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UNPUBLISHED DOCUMENTS RELATING TO TOWN LIFE IN COVENTRY

BY MISS M. DORMER HARRIS

Read, April 8, 1920

THE subject of this paper is to be found in two volumes of correspondence from royal and private persons belonging to the city of Coventry, and in one other MS., the diary of Robert Beake, mayor of Coventry in 1655. Where the original of this latter MS. is I do not know; possibly it has perished; but a copy exists in the writing of the Rev. F. J. Eld, whose father was a former mayor of Coventry, and this copy still is in the son's possession.

The letters,¹ which include sign manuals and privy seals from kings and queens, addressed to the corporation of the city, were apparently scattered until Thomas Sharp, the antiquary, and George Eld in 1832-3 brought them together into two volumes. The earliest communication is from Joan, the Fair Maid of Kent, mother of Richard II, the last is from Mr. Butterworth, M.P. for Coventry in 1812. Usually the more exalted the quarter whence the writing comes, the less individual the style; the royal signature may be of interest, but the communication is usually couched in dull official form; exception must be made, however, to some post-Reformation documents of Henry VIII which have a peculiar unction, while James I adopts a tart, scolding tone in dealing with the Coventry Puritans. In an ordinary royal

¹ Coventry Corporation MSS. A. 79. An index made by Sharp to this collection has been printed in Poole's *History of Coventry*. Cf. The Sign Manuals of Southampton (Southampton Record Society). For the Coventry MSS. see Hist. MSS. Com. i. 100-2, xv. pt. x. 101-60.

missive the king or prince is to be seen pressing the claims of some dependent to an official place, or forwarding the cause of some suppliant; thus Edward IV recommends Thomas Whitchurch as jailer,¹ and Edward his son, sends from Ludlow, probably in 1479 or 1480, a bill of complaint, urging the mayor and officials to do justice to the "party plaintiff"² named therein. Humbler correspondents express themselves more freely; they deal with their own affairs, and record here and there some private information or personal opinion. Thus Sir Thomas White writes in sore straits beseeching the mayor and corporation to perform their undertaking with regard to his wife's jointure. "Else," he says, "I shall even cast my college (St. John's, Oxford) for ever . . . so am I utterly shamed in this world and the world to come";³ or again Alderman King is informed (in 1675) that Mr. Ogilby's esteemed work, the first volume of *Britannia*, so highly valued by His Majesty, King Charles II, has been dispatched by the Kenilworth carrier, for presentation to the mayor;⁴ while Lord Chancellor Ellesmere writes pepperily from York House in 1610 reproaching the mayor and corporation for the scruples they have displayed about surrendering some papers entrusted to their keeping by Sir Thomas Leigh.⁵

Several of the royal missives come from Yorkist and Tudor Princes of Wales, who kept their court and council in the Welsh marches, for Coventry, known as the "Prince's Chamber," had a special connection with the king's heir. Edward, afterwards Edward V, writes from "our Castle of Ludlow";⁶ Arthur from "our manor of Bewdley,"⁷ Henry, afterwards Henry VIII, from the town of Bridgnorth.⁸ The last-named is a typical royal communication of the more expansive kind, and concerns a quarrel between a debtor and creditor wherein appeal

¹ Corp. MSS. A. 79, fol. 6 (Sign Manual).

² *Ib.*, fol. 7.

³ *Ib.*, fol. 63.

⁴ *Ib.*, fol. 276.

⁵ *Ib.*, fol. * 95.

⁶ *Ib.*, fol. 7.

⁷ *Ib.*, fol. 9.

⁸ *Ib.*, fol. 10.

had be enmade to the prince's authority. A certain John Mucklow of Halesowen has complained that John Harris, tailor, of the same, not only refuses to pay the bill owing for cloth, but has assaulted and wounded his creditor into the bargain, and quitting the territory of the prince's council's jurisdiction, now dwells in Coventry. The mayor is urged to settle the affair either by his own authority or by ensuring the appearance of the culprit before the more exalted tribunal.

The letter runs :—

By the Prince.

