

York in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

DURING the fourteenth century the trade of York had developed rapidly; but the city fell under the royal displeasure during the Lancastrian rule, and became a centre of disaffection, for the imposing personality of archbishop Scrope gained him a large following in opposition to Henry IV. The paramount influence of the earl of Warwick, whose principal Yorkshire seat was at Middleham Castle, induced the people of York to espouse the Yorkist cause in the wars of the Roses, and Edward IV on his march to Scotland was entertained royally within its walls. Renowned as York was for its liberality on these occasions, its hospitality seems to have been taxed too severely, for Sir John Paston, when arranging for a royal visit to Norwich later, warns the people 'to provide them wine enough lest the town be drunken dry as York was when the king was there.' Richard, duke of Gloucester, shared his brother's popularity; he was a member of the York guild of Corpus Christi, and more than once obtained from the king special privileges for the city. After he became king he visited York, where handsome presents were lavished upon him, the creed play was enacted for his benefit, and feasts were held in his honour. Richard seems to have recognised the importance of the occasion, for he despatched a special messenger to London for certain robes of state, 'one dowblet of purpill satyn, one dowblet of tawney satyn, two short gownes of cremisyn cloth of gold, oone gowne of grene velvet lyned with tawney sattyn,' and numerous other articles of finery. Richard's death at Bosworth was bitterly lamented in York. This possibly led Henry VII to regard the city with suspicion. Whether this royal disfavour had a sinister influence on its welfare, it is difficult to determine, but the fact remains that the accession of the Tudors is coincident with the beginning of the decay of its industrial prosperity. It had passed scatheless through the trying period of the wars of the Roses, in fact it was at the height of its prosperity under Edward IV, the burghers had calmly bought and sold and added to their wealth while the bloody battle of Towton was being fought a few miles from their walls; but many causes, more far-reaching than the passing disfavour of a

king, were undermining its position as the centre of northern industry. The tide of commerce was setting in the direction of the freer towns, where trade could be pursued unhampered by gild or other restrictions; the selfish shortsighted policy of the burghers, with their petty jealousy of the 'interlopers,' was driving the woollen trade to Wakefield and Huddersfield. York had lost another branch of industry; it was no longer a place where foreign goods were disembarked; nature itself had played her false, the tide did not rise so high as formerly, certainly not high enough to float the heavier and larger vessels, which the longer journeys and more bulky freights rendered necessary. Hull had monopolised the northern carrying trade. It was indeed a *diebus funesta* for York when Edward I, seizing with his quick statesman's eye the possibilities of the position, had determined to do his utmost to expand the trade of Hull. He had been struck with the resemblance between the flat marshy land which surrounded it and his own Aquitanian dominions, and determined Hull should be for the North Sea and northern Europe what Bordeaux was for the Atlantic and southern Europe. Two centuries elapsed before his dream was completely fulfilled, but the seaport grew steadily. York, with its stately minster, its gorgeous monastic buildings, its well-organised municipal life, its unimpeachable traditions, at first looked with scorn on its parvenu neighbour, but its scorn was soon changed into jealousy, its jealousy into rivalry, its rivalry into sullen acquiescence in its rival's success. Hull owed its origin to royal foresight, its maintenance to royal favour. The constant European wars of the sixteenth century made the kings view the shipping interest with peculiar favour, for an increase in the number of ships meant an increase in the security of the English shores. Hull made the most of her opportunities; she pursued a policy of self-interested generosity; her liberal contributions to the marine defences, her spirited efforts to save the royal exchequer, were rewarded by grants of trade privileges.

