William Sydenham for one garden*” (pro uno gardino) “*outside the South gate*” “*Richard Hooper for one tenement near the great bridge.*” John Moleson (38 Henry VI) accounts for five shillings “*received for the schrudes of the trees growing upon town-ditch, sold to John Parker this year,*” They did not always produce so much, for another year we find, “*From Robert A Banke for the shroudynye of divers trees upon the common foss, xiid.*”

(2) Sums received for special purposes. We place under this head many entries having reference to the building and completion of the West Gate— a work which appears to have been kept about a long time. Some receipts are for the church, e.g. “*ivs,*

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recd, of Wim. Atwelle for moneys arising from the collection in the road (or street) without the West Gate of the town afore-said, upon the old tallage granted for the church and the maintenance of the building thereof."

(3) Dues received for the freedom of guilds or trades. Thus (22 Henry VI), " viis. vid. received of Richard Cloptone for having the freedom of the guild." " From John Eremyte for his fine upon having his freedom, viiis." "From John Eleys, smith, for having his freedom, ivs." "xiii. received of Richard Forde, *corviser*" (cobbler) "for following his craft this year' The following entry is rather curious in this connection— " Received of Wm. Smith for having the freedom *in le yle viis.*" (? freedom to appropriate a seat in the aisle of the church). I find only one instance of a fine in the ordinary sense. " For wepon drawe agenst the peace, *ixd.*"

(4) Income from the port and its appliances, generally entered under the heads of Moorage, Plangage, the Bushell, and the Crane, One or two samples will suffice: — 1397. "For xxxviii. received as profits for the cord and skids " (*Skedis*— gang- boards for rolling or sliding heavy goods) "in drawing wine and other things during the time of the account, by tally against the porters " (per tall contra les portours). 1399. Issues of the water xviii, *xid* received for moorage, planchage, and the bushell during the time accounted for, and livs. viid. Received . for the common cord and *Skedys*. Received of the *bere-men* (porters) "of the crane *ixd.* For the mooring of divers boats and picards " (batell; et picard :) "*xvd*"

When we turn to disbursements, we find a large expenditure in repairs, and a considerable outlay upon the common cord, the bushell, and the crane. Thus we have, in 1397, "Paid for cleaning the common cord *vd.* For two skids with the making iis, *iiid.* For two new cords for the commonalty *xxs.* For one new *hausour* bought for drawing wine and other merchandise *xiiis,* *ivd,* For payment made to John Hill, carpenter, hired by the task to make a timber-way to draw wine and stone from the boats to land, *ivs.* For midday drink " (*potus meridianus*) " bought for the same carpenter while engaged in the work, *vd*" So again we have an elm bought " to be cut into four new planks, *iiis.iiid,*" We find payments " to Henry Roper of Taunton for

one *slengge* weighing 38 lbs, of hemp, *ivs. id.,*" and for: "slietying the slengis " (fitting the slings) ; for " a *poleyn* for the crane, *ivd.,* and a *lagge* bought to support the crane when taken down and put up, *id,*" and for " the making of *gymyows*³ and *happse* for the crane," Another curious word occurs In connection with the crane:—" Paid for two *fraccuns* bought for the *polys,* *xxd.*" (wheels or blocks, I suppose, for the pullies.) The said crane consumes large quantities of *talgh,* *talugh,* or *talow*—an item occasionally further varied, as when Hurdecombe enters " *swynesgrece* pro le crane," and Parys "pro pinguedine empt; pro la crane." There is an outlay every now and then upon the bushell, as well as upon the cord and crane, *e.g.,* for binding it with four *clampis* of iron. We have, moreover, particulars of a new bushell, "In a buschell the tre, *ixd iv.* yre to the same busshelle, *viid,* ob. (*½d.*). In the makyng, *vd.* ob," Another municipal expense is more singular—" In togam pihistolat; " (*i.e.* fistulatoris, For the piper's gown)

