

THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE ENGLISH GILDS

By F. D. COPE.

THE Gilds which played so important a part in the development of the industrial, social and municipal life of this country in the Middle Ages, gave their name to the system of industrial organization which was the forerunner of the Domestic and Factory systems. Prior to the time of the Norman Conquest, there had been various gilds both religious and social (the latter being known as Frith gilds), but it is not until the eleventh century that mention is found of the type of gild with which this article is concerned. Professor Salzman tells us that on account of the great development of the cloth-weaving industry by the middle of the twelfth century, "The weavers of London, Winchester, Lincoln, Oxford, Huntingdon, and Nottingham, and the fullers of Winchester, had formed themselves into gilds, which were sufficiently wealthy to pay from forty shillings to twelve pounds yearly to the king for various privileges which practically amounted to the monopoly of cloth-working in their several districts."¹

In the main, the gilds consisted of three chief classes : (1) Merchant gilds ; (2) Crafts ; and (3) Religious gilds. In many cases, however, the lines of demarcation between the three were narrow and at times non-existent. In actual fact, the functions of all three classes might be combined in a single gild, especially in the early days. "In many cases," says Dr. Westlake, "it is impossible to determine whether a religious association developed into a craft-gild or whether a gild was formed primarily for trade interests and enrolled itself in customary fashion under the protection of religion."² Again, one gild might contain within its ranks representatives of two or more different trades or crafts. The great gild of Corpus Christi at Ipswich, for example, was thus composed.

The Merchant-gilds were, in general, the forerunners of the Crafts. They reached the zenith of their power by the end of the twelfth century. By this time they had obtained for their members many privileges, such as monopoly of local trade and freedom from imposts. They controlled production within their particular town, for which they were often instrumental in obtaining a charter. They also represented their town in its dealings with other towns, and played many parts in the regulation of urban life which, at the present day, are carried out by the representatives of local government. With the rise of the municipalities they lost many of their civic functions, these being transferred to the burgesses.

¹ *Mediaeval English Industries*, Chapter ix, p. 194.

² *Parish Guilds of Mediaeval England*, Chapter ii, p. 23.

Although termed Merchant-gilds, they were not confined to traders, but had craftsmen also within their ranks. As, however, the specialization of industry proceeded and markets widened, there came a tendency for the producing and trading functions of merchant-gilds to fall into separate hands. By the middle of the fourteenth century, this process was almost complete. Conflicts between the old and new organizations, and the municipalities who wished to control them, were frequent. In the end, however, the newer craft-gilds managed to maintain their own; and, in the course of time, the Merchant-gilds were merged into other institutions.

Membership of the Craft-gilds consisted of three grades: apprentices, journeymen, and masters. Journeymen were required to be apprenticed for a specified number of years (usually seven), apprenticeship becoming compulsory in nearly all trades, possibly by the end of the fourteenth century.¹ Before an apprentice could become a journeyman, he usually had to show competence in his particular trade, a "masterpiece" being demanded from those who aspired to this rank. In speaking of masters and journeymen, it must be borne in mind that there was not the sharp social cleavage between these classes that developed between employers and employees in later times. In the majority of cases a journeyman could look forward to the day when he, too, would attain to the master stage. This was, in fact, the usual course to follow. Hogarth's Industrious Apprentice who marries his employer's daughter was no doubt true of the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, but must have been exceptional in the eighteenth. A mass of employed labour working for a wage, without much hope of rising above their present position is essentially a condition of modern capitalistic industry. It did not exist to any extent until the early fifteenth century, and where it did so before that time, was the exception rather than the rule. In theory as well as in practice, custom was the deciding factor in the problems of industrial organization. The mediæval conception of commercial ethics derived from the teachings of Aquinas, and embodied in the Doctrine of the Just Price, regarded it as immoral for a merchant to manipulate the market. The cost of production was assumed to fix the price of an article, allowing for the producer a fair margin of profit. To-day, the existence of economic forces is recognized, and their operation understood and allowed free play, except where it is to the interests of the community, or any considerable section of the community, to restrain it by legislation. It is in the light of this essential difference between mediæval and modern economic theory that the gild system is to be viewed. Again, Capital, the life-blood of modern industrialism, had no predominance in mediæval economic organization. The mediæval economist recognized only two instruments of production—land and labour.