Trusty and right welbeloued etc. And where hertofore vpon greuoux complaint made by oon John Muklowe of Halysowen in the countie of Salop as well vnto the late Prince Arthure, whom God *pardonne*, as vnto vs sithens his decease, ayenste oon John Harryes, late of the same Town, Taylour, for that the said John Harryes was indebted vnto hym in a certain som of money for clothe; and vpon his demaunde of the same his dutye the said John hym sore hurte and wounded, putting [him] in greate jeopardye of lif, as he surmysethe; for the reformacyon wherof he had to hym directed boothe the said late princes *lettres* and also oures, which he hath obstinately reffused to obey, beyng inhabited nowe, as we be enfourmed in the Citie there; the poore man not beyng satisfyed of his, said dutye nes for his sore hurte and mayme, callethe vpon us for his remedy in that behalue: Whom we have remytted vnto you insomoch as the said John Harryes is auoyded oute of *our* auctorities. Wherefore we desire and pray you to call affore you the said John Harryes in examynacion of the *premysses*, and therupon hauyng in respecte his disobeysaunce of the said late princes *lettres* and also oures, to see that he recompens and content the said poore man, as ye shall seeme according to right and conscience, so as he have no cause eftesones to complayne vnto vs for his othre remedy in that behalue, if by any meanes ye so canne. Or ells we woll ye putt hym vndre sufficient suerties of his apparance before vs incontynently vpon the same, to thentente we may thanne furthre do therin as we shal seme conuenient and according to Justice and in your thus doynge shal singlerly pleas vs. Yeuen

vndre *our* signet at the Town of Bruggenorth the iiij day of Octobre [1502].

Another letter from a Prince of Wales, dated 1612, and signed Henry P., places the young son of James I in an amiable light. Prince Henry had been interested in a blind student brought to his notice by the governing body of Coventry, and writes accordingly :—

We have bin pleased to remember the promise wee made you touching the admittance of the poore blinde Scholler into some Colledg of the universitie ; wherein wee have taken that order with Dr. Prideaux, one of our Chaplains and Rector of Exeter Colledg in Oxford, that whensoever you shall think fitt to send him thither in our name he shall be receaved into the house and have such maintenance allowed him as maie enable him to goe forward in his studies.¹

These letters, however, contain no note of the name of this protégé of the prince, or of his subsequent career.

The missives from queens and royal ladies include the earliest in this collection, hitherto always attributed to Isabella,² mother of Edward III, Coventry's early patroness. The heading "De par la Princesse," however arouses suspicion that the instigation of the writing was not a queen, and the place-date of "our manor of Bushey," points definitely to Joan of Kent, in whose possession Bushey then was. To the widow of the Black Prince then this letter,³ a plea on behalf of the Friars Minors of Coventry, must now be assigned, the date of it lying sometime between the accession of Richard II ("nostre tres honoure fiz, le Roi") in 1377 and 1385, the year of Joan's death. No question concerning the identity of another correspondent, also mother of a reigning sovereign, has ever arisen. The Lady Margaret heads her somewhat peremptory letter to the mayor and his brethren about a "variance" within the city "By the

¹ Corp. MSS. A. 79, fol. 36.

² Sharp, *Antiquities of Coventry*, 197; Cordy Jeaffresson, *Cal. of Coventry Charters and Manuscripts*, 13; M. Dormer Harris, *Life in an Old English Town*, 130.

³ Corp. MSS. A. 79, fol. 1.

kinges moder," and signs it "Margaret R." in right royal fashion.¹ Among other letters by, or on behalf of, queens may be numbered that from Anne Boleyn announcing the birth of Elizabeth,² and one from Elizabeth herself urging on the city officials the safe keeping of Mary, Queen of Scots.³

The interest of this last letter is manifest.⁴

Elizabeth R. By the Queene.