This new development was regarded by York with dismay; her rival's increase meant her decrease, and the municipal records are full of the acrimonious correspondence carried on between the two mayors. The parliamentary representatives were respectively urged to contest any advantage gained by the rival town. The see-saw story is wearisome in the extreme; still it shows the gallant effort York, representing the old well-established towns, made to retain the pre-eminence. But the woollen trade was even more jealously watched than the shipping. Here again York had a prescriptive right, for under Edward III it had been a staple town, and the buying and selling of wool for the greater part of the north of England had taken place in its markets. In the sixteenth century the trade languished; an industrial change was passing over the

country. England no longer produced wool to export and to be imported again when manufactured into cloth, but manufactured her own wool; and cloth, not wool, became the staple export, the export of wool under Elizabeth being forbidden. This ought not, however, to have told against the prosperity of York, for she still enjoyed the monopoly of the manufacture of cloth for the whole county, and was specially exempted from the statute limiting the number of looms and apprentices of weavers. The real cause of the decay was her jealousy of aliens; in 1565 Norwich sought and obtained leave for some of the foreigners who had come from Flanders to settle in their town, where the weaving industry was decaying, and the London weavers made an agreement with the foreigners, but York refused to countenance such irregularities, and was so far successful that in the middle of the sixteenth century there were only four Frenchmen in the whole of York.¹ The result of this shortsighted policy is clear from the following correspondence, which is interesting as showing the causes to which the people of York themselves attributed the decay.

To our moste gracious souvereigne ladye the Queenes Majestie. In moste humble wyse showe unto yor moste excellent majestie yor obedient faithfull subjectts the mayor aldermen & sheriffes of yor graces citie of Yorke That whereas in olde tymes past the saide cittye hath moche prospered in clothe makyng & thereby the occupation of weavers of the same citie being then both many and of good repute obtained by charter of yor highnesses moste noble progenitors to be incorporated holding for a fee ferme a certayne yerely some in yor high corte of exchequer which yerely fee ferme was paid accordingly so long as webbyng in the said citie was used. But lyke as moste gracyous sovereign in processe of tyme the said occupyng decreased and at last utterly decayed in the said citie even so the weavers of the same bothe wanting their accustomed occupying and also being overchardged with the said yerely payment have fled the moste parte out of the citie inhabiting in the country to the same nigh adjoining safe onely a fewe very poore men nowe remaining whoe no dowbte if they be compelled to paye still the said yerely fee ferme shall also in shorte tyme be fayne clerely to forsake yo^r graces said citie to the grete discomoditee of the same.²

This gloomy epistle brought an immediate answer, in reply to which the mayor gives more specific information on the state of trade.

Accordyng to yo^r lordshippes will & pleasure the mayour of this citie of Yorke have caused diligent enquiry & serche to be made what number of weavers & loomes for woollen clothe are within the same and thereupon doo finde and perceyve that there are in the said citie not above tenne weavers who can worke bothe linen and woollen and that their lyvyng is of lynyen.

Also there is presently remayning in the said city four woollen loomes

¹ *York Corporation Minutes*, 1 Eliz. book xxii. f. 137.

² *Ibid.* 3 Eliz. book xxiii. f. 14.

only, which for the mooste part doe stande unoccupied for the lak of worke. Moreover one Richard Marshall of the said citie marchant did latly sett up drapyng in this citie and had oone woollen loome thereof his owne but because he founde no gaynes at it he hath left off and the cause of the decay of the said weavers & loomes is the lakke of cloth makyng in the said citie as was in old tymes accustomed which is nowe increased & used in the townes of Halyfax Leedes & Wakefield for that not onely the comoditie of water mylles is there neigh hande but also the poore folke as spynners, carders & other necessary work fowlkes for the said webbyng, may there besides there hand labor have rye fyre and other relief good cheap which is in this citie very deare & wantyng.³

No reference is here made to the standing grievance of the York weavers, the presence of the foreigner, but in 1606 they petitioned the mayor to allow them to add a very stringent clause to their ordinances by which any one employing foreign labour, *i.e.* employing any one who was not a freeman, was to be fined forty shillings for each offence.