"As a rule, fixed capital in the shape of machinery and buildings played a subordinate part in mediæval industry. The basis of industrial life was craftsmanship—tools and technical skill were the resources upon which a master was content to rely to gain a livelihood."²

¹ Ashley's *Economic History and Theory*, Book II, Chapter ii, pp. 84-5.

² E. Lipson, *An Introduction to the Economic History of England*, Vol. I, Chapter viii, p. 328.

On the social side a later development of the crafts was the provision of money and shelter for necessitous members, much on the same lines as a modern friendly society. In many guilds it was the rule if a member was sick or in poverty, that he should be maintained out of the funds, or, if he died, should be buried at the common expense. Thus the members of the guild of the Painters (B.V.M. and St. Luke) attached to St. Giles, Cripplegate, received 10½*d.* in helpless poverty,¹ while the guild of Pater Noster in York, gave burial to needy cases at the guild's expense; "help in need from robbery, fire, or false imprisonment."² The Cutlers' guild, founded in 1370, enacted that if any member came to hurt "through storm at sea, fire, robbery, or other misfortune, by the Will of God, he shall have 1*od.* a week payable at the end of each month while the hurt lasts."³

Sometimes a guild would advance loans either in money or kind to its members. R. H. Tawney, in *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*, refers to a guild in Suffolk making loans of cattle at a charge. "The guild let out in one year 8 cows and 4 neats at 19*d.* each."⁴

These activities were carried on successfully for many years, and the guilds acquired varying degrees of power, their zenith being reached in the fifteenth century. After this time, however, a decline can be traced in their powers, the principal cause being undoubtedly the change in the industrial system which was gradually taking place. The rise of the domestic system of industry rendered an organization like a craft-gild unnecessary. Industry was being reorganized on the modern basis of wage-labour producing for a capitalist employer, rather than that of independent craftsmen who sold their products direct to the consumer. A class definitely consisting of employers and suppliers of capital became predominant. The line dividing workmen from employers became more accentuated. Instead of vertical divisions of craft from craft, there appeared horizontal lines, stereotyping class divisions. From the domestic system, it was but a step to the factory system, in which the employers and employees were drawn from quite different social classes, and their interests were, in fact, often antagonistic. These changes did not, of course, take place at once; nor were they in water tight compartments. The three systems existed side by side until the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century gave an impetus to the Factory System. Between the craft-gilds and the modern trade union there does not appear to be any continuity. This is not strange when it is borne in mind that the economic conditions which called the two organizations into being were vastly different. The guilds were associations of independent craftsmen, who usually combined the double functions of producers and traders, each working with their own capital and employing only their own family and one or two journeymen. A class who were distinct purveyors of capital which they loaned to others had not yet arisen on any large scale. A

¹ Appendix to *Parish Guilds of Mediaeval England*, p. 236.

² *Ibid.*, p. 234.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁴ Quoted by Tawney from *Victoria County History, Suffolk: Social and Economic History*.

modern trade union, on the other hand, is an association of labour only, out to make with capitalist employers the best bargains it can for maintaining and improving the standard of life of its members. It is true that towards the end of the period of the guilds there appeared a class of organizations known as "yeomanry" guilds, consisting for the most part of journeymen. But any evidence that the guilds as such survived into the period of trade unionism is vague.