Trusty and welbeloued, we grete you well, fforasmuche as wee have for dyvers good considerations gyven ordere to our right trusty and right welbeloved Cousyns, the Earles of Shrewesbury and Huntington, to bring the Scottyshe Queene to that our towne of Coventrie, and here to see her safely kept and garded vntyll *our* pleasur shall be otherwyse to determine, we let you witt *our* pleasur and commaundment is that for the better assystance of our sayd Cousyns and either of them in this charge committed vnto them, you shall from tyme to tyme followe suche ordere and direction as shall for that purpose bee by them, or either of them, prescribed vnto you in suche wyse as they, or either of them, shall think fyt for the weale and furtherance of our service. Yeven vnder our Signet at *our* Castle of Wyndesor the xxvjth of November, the xijth yere of our Reigne.

To our trusty and welbeloud the Mayour of our Citie of Coventry and to his Brethern the Aldermen there.

Mary arrived at Coventry on November 25, 1569, having travelled all day from Ashby de la Zouch with a halt for food at Atherstone, in order that she might be out of the way of the Rising in the North under the Earls of Northumberland and Westmoreland. She left the city about a month later. Much to Elizabeth's indignation, the authorities lodged the Queen of Scots at first at the "Bull" inn, because the place named in the

¹ Corp. MSS. A. 79, fol. 12.

² *Ib.*, fol. 31; *Coventry Leet Book*, 716-17.

³ Corp. MSS. A. 79, fol. 33.

⁴ It has been printed in various Coventry histories.

royal warrant as appropriate for her detention, the castle—the old Cheylesmore palace must be meant—appears to have been little, if any, better than a ruin. The “Bull” was at least watertight. Later she was removed to some other lodging, not identified,¹ but, according to a persistent local tradition, a room leading off St. Mary’s Hall.

Evidently Mary’s conduct and correspondence during her Coventry imprisonment² gave the authorities some anxiety. A local man, Henry Goodyear, had some concern with the scheme for the Norfolk marriage. He is said to have furnished the duke with a cipher for his correspondence, an indiscretion which caused him to find lodgment for a time in the Tower. “Goodyear was,” says Dugdale, “a gentleman much accomplished and of eminent note in this Countie whilst he lived having suffered imprisonment on behalf of that magnanimous ladie Marie, Queen of Scots, of whom he was a great honourer” boasting, according to the same authority, of the buttons of gold the queen gave him, which he wore on his cap and doublet as a keepsake. He is also remembered as a friend of Sydney and patron of Michael Drayton. His connection with Coventry is very clear. He was returned member of Parliament for the city in 1571. He had a town house in Much Park St.,³ Coventry, where his daughter, Anne, celebrated in Drayton’s sonnets as the fair Idea, was born.

A letter from Goodyear, dated from Polesworth, October 21, 1593, is included in this collection.⁴ It concerns some client of his, one Wotton, who had offended the corporation and was anxious to be received back into favour. Though the main matter of the letter has small

¹ Hatfield Papers (Hist. MSS. Com.) 448. Shrewsbury and Huntingdon inform Cecil that they took the Queen the day before (December 3) to a house, “which was sometime the Lord Chief Baron’s, where to be long will not be convenient, for the house is so straight of room”. ² *Ib.*, i, 455.

³ Mrs. Stopes (*Shakespeare’s Warwickshire Contemporaries*, 201) speaks of “Mich Park” as the locality of Goodyear’s house. ⁴ Corp. MS. 79, fol. 82.

interest, a family detail mentioned therein is worthy of note. Goodyear thanks the corporation for their most friendly remembrance of him at his daughter's marriage. The daughter in question must have been Frances, Drayton's "good Panape," who married her cousin, Henry Goodyear the younger, the friend of Donne, Anne, Drayton's sonnet-mistress, being still unmarried at the time of her father's death.

Among king's letters—to return to royal missives—is a sign-manual from Richard III,¹ and a characteristic production of that careful King, Henry VII,² concerning a lost gold spoon and pieces of plate, recalling the Venetian traveller's assertion that there were more vessels of gold and silver in the London goldsmiths' shops at this time than in all those of Milan, Rome, Venice, and Florence put together.³

This sign-manual runs:—

By the King.