There was a general tendency to blame the municipal authorities for this state of affairs; some extreme radicals even went to the extent of saying if they feasted less and thought more of the city's welfare trade would improve. This was, however, unjust, for their refusal to countenance foreigners was regarded as sound policy, and in other matters their only fault seems to have been over-anxiety. It was owing to civic enterprise that towards the end of the reign of Henry VIII the coverlette act, which gave the monopoly of that branch of trade, was obtained. The city council constantly interfered to keep up a high standard of workmanship; they issued regulations to ensure the cloth being well woven and of right measure. In Elizabeth's reign they went a step further; the whole trade was rigorously supervised, and the civic authorities seem to have started a corporation spinning and weaving business. The municipal records are full of allusion to this enterprise.

Four pares of sheeres shalbe bought and other necessaries in redyness for dressers of the city cloth by sight of the workmen and also that spynners shalbe spedy as well of the country as citie to spynne so that websters may have sufficient work.⁴

The following month the high price at which the corporation tried to dispose of the cloth is complained of; but Mr. Andrew Trewe, who was one of 'the prasers thereof,' proved his faith in the justice of his valuation by taking the cloth at his own price. Although the expedient of providing for the unemployed by setting up looms was often resorted to, strenuous precautions were taken against the work being scamped. The looms were set up at St. Antony's Hall on Peaseholm green, which seems to have been a

³ *York Corporation Minutes*, 3 Eliz. book xxiii. f. 20.

⁴ *Ibid.* 12 Eliz. book xxiv. f. 192.

forerunner of the modern workhouse, or St. George's house, outside Micklegate Bar.

That the poore folk of this citie suche as are founde able to doo some work shalbe brought by the constable of every parishe where they dwell into Saynt George's House where the citie wool lieth then & there to be proved by the Aldermen wardens and XXIII with the advyse of Roger Lyhe clothier what they can doo and suche of them as can doo oughte or are mete to learne to have wool delivered theym and the said Roger to do his diligens to instruct suche of the saide poore as he shall perceyve not perfect, but suche as he shall see hable and not willyng to labor or learne to labor to informe the saide lorde mayor.⁵

In spite of all these efforts the cloth trade of York gradually dwindled. But the enterprising York traders had no intention of sitting down calmly under defeat. As they failed to bring the guilt home to any particular class, the idea seems suddenly to have struck them that the Ouse was the principal delinquent. Early in the century they had been at immense expense in restoring Ouse bridge. Even then they had so far overcome their prejudice against strangers as to have an architect from London; now, however, they went a step further, and the hated alien was commissioned to widen and deepen the river. The transaction roused the greatest interest, and the discussions in the council chamber were more numerously attended than usual. It is interesting in this age of tender by telegraph to compare the more leisurely ways of the city fathers three hundred years ago.

3. Jan: 1616.

And whereas upon a petition preferred by diverse merchants of this citie it was ordered that John Hart being by Gods permission for to go into Holland shoulde enquire of a skillfull man who had knowledge in cutting of rivers and to knowe what he would take for comyng over to vewe the river and giving his judgement thereof and at his returne to certify what he shall have done therein and thereupon the court to consider whether he should be sent for or no and now the saide John Hart hath certified being returned that he hath brought over with him thre duchmen one that is perfect and the other two in cutting of rivers and he was by men of judgment in Holland so far to doe and showed that he had agreed to give them for their paynes 44*£* over & besydes all their chardges in bringing them into England and in their returnyng into their owne countries alledging that he was inforced to bring them over this winter for that after the spring of the yere they would not have been brought into England but at an extraordinary chardge by reason of ther great employment in their owne countries which this courte takyng into consideraton did much dislike that he had done contrarye his direction in bringing them over before he had first certified my Lord Mayor and had ther directions to have brought them over. Notwithstanding for that the said Duchmen were come over this courte did thinke it very mete that they should vewe & survey the same river and that

⁵ *MS.* 11 Eliu, book 23iv. f. 139.

the same John Harte and some merchants and mariners should go with them for the viewing thereof.