We come next to repairs of public buildings and corporation property. In the earliest of these documents we find this entry, " Delivered to Richard Ermyte for mending the South bridge called Lymbrugge on two occasions, *viii.* vid . Also some work done by Nicholas Bridie, followed by "For two *nuncheons* for the said Nicholas and his lad," (Pro ii noucheynchis ad die Nich et parvui sum). The word occurs again, with the spelling *nonechenche* which favours a derivation suggested by Mr. Riley, *i.e., noonquenche* ; in fact the *potus meridianus*, of which we have already found mention. Luncheon or lunch is quite unknown to our older writers, while *nuncheon* or *nunchion* is not infrequent. Such provision for workmen appears to have been quite usual :nwe have in the same account (Smok), "For beverage at various times for Richard Plomere when covering the church, *ivd ;*" and many later instances, *e.g.* (Barell), " Item *iv* merinos mete ii devis, *xvid,* Item, John Doget is mete a dey, *iid.* ;" and (Hanford), " Paid to divers *waynemen*, namely four waynes and eight men, for their victuals " (pro cor. vittual) "*xivd.,* ... for their breakfast in the morning " (pro *jantaclo* eor, in mane) "*vd*" The South Bridge and the West Gate occur frequently, *e.g.:* " For expenses of divers men hired to mend the South Bridge, *iis.* For stone bought at Wemdon for mending the West Gate, with

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carriage of the same and of sand, xviii." (1397). "The houses of the corporation tenants constantly need repairs, e.g." For bordys to make hacchis " (doors) " to the tennuntrye, vid. For twystes to the hacchis (hinges to the doors), " xiid" One particular house on the bridge seems to have been a continual drain upon the municipal revenues. It reappears perpetually :—"For dawbyng and mendyng the house at Brigge, id." Again, " For dabbing and spikyng the tenement on the bridge, iis." Again, "For dabbyng of the howsyn a pon the burge, id." Again, "For reparacion of the howse apone the burge—for spekis and yerdis, vid" John Bussell (6 Edward IV), the last, of the bailiffs whose accounts appear ia these rolls, seems to have tried vigorous measures; he charges, "For my own labour in the repairs of the tenement upon the bridge on divers days, vid" The official Latin constantly breaks down over the household details ; and we read, " Fro emendacione de la locke, id, Pro uno locke et twyste et le ryngge, vid." And again, " Librat: klokke-makyer, iiiili. xs.

I will quote only two or three more items under this head : — "For the repair of the Almyshouse without the West Gate, xs, xd." "For the baryng of stones fro the key, ivd. For ledyng of ffaketys (fagots) " to the Lymeburge, vd. For making a botte of yre for the Sowthe yate, iid . Item, for ii scheners" (?) "and mendyng of the polys, xid." (Barrel;) Here is apparently, a new public work ; — " For makyng of the bole-ryngge and the stapylle, iiid,"

We come across some notices of the acquisition of property ; for example, "Paid to the wife of John Fortescue for the great tenement in which John dwelt, xxvis. viiid." But here is a better bargain, though accompanied by circumstances which might indicate that an unfair advantage was taken of the vendor, "For wine given to John Powlet for his tenement called La Warte, viiid, "For oysters given him at Polys, iis, ivd" (Pole was a scrivener.) " For writing of the evidences of the said tenement, paid to John Pole, iiis" — (a large conveyancer's fee, in proportion to the consideration given for the property!) " For wax for sealing the evidences aforesaid, if iiid" (This tenement is the subject of one of the exhibited documents.)

The payment and entertainment of the borough's representatives in Parliament

furnish numerous items, of which few will suffice:—" For xxs paid to John Cole for Parliament this year." "Paid to John Mancell and W. Warde being burgesses to Parliament for the town aforesaid, xls." "vid paid for wine bought and given to John Palmer coming to the town after Parliament, in presence of the Seneschal and other merchants then present ; " the same again for "John Palmer, when he comes to the town before Parliament." The Bridgwater burgesses appear to have been very hospitable, and from the fact that this was very largely a wine port, a present of wine was the natural form of municipal courtesy. There was a large trade, not only with the South of France, but with Spain, a fact to which Mr. Riley drew my attention, as explaining how it happened that a pilgrim desiring to visit the shrine of St. Jago, at Compostella, came to take ship at Bridgwater. All outlay in hospitality is usually set down under the heading of *Wine and other expenses*; there is a striking exception to this practice, however, in the earliest account, where we read, " Paid to Richard Baker iiis. ivd for bread bought at the time when Lord de Zouche, lord of the town, was here." The following extracts will show the general character of these entries :—" Wine bought at the time when Ric. Sydenham was present in the house of Wm. Erich, xviiid" "iis. viiid", for four gallons of wine bought and given to Thomas Mortimer." " xviiis, paid for wine bought and given to the Archbishop this year; " (followed by xs. paid for oats bought and given to the same Archbishop).