A contributory factor of the decline of the guilds is to be found in the decay of the towns which is the universal lament of the early sixteenth century. The guilds had had a considerable share in the task of developing urban industry, their interests being in many cases identical with those of the towns, and the decline of the latter involved a corresponding decline in relative importance of the guilds. This decay of the towns which, according to a statute passed in 1540, was general from Berwick-on-Tweed to the Land's End, may easily be misinterpreted. On the face of it, such a phenomenon would appear to imply a decline in the industries and general prosperity of the country. Were such a thing to occur now, no other explanation could be given. But, in fact, the security of life and property which the cessation of civil strife and the orderly government of the Tudors had brought about, made it no longer necessary to seek for safety the protection of walled and fortified towns. The open country had become secure and population and industry began to flow into it. Hence that temporary decay of the towns which so much disturbed Henry VIII and his parliament. It was more a sign of growing prosperity than a cause for serious alarm.¹ Moreover, the Tudor monarchs favoured a national as opposed to an urban policy, and men had begun to think of England as an entity rather than as a collection of towns and villages. Markets were expanding; and internal peace, after the Wars of the Roses, favoured commercial development. Great quantities of ready-made goods were imported from abroad to the detriment in many cases of the guilds and their members whose markets had been mainly local. This is aptly expressed in the words of an anonymous sixteenth century writer, which have a curiously twentieth-century ring.

"I knew the time when men weare contented with cappes, hattes, girdeles and poyntes, and all maner of garmentes made in the townes next adjoininge: whereby the townes then weare well occupied and set aworke; and yet the money paide for the same stuffe remayned in the countrie. Nowe the poorest yonge man in a countrye can not be contented either with a lether girdle or lether pointes, gloves, knives or daggers made nigh home. And specially no gentleman can be content to have eyther cappe coat doublet, hose or shirt made in his countrye, but they must have their geare from London; and yet many things thereof are not there made, but beyond the sea, whereby the artificers of our townes are Idle."²

In many cases also the restrictions of the guilds tended to become vexatious and quite unsuitable for the changed conditions of industry. Craftsmen often deserted the towns in order that they might practise their craft in local villages where these restrictions did not apply. At

¹ Cf., Froude: *History of England*, Vol. I, Chapter i.

² Quoted: *Unwin's Industrial Organization*, p. 71.

first the guilds had forced all who wished to practise a craft to join them, but towards the end of their existence they placed a restriction upon their numbers so that the guilds should not be overcrowded. By the end of the fifteenth century many guilds had developed into livery companies, such as the Clothworkers, Mercers, etc., whose members were divided into those "of the livery," and those "not of the livery." The former alone wore the livery of their particular company and from amongst these were elected the officers. This development created a tendency for control to fall into the hands of the wealthier members, the poorer ones being often excluded. Capitalists, rather than craftsmen, now began to control the industries. Entrance fees were so increased that many journeymen were unable to join.

It is sometimes represented that the principal reason for the decline of the guilds was the alleged partial confiscation of their funds by Protector Somerset in 1547. This view was held by the late Professor Thorold Rogers and others. Modern investigations, however, have conclusively proved that this view is not in accord with the known facts. The religious guilds only were suppressed; the others being deprived merely of that part of their funds set aside for religious purposes. In many cases the motives which united the members of a guild were religious as well as secular. A common practice was to bequeath money to provide masses for the repose of the souls of deceased members. "It is evident," says Dr. Westlake, "that the strongest bond that united the brethren was their belief in the efficacy of masses and alms for the dead, and the value of the invocation of those saints under whose protection they had enrolled themselves."¹ Thus, in 1392, one Cantelaw gave a chalice and 12 pence, with a request for prayers for the repose of his parents, friends, etc., to the Guild of Tailors at Winchester.²

Therefore, it is natural that the guilds, like the monasteries, should come under the notice of the Reforming party in England in the sixteenth century. An act was passed in the last year of the reign of Henry VIII (38 Hen. VIII, Ch. 4), investing the properties of colleges, chantries, fraternities, brotherhoods and guilds in the Crown, but the king died before it could be carried into effect.

One of the first acts of Edward VI was, however, directed to the same purpose. Nor was this the first occasion upon which the Crown had coveted the property of the guilds. In 1388, in the reign of Richard II, an order was issued that the officials of all guilds and brotherhoods should make a return to the government giving particulars of the guilds over which they officiated. The idea behind this order was probably confiscation or taxation of their funds in order to provide money for the many wars in which Richard II indulged. A further object was to stop the activities of the journeymen's associations and to limit the amount of land passing into mortmain.