And now the thre duchmen who were brought forth of Holland have taken a viewe of the river and delivered a plotte thereof how and in what manner the same may be helped by somecutts and makyng two slucs . . . it is thought mete that John Hamonson the engineer shall remayne here until the king coming in this cittye and to have 40s. a month and his diett paid for and the other too duchmen to have libertye to departe and that they shall have 44 £ which was covenanted by John Hart to be given unto them.⁶

The real difficulty was want of money. Possibly the preparation for the king's reception had exhausted their means; but two of the councillors came to the rescue of the distressed council chamber. The royal visit was made the excuse for one of those small dramatic displays in which, in spite of puritanic influence, the York people still delighted. But they determined to combine business and pleasure. By the startling apparition of a figure rising as if from the waves at the very moment when the king reached Ouse bridge, and reciting a poetic effusion, made for the occasion, they hoped to arouse James's interest in their disappointing river. The adroit mixture of flattery and business is an amusing feature of the poem.

What sudden joy is this. A great one sure
 For now I do perceive I have a power
 To break out of my melancoly bower
 With able nerves oh what blest sun darts forth
 Such comforth upon one and all the north
 Oh nowe I do discern him by his rays
 'Tis he that makes our happynes and dayes
 The firste exceed arithmetic the last the last
 So glorious that we do no winter taste
 And I the genius of this aged flood
 Who auntiente chronicles still great & good
 Though long impresoned by some envious groundes
 That have encroached upon my natural boundes
 And pent me so that thes sad stones do knowe
 I scarce have means to ebb or power to flowe
 Do nowe putt off my long oppressing feares
 And here drye up my self consuming tears
 For well I know that thou the author art
 Of peace & libertye to earth's grieved hart
 Nor do I nowe repente I syrens brede not
 Such is this virtue that a charme I need not
 To incyte thee to a worke of charitye
 Whose everie acte is noughte but charite
 And will I know enlarge my scanted scope
 Whose hopes in one so good can lose no hope.⁷

⁶ *York Corporation Minutes*, 13 James I, book xxiii. f. 114.

⁷ *Ibid.* 13 James I, book xxxiii. f. 119.

The city was most anxious that a tax might be levied on the whole of Yorkshire for 'the amendyng of the river.' A bill to this effect was presented to parliament, but on its second reading formidable opponents rose, 'Mr. Thomas Wentworth and diverse principall persons of Yorkshire,' who proposed that the money should be raised by an additional tax on every last or ton of goods coming up the river, and to this York had to submit.

No feature of sixteenth-century life is more difficult to grasp than the paramount importance of the gilds and companies. In York foreign trade was regulated by the merchant adventurers and the eastlanders, home industries by the various gilds. At every step the workman found himself confronted by these trade restrictions. Before a boy could be bound an apprentice he had to show he was a native of the city, and his seven years' apprenticeship did not end his obligations, since he had to take up his freedom of the city before he could begin business for himself. Doubtless in foreign trade some sort of combination was necessary, for the Hanse merchants had gained such a firm hold on the English shipping trade that they were most difficult to dislodge. But favoured by Edward VI and Elizabeth, the merchant adventurers had driven them from the field. The York adventurers were a flourishing body as early as 1370; they were sufficiently rich to found a hospital and chantry in Fossgate, where thirteen old people were maintained at the company's expense. They had received a charter from Henry VI, but Elizabeth granted them more extensive privileges; they had some features in common with the staplers, but were composed entirely of Englishmen. Their secretary describes them as consisting of a number of wealthy and well-experimented merchants, dwelling in diverse great cities, trading in cloth and kersie and all other as well English as foreign commodities. They were free from any interference from the company in London, except that their governor had to be free of the central gild, and they seem to have exercised a sort of supervision of all the trades, analogous to that exercised by the old gild merchant. A quaintly worded petition sent to the governor shows how he was appealed to by the unsuccessful tradesman.