Trusty and welbeloued we grete you wele. And receiued yisterday *your lettre* by this berer *with* a spone of gold of ours, and also this day we have receyued by certain *our subgiettes* of that *oure Citie* a pair of knyves and a salt of gold to vs belonging, whiche were lately loste, and by the diligent serche of you and of *your brethren* founde and gotten again. And for your and thair effectuell acquittailles therin, we geve vnto you and theym our especial thanks, whiche We shal remembre accordingly herafre. Geuen vndre our Signet at *our manoir* of Langley, the xxvj day of Septembre.

To our trusty and welbiloued the Mair of *our Citie* of Coventrie.

In one of the several communications from Henry VIII that king remits some of the punishment due to Coventry rioters "at the contemplation of the remission, indulgence and pardon of this holy Jubilee, whereof our holy fader, the Pope, hath of his paternall zeale and favour

¹ *Ib.*, fol. 8.

² *Ib.*, fol. 22.

³ Italian Relation of England quoted in Coulton's *Social Life in Britain*.

made us participaunt".¹ This was in 1526, naturally before the quarrel about the divorce. Another lays down the importance of impressing "in all our subjects hearts and minds" the high dignity of "the supremacie of our church wherewith," he says, "it has pleased God Almightye by his moost certain and undoubted worde to endowe and adorn our auctoritie and Coron emperiall of this our realm".²

One of Henry's successors was inclined to exert very strongly his authority of supreme head of the church. It came to the ears of James I that the Coventry people were reluctant to kneel on receiving the Sacrament. They sat or stood at the administration of the rite. The king, in 1611, informs the mayor and archdeacon of his dislike of this laxity, which he is no longer disposed to tolerate,³ regarding it "an vnsufferable disorder in a well settled Church and State that any perticular society or Cytie professedly and publickly (especially in a religious accion) should do the contrary of that Church and State doe Commaund".

The citizens evidently caused some local minister to set forth the reasons of their Puritan custom, but James was not to be thus placated. Incidentally we learn from the controversy what a long time the ceremony of the administration of the Sacrament lasted in Tudor and Stuart days.⁴ The Coventry men averred that in Edward VI's time the service was not over till "sometymes 2 or 3 of the Clocke in the afternoone and soe some vnreverentlie went home and dyned or walked in the fieldes, whilst others were receauinge in the churche". They urged that if the prescript form of words and gesture were used it would require more time to administer the Communion than will be spent in the reading of the whole book of Common Prayer, the number of communicants being six or seven thousand. Nothing that they

¹ *Ib.*, fol. 27.

² *Ib.*, fol. 29.

³ *Ib.*, fol. 35; *Leet Book*, 834-5.

⁴ *Ib.*, fol. 97.

could urge, however, availed to turn away the king's displeasure and he refused to grant a new charter to the city in 1621 until he had been satisfied of the conformity of the citizens in this matter of church observance.

The correspondence from private persons includes a letter from Thomas Mowbray, Earl of Nottingham, Earl Marshall, who in 1397 was created Duke of Norfolk. This was the duke who would have fought at Coventry with Harry Bolingbroke upon St. Lambert's, 1398, had not the duel been stayed by Richard II.¹ Another missive of about this date (1400) comes from John Preston, master of the Trinity Guild to John Marsh, the king's butler, asking him to remit by the bearer the money he owed the fraternity for his soul's health, as the master's account was due to the brethren and sisters of the guild. The writer also forwarded a "chaperon" (cap) part of the livery.² Among later correspondents may be noted Thomas, Marquis of Dorset, son of Elizabeth Woodville,³ Fulk Greville (1592), father of the poet, Chief Justice Coke, member for Coventry, and Endymion Porter, who was concerned in developing the North Warwickshire coalfields.⁴ Letters of scholastic note include one from John Eachard who writes from Catherine Hall, Cambridge, to Frankland, master of the Grammar School in 1676 upon educational matters, and urges that more time should be spent in translating out of English into Latin, and less in composing of themes and speeches.⁵ "This is not, Sir," he says, "my opinion only, but of many others; but particularly of Mr. Milton; who, though he was a man of very vile principles, yet he was a great witt and scholar, and most accurate in the Latin tongue". Eachard goes on to fortify his precepts by example. "I lately met, Sir," he says, "in Suffolk with 3 young lads about 10 years of age (but indeed they had been very hard followed in their fathers houses), who would

¹ *Ib.*, fol. 52.