¹ *Parish Guilds of Mediaeval England*, Chapter iv, p. 43. In the list of guilds given in the Appendix to this volume, there is scarcely one which does not include among its objects the provision of masses for the dead, prayers to the B.V.M. and votive lights.

² Quoted: Gasquet, *Eve of the Reformation*, p. 327.

Again, in 1437, it was enacted that the crafts should have their rules approved by the Justices of the Peace.

To return to the Act of Edward VI. The preamble of this Act (I. Ed. VI, Ch. 14), is of interest, as showing how parliamentary opinion was tending to the religious views of the Reforming Party. "Considering," it said, "that a great part of superstition and errors in Christian religion hath been brought into the minds and estimations of men by reason of their ignorance of their very true and perfect salvation through the death of Jesus Christ; and by devising and sanctifying vain opinions of Purgatory and Masses satisfactory to be done for them which be departed." And, it went on to enact that all monies devoted to the furtherance of these purposes should henceforth be vested in the Crown. Although the revenues devoted to "superstition and errors in Christian religion," were confiscated, the general funds of the guilds were not. Though, of course, if there was any doubt as to the division into which such monies fell, the Crown, and not the particular guild concerned, received the benefit of that doubt. By this Act, 90 collegiate bodies, 110 hospitals, and 2,374 guilds, chantries, and free chapels were deprived of those funds devoted to such religious usages.¹

Thorold Roger's opinion that the Act of Edward VI dealt a devastating blow at the guilds is not borne out by the facts, and his further statement that, "Protector Somerset did not venture on appropriating the estates of the London guilds, for London had it in its power to make revolutions, and they were spared, after ransom paid, under the plea that the guilds did good service to trade,"² is misleading.

Professor Ashley interprets the situation thus: "The meaning of the statute would be perfectly clear: where there was a religious fraternity composed of members of a craft, but clearly separate from the company itself, it would share the common fate of all religious fraternities; where in any company the religious and industrial features were both present, those revenues would pass to the king, and those only, which had actually been bequeathed or otherwise set apart for definite religious purposes."³ The Merchant Taylors' Company, quoted by him, from Clode's *Early History of the Merchant Taylors' Company* (1888) is an example in point. The Company, "held 29 hereditaments standing at an annual rental of £440 13s. 10d., all of which (to some extent) were charged either by the company's contract, or by will, with payments to provide for masses and obits. Out of this £440 13s. 10d., only £98 11s. 6d. was reported by the Commissioners as due to the king, i.e. about two-ninths."⁴

Thus it will be seen that it was economic change, rather than the confiscation of their funds, which was mainly responsible for the decline of the guilds. Like the monasteries they had in many cases outlived their usefulness and in the new system of industry could no longer find a place. By the middle of the sixteenth century many workmen carried on their trade altogether outside the scope of the older guilds. But the fact that they had declined in power and influence

¹ *Parish Guilds of Mediaeval England*, p. 135.

² *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, Chapter xii, p. 348.

³ *Economic History and Theory*, Book II, Chapter ii, p. 147.

⁴ *Economic History and Theory* Book II, Chapter ii, p. 150.

did not mean that their main ideas were effete. The Statute of Artificers, that great Act of Elizabethan legislation dealing with the problems of industry, was, in many points, based upon the gild organization.

The Statute of Artificers aimed, *inter alia*, at checking the decay of the towns and represented an endeavour to restore them to their former prosperity; and also at maintaining the balance between the supply of labour for agriculture and industry. This Act introduced, on a national scale, many of the gild regulations. For example, a seven years' apprenticeship. (In some cases apprenticeship was even prolonged until an artificer was 24 years of age if the craft was being learned in a specified town.) It placed a restriction on the sons of agricultural labourers becoming artificers, thus endeavouring to maintain an adequate supply of labour for agricultural purposes.