In moste humble wyse compleyneth sheweth and beseceth your honourable Lordshipp and assistants your poore brethren the merchaunts being retayllers in the said cittye whereas heretofore the merchaunts resydant & inhabityng in the cite of York have been in there art misterye or scyence greatlye traffiqued exerceysed and occupied as well for the sustentation of themselves, ther wyves and famylyes as for the good educasion of the youthe ther apprenteces so notwithstanding that by reason of dyverse artyfycers havynge manuell occupation daly exercysyng usyng & occupyng the retayle of the said scyence or misterye your saide poore Brethren the merchaunts retayllers are not onely less traffiqued lesse

occupied and thereby utterly impoverishd there youthes not trayned in the said mysterye and thereby the saide mysterye and seyence much impaired unlesse youre honourable assistance and aid for the redress of the premisses be specylye showed as by your good advisers and counsell shalbe thought moste expedient & requisite, whereunto you are not onely bounden by our charter but also by publicque and solemn othe whereby we are constrayned to relate and speak these wrongs which dayly are aggravated upon us by the artificers of this cytye trustyng to some spedye reformation of the same for it is written in the Book of God whoso robbeth his neighbour of his lvyng doeth as great synne as though he slew him to death if your honour and worships wold consyder the state of your poore Brethren we doubt not that you will confesse that we are robbed and spoyled of our lvyng by the artificers of this cittye.⁸

What reply the governor made to this appeal we do not know.

The merchant adventurers seem to have been independent of the supervision which the mayors exercised over the other trade guilds of York. In some towns in the seventeenth century, the guilds as a rule derived their coercive power from parliament or the king, not as formerly from the municipal authorities. This is doubtless true of the more important companies, as merchant adventurers and merchant tailors, but in York gild life was continuous; there was no distinctly marked period of depression under Edward VI and Mary, as there was in the history of some of the English guilds. For the greater part of the seventeenth century numbers of smaller guilds existed, which constantly appealed for the mayor's permission to alter their regulations, to add new clauses or to enforce their ordinances. As a rule the mayor was the final referee in any trade dispute, and the officials rarely refused to submit to him.

The merchant adventurers continued a powerful company until the middle of the eighteenth century. They still exist, though diminished in numbers, deprived of their privileges and shorn of their wealth. They made a last effort to maintain their power in 1892, when they brought an action against a druggist who had set up business in York not being a member of their company. They lost the case, and the law expenses amounting to 1000*l.* they were forced to part with some of their property to cover them. They still maintain the old pensioners, five men and five women, to whom they pay 9*s.* 4*d.* a month. Until a few years ago these old people lived in four large rooms under the hall in Fossgate, but the rooms were damp and unwholesome, and they are now boarded out with their friends or relations. A service is held once a year in the quaint chapel under the meeting hall, on 20 Sept., the expenses being defrayed by a fund left in 1644 by Mr. Thomas Herbert for the purpose. After the sermon the brethren of the company hold a reception, and provide afternoon tea.

The adventurers had the monopoly of trading from the mouth

⁸ *Minute Book of the York Merchant Adventurers.*

of the Somme as far as the Cattegat, but the trade of Norway, Sweden, and the Baltic was principally in the hands of the eastlands company. They were not so ancient a company as the adventurers, but seem to have been the aristocracy of commerce, many well-known Yorkshire names occurring among their list of apprentices, Pennyman, Belasyse, Cholmley, Bendlowes, Burdett, Lascelles, and Wyvills. They seem to have been on very friendly terms with the adventurers, on one occasion Sir Henry Thompson being both governor of the adventurers and deputy of the eastlanders. They suffered from a serious disadvantage, for they owed a sort of allegiance to the eastlanders in London, who elected their officers, and exercised a general supervision over their doings. This was galling to the pride of the York merchants, who were most anxious to shake off the yoke of the parent gild, but were by no means adverse to taking upon themselves the same responsibilities towards the northern eastlanders, settled at Leeds, Newcastle, and Hull. The York merchants refused to give in their accounts until the company in London had given them an answer to their request to elect their own deputy and to have a court of assistants like the one in London. The company allowed some time to elapse before they replied, then wrote, more in sorrow than anger, a grandiloquent letter, never, however, touching on the real point of dispute.