" Wine given to Sir Baldwin Malet, Knight, William Stapleton, and Peter Courtenay." Again (1441)," Paid upon the eve of the Assumption of the Blessed Mary for wine given to, and other expenses incurred upon Edward Hall, Alexander Hody, and other counsellors of the town, ix. (A. Hody was standing counsel to the commonalty, at a yearly fee of 13s. 4d.) " Paid to David Baker for three gallons and. one pottle of red wine, one pottle of Malmesyn, and three gallons of red wine delivered to William Lord de Botreaux, one quart of Malmesyn, and one pottle of white wine, making in the whole vs. ivd." (This was the last Lord de Botreaux, killed at St. Albans, 1462.)

Entries like the following recur with little variation from year :—"Paid for a gallon of wine for the master of the Hospital⁴ and the

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convent on the Feast of Corpus Christi, viiid. For two gallons of wine delivered to the Friars Minors⁵ at the said feast, xviiid. Paid for two gallons and one pottle of wine delivered to the aforesaid master of the Hospital and Alexander Hody in the vestry of the Church, xxd. Item, for bread, id" (Does not this recall a certain account found upon the person of Sir John Falstaff, which provoked the exclamation, "O monstrous! But one (half) penny-worth of bread to this intolerable deal of sack!") You will note that the Vicar is not mentioned on these occasions; I fear that then, as generally, the Regular clergy fared better than "the pore Persoun of a toun." I can only find here and there a wholly unconnected entry of "a pottle of wine for Sir Vicar, ivd." which has a very shabby look.

Alexander Hody reciprocates the hospitality of Corpus Christi day, as the following entries show;—"Paid to John .Pole for wine bought and consumed upon a buck of *venose* being presented to the commonalty of the town by Alexander Hody, viis. ivd. Paid for *floure* and spices for the same commonalty, viiid. Paid to John Bercom as a reward for the man who bought that venison to Briggewater, xxd. Paid to Wm. Coke for baking the same venison, ivd"

We have another mention of a Corpus Christi festival from which I will quote, as it gives some idea of prices current:—"For two capons bought of Wm. Seymour, iis. For one goose, vd. For two *scildres* of mutton, vd, For *pepire* and *safire* iid, For powder *sinomun*, iiiid. For reward eve (given) to the Coke, iiiid." An adjoining entry refers to the ceremony of the day, "Reward to John Miller for collecting rods on the Feast of Corpus Christi, ivd"

But of ecclesiastical matters we do not learn much from these documents; one would gladly know a little more of the occasions of such entries as the following:—"For making a *selde*" (shed) "in the church-yard upon the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Mary for the Abbot of Glastonbury, and other expenses, and bread and ale and other victuals. viiid" It is possible that this was one of the occasions upon which "the town was blessed" We find several references to this ceremony, some direct, others indirect, and merely mentioning the wine paid for on the occasion. Among the former the following may be quoted:—"For the labour of John Paris, riding to Taunton for a prior for the

blessing of the town, xiiid. Again, when the townspeople send further in the same cause," For a reward given to a priest, for naming a proctor at the Roman Curia, for the benediction of the town, vis, viiid." I have mentioned expenses for wine, &c., on occasion of the blessing of the town; it appears that the old inhabitants were inclined to be festive on much more uncongenial occasions, and liked solid refreshment even at a tax-gathering, as we find an entry "For bread, ale, and paper used at the hall on the collection of one fifteenth and one tenth for our Lord the King." (There is a writ of 4 Richard II, ordering the collection of one-fifteenth and half a fifteenth, among the documents exhibited)

There are two entries connected with the church to which I may call attention. (1). "Paid to Roger Betone for a case to keep in it the *elvett* silver" (le elvett argent) "for the church, xviiid," Mr. Riley suggests that this may be "money set by for planting *elvene* or elms near the church." I have been trying to establish some connexion with *elmes*, or *elmesse*, alms, but without success. (2), "In wyne geve to Sir John Whelere when he made the *verdere*, iiiid." (Parker B.) This might be illustrated at length from the churchwarden's accounts, to which I have not had time to refer during the compilation of this paper. The *verdere* was, I believe, a curtain which hung before a picture or relief representing the Resurrection; beneath was the sepulchre, which was watched by men hired by the churchwardens for the purpose, from Good Friday until the morning of Easter Day, when the *verdere* was lifted, and the figure of the risen Christ displayed.

Returning to municipal matters, we find that there was the same difficulty then as now in clearing the channel and maintaining the banks of the river Parrett. Every year we have expenses, "Paid for dyking. Paid for dyking *ayme-ward*. Item, paid for thornes to the back" (thorns to protect the river bank and keep the mud together)," ivs. vid, Paid the cranemen for digging away the *wose*" (ooze, or mud) "from the quay throughout the year, vis. viiid" "Pro fodicione de la wose ab keya," (sometimes spelt *caye*).