The duty of administering the details of this Act fell upon the Justices of the Peace who, as Professor G. M. Trevelyan remarks, "Became the agents of the vast and intricate economic control taken over by the State from the old corporations—regulation of wages and prices, relations of masters and apprentices."¹

Some measure of this task, too, fell upon the new industrial companies which were revived at the end of Elizabeth's reign. These were built on the foundations of the crafts, though in organization, they were very different, being rather associations of employers than of craftsmen. They carried out many of the duties previously performed by the organizations which they had replaced, but they did not attain either the importance or the influence of the older gilds.

The gilds had played their part well in the development of English industry, and when their work was done they were merged into other undertakings which have successfully carried on their traditions. The spirit of the gilds has survived in organizations like the Oddfellows and the Foresters, who now carry out many of the "Friendly Society" duties of the mediæval gilds.

In a short article it is obviously impossible to touch upon every aspect of the gilds, or to do more than indicate the various developments which occurred as the years went on. There is, however, one point which it may be of interest to mention. It has become fashionable among a certain class of historians to represent the period when the gilds had reached their zenith as one in which all classes of the community dwelt together in amity and concord, and as a world in which the disruptive conflicts between Capital and Labour so common in our own day, were totally unknown. In a mosaic of mediæval life, drawn more from imagination than fact, they have pictured the Middle Ages as a golden era when the craftsman worked diligently for the love of his craft and not for the profits of a capitalist employer. It is true that some beautiful work was produced in this period, as our Cathedrals, in the main, bear witness. But it is not to be supposed that this roseate picture is a true representation of the case, or that it represented the rule rather than the exception. It is only necessary to read the ordinances of the gilds, with their frequent penalties for bad workmanship, and their guard against fraudulent practices, to realize that the Middle

¹ *History of England*, Book III, Chapter i, p. 278.

Ages, no less than our own, had its bad craftsmen and shoddy materials. Salzman is quite clear upon this subject: "Cloth," he says, "was stretched and strained to the utmost and cunningly folded to hide defects, a length of bad cloth would be joined on to a length of superior quality, or a whole cheap cloth substituted for the good cloth which the customer had purchased; superior leather was faked up to look like the best, and sold at night to the unwary; pots and kettles were made of bad metal which melted when put on the fire; and everything that could be weighed or measured was sold by false measure."¹

The rigorous insistence upon a decent standard of workmanship and just weights and measures, shows that the guilds did their best to promote good and honest work. But their regulations were often evaded when opportunity permitted.

We may well be thankful for the great creative ideals and for the constructive work of the Middle Ages, but we must not read into the past that which was not there, and institute comparisons unfavourable to our own age. There is no sufficient reason why admiration and gratitude for the past should lead us to depreciate or undervalue the achievements of the present, or to look back upon an imaginary golden age of whose existence history reveals no trace.

¹ *Mediaeval English Industries*, Chapter xiii, pp. 309-10.

Aims and Ideals of Christian Living (S.P.C.K., 2s. 6d. net) contains forty-eight Lessons for Bible Classes, Youth Groups, and Study Circles, by various contributors. It is edited by the Rev. J. R. Lumb, Rector of Chislehurst, and the Bishop of Bradford contributes an Introductory Essay. The series is divided into eight sections, and covers the general course of Christian thought and life. It also gives some useful hints on such subjects as Communism, Fascism, and Humanism. It contains a large amount of useful information, and in general should be helpful, although we cannot accept the teaching that is given on some points such as that of Worship. It is a book to be used with discrimination.

Loyalties to Church and State, by H. W. Fox (Student Christian Movement Press, 1s. 6d. net), is by the Hon. Secretary of the British Council of the World Alliance for International Friendship through the Churches, who is well qualified to explain the principles underlying the relationship of men as members of the Church of Christ and as citizens of their native lands. These are presented under the four headings—Man, The Community, The Church and The State. A useful bibliography and a series of questions are added for the use of Study Groups.

A World Picture Book of Prayers, by Phyllis L. Garlick, is a fascinating collection of prayers for children charmingly illustrated. (Church Missionary Society, 2s. 6d. net.) It includes prayers for "All Our Friends" and these can be had in a smaller form for three-pence. It is just the book that many will be glad to give to young children. It provides an excellent training in the meaning and scope of prayer.