We hope that time which changes all things has also changed the state of affairs at your residence from what it was & that that misunderstanding (to give it the softest name we can) which you have had of our proceedings, is by this time thoroughly removed for after all these heats you have had leisure to consider in cold blood whither these differences tend which have been raised among us and if the dregges of that distemper by standing still soe unmoved have settled to the bottom may noe malicious hand shake or trouble it agane to disturb the peace of the fellowship nor would we be content barely to have these animosities skimmed over, but skilfully healed and therefore we pass by & forget them that not so much as a skarr may be left to discover the sore by.⁹

The tailors were a very ancient gild. The more ambitious title merchant tailors, by which they were known in the sixteenth century, was first conferred by Henry VII, 'in consideration of their having immemorially exercised merchandize in all parts of the globe,' upon the London gild, but the tailors of York were similarly chartered the same year. They seem to have had a general supervision of the textile industries within the city. In 1656 they found their power of enforcing their ordinances decreasing, and appealed to the mayor to uphold their authority: the request was granted, and the searchers were empowered to enter into the house of any one refusing to pay the fine levied by the gild, and seize his goods. The arrangement does not seem to have worked

⁹ *Minuto Book of the Eastland Merchants*, i. 66.

satisfactorily, for some years later we find the tailors obtaining a charter from the king, Charles II, which reasserted and consolidated their powers. They still carry on their meetings in the hall in Aldwark, over the door of which is their motto, '*Concordia parvae crescunt res.*'

In spite of the efforts of the companies and guilds, the dreary story of the decay of trade drags on. Intense jealousy of the coming of strangers and foreigners meets us on every page of the municipal records. Even the strolling player and musician is objected to. Some of the citizens wishing to have a theatre suggested that 'it might be a means to restrayne the frequent comminge thereunto of other stage players;' the corporation agreed under certain conditions which they promised to publish later. The citizens, taking this conditional promise absolutely, at once got together their players, erected a theatre, and set to work to amuse the people of York. This roused the indignation of the city fathers: possibly a more puritanic element had been introduced into the council; in any case the conditional consent was withdrawn. The fascinations of the stage had evidently exercised too much influence, for the promoters of the scheme were accused of drawing 'into their companyes strangers that did inhabit in the countrie and likewise some of manuell occupations in this cittie who do intend to give over ther occupations and fall to an idle course of life.'¹⁰

But slowly the idea was gaining ground that the good of the city might occasionally require the admittance of the hated stranger within the gates. Exceptional talent, lack of workpeople of the same trade, influential connexions, sometimes broke down the barriers which prejudice had raised, and people were admitted to the freedom of the city without paying the customary fee; in return for this generosity they generally gave some specimen of their workmanship to the council.

William Kidson clockmaker, who is commended by diverse knights and others of good worth to be verie skillfull in that arte or scyence of makyng silver clocks now for that there is not within this citie that is skillfull or perfect in makyng or amending of them therefore this courte is well pleased to bestowe the freedome of this citie upon him without paying any money for the same. Whereupon the said William Kidson did voluntarie offer to give to the corporation a clock to remayne in the court.¹¹

Benedickt Horsley, a 'pictorer and painter,' was admitted at a reduced fee, on condition that he set up the ten commandments in the sheriffs' court.¹² The old order was changing, but nowhere was the change more strenuously resisted than in York. There is

¹⁰ *York Corporation Minutes*, 6 James I, book xxxiii. f. 187.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 8 James I, book xxxiii. f. 48.

¹² *Ibid.* 4 James I, book xxxiii. f. 95.

something almost pathetic in the inability of the old city to adapt itself to new circumstances; its refusal to truckle to the new spirit of free competition is dignified if unpractical. Nowhere was the heretical opinion advanced in the house of commons in 1621 that guilds and companies should be swept away like any other monopoly more detested than in York. Blow after blow had been aimed at its pre-eminence. The suppression of the monasteries had robbed it of its rich monastic establishments, the growth of puritanism had put down the shows and pageants which delighted the inhabitants