There are notices of maces, which, I fear, exist no longer among the corporation-plate. "Paid in the making of one *mase* that had been broken by John Tarrant, viiis, ivd."

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“ Paid for making the common *mas*, viid.”
“ Paid for silver for making the silver mace belonging to the town, *mas vs. vid-*... “ to Thomas Goldsmyth, viis”

It was my intention to make some further remarks upon the language of these documents ; but examples enough have been given to show the precarious manner in which the common bailiff, or rather the professional gentleman who received 3s. 4d for writing his “*parcelles*,” balanced himself between Latin and the vernacular. The difficulty of maintaining a pure style under the circumstances must be admitted; and when a Cambridge bursar writes “*Pro corda ad le whippe 1d⁶*” it is no wonder that a contemporary burgess of Bridgwater should account “*pro gravellynge le viam a fonte usque ad keyam*,” and “*pro dimidio mille de lathnaille*,” It must however be confessed that our notary reaches a lower level when he speaks of the common ditch *without the West Gate* as “*sine occidentalem portam!*”

These documents give us but little information as to contemporary English speech. A few curious or obsolete words have been noted in the foregoing extracts, and the list might be slightly extended. We have traces of a Somersetshire tongue in the spellings *burge*, *axith*, *happse*, *paselles*, &c

ENDNOTES

(1) I append a list of the documents of which I speak. The dates- are counted from Michaelmas in each year. I have noted the spelling of the name of the town, concerning which a question was raised at the recent meeting.

A.) John Smok, Receiver of the Commonalty of the town of Bruggewater.

(Heading ; — *Computum J. S. & receptoris commutatis villae de B.*); 47-40 Ed. III, 1372-76.

B.) Ric. Salter, Bailiff of the Commonalty. (*Comput. R. S. Balli Cōitatis*). 20-21 Ric. II, 1397-8. Bruggewater.

C.) Thomas Sequard. From Michaelmas, 21 Ric. II, 1398. Paper, much torn Bruggewater.

D.) An account of which the heading is lost; temp. Ric. II,

E.) Ric. Baker, Bailiff of the Commonalty, 23 Ric. II, and 1 Hen. IV, 1399-1400. Bruggewater. Paper, in bad condition.

F.) John Aileward. 6-7 Hon, VI, 1427-8.

G.) John Hanford, Common Bailiff (*Communis Ballivus*), 19 Hen. VI, 1441, Bruggewater.

H.) Robert Beaumont (spelt *Beamonud* and *Beamund*) 1442, Bruggewater.

I.) John Hurdecombe, C. B. 22 Hen VI, 1444

J.) Wm, Alys, C. B. Probably 1444-5. Parchment mutilated. Bruggewater,

K.) Ralph Gardiner, B.C.31-2 Hen, VI 1452-3 Bruggewater.

L.) Walter Parys 32-3 Hen. VI, 1453-4 Bruggewater,

M.) John Parker (A), Bailiff, 33-4 Hen, VI 1454-5, Bruggewater.

N.) John Parker (B) 34 Hen. VI, 1455-6. Bruggewater

O.) Richard Hills, 34-5 Hen, VI (so headed ; but it must be 34-5) 1456-7, Bruggewater.

P.) John Moleson. 36-7 Hen. VI, 1457-8. Bruggewater.

Q.) John Barrel 38-9 Hen. VI, 1459-60. Bruggewater.

R.) John Russell 6-7 Ed, IV, 1466-7. Bruggewater.

(2). See *Historical Records Commission*, 3rd Report, Appendix p. 312 by H. T. Riley, Esq., M.A., to whom my sincere obligations are due for many reasons especially in connection with this paper, Ailward's account is not with the others, and I have been hitherto unable to find it. When I have quoted it, I have used memoranda made from MS. note of Mr. Riley's which I had the privilege of seeing after his last visit to Bridgwater as Inspector of Historical Records. In the case of all the other documents I have carefully inspected the originals.

(3) Mr, Riley says, “More commonly *gemmeus*, clasps or double hooks.” I find *gimmow* and *jimmers* used in *O. E.* for *hinges* and “a pair of *gimmesses*” is still used here that sense. A derivation from *jumeaux* is of course justified in either meaning

(4) Hospital of S. John the Baptist.

(5) Friars Minor of S. Augustine, from whom Friarn, formerly Freryn, Street takes its name.

(6) Historical MSS. Commission, 1st Report, p., 65.

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