² *Ib.*, fol. 51.

³ *Ib.*, fol. 54.

⁴ *Ib.*, fols. * 72, 114, 162.

⁵ *Ib.*, fol. 282.

read almost anywhere in the Bible, out of English into Latin, without studying or Dictionary, and commit very few mistakes, fewer I am sure than I should have done when I was admitted into Cambridge," a degree of scholastic accomplishment ensured no doubt by timely application of the rod!

Several letters in these Coventry volumes come from the pen of Robert Beake, a fact which links them to the other manuscript of which this paper deals—the diary of this mayor of the time of the Commonwealth. Beake was a major in the Parliamentary army, served as member for Coventry in 1654 and in subsequent parliaments under the Protectorate, and again in 1678. He lived to a great age, for in 1701 at one of Coventry's most stormy elections, "being an ancient man going to the Gallery to poll to avoid the crowd," he was pelted with stones and turnips by the Tory party. He was one of those who wished to urge upon the Protector in 1657, the terms contained in "The Humble Petition and Advice". In a letter to a Coventry friend, Leonard Piddock, dated March 28, 1657,¹ he says: "The souldiery by this are much disobleeged and great discontents there are in their spirits, but I hope God wil let his highness see that his interest lies as much in the preservation of laws and affection of his people as in a military power".

But the great interest of Beake lies in his diary, composed in 1655 the year of his mayoralty. This MS. gives us an idea of what the gay and flighty, the lovers of cakes and ale, suffered at the hands of the virtuous in Cromwellian times. Many of the items recorded by Beake in these pages explain the warmth of the welcome extended in after days to Charles II.

The diary begins November 12, 1655, the day after Beake became mayor. Day after day he gives the record of cases that came before him in his capacity as head magistrate of the city.

¹ *Ib.*, fol. 302.

The miscreants were mostly convicted of breaking the Sabbath, swearing a certain number of oaths—the number is frequently mentioned—or punished for some religious or moral offence.

The following selections show the character of Beake's journal:—

November 18.—A man travelling from Righton to Exhall to be a godfather was distrained and paid 10s. 6d.

November 19.—3 Quakers, for travelling on the Lord's day were set in the Cage. M^d it grieved me that this poore deluded people should undergoe punishment of such a nature.

November 27.—Goody Pywell sent to house of Correction for living idly.

December 2.—3 Carriers men for loytering at the Inne in tyme of publique worship were sent to the stockes.

Next follows a question of precedence on which Beake shows himself a trifle sensitive. "Major Gen^l Whalley being first in the church sate above me upon a mistake supposing he had given me the right hand."

December 7.—I released Goody Pywell out of Bridwel . . . her legs sweld that she could not worke.

December 9.—The lady Archer send her man from Warwick to buy linkes [torches] to bury her son, who died last night of the pox and could not be kept longer than this night. Being the Lord's day, I was in doubt whether Wheler, her man, might not be punished for breach of the Sabboath, but consulting Mr. Piddock, Mr. Bassnet, and Dr. Grew they resolved I might let him pass.

5 carriers were brought before me for being in the Inn in time of publique worship and sitting by the fire. I dismissed them for present and after consultation had with Mr. Hopkins what the Law was in the case, I sent for them againe and putt two in the stocks. The other 3 hid themselves.

January 6.—Being Lord's day John Haw brought one Brisco, who lives at Corley, to me for coming on foot hence;

he alleged that he came to church here and that ther was no sermon at Corley. Whereupon I tooke security from Ger. (?) Cooke, baker, that if Brisco proved there was no sermon at Corley then he should be free, otherwise to pay 10d.

January 17.—Bourley, the constable of Stoke, informed that on January 4, being Sabath day, Wm. Hopkins and John Tayler, were at the house of Shoeman of Stoke in the midle of the Evening service where they had pie and other things before them and did run away from the constable, there being 2 more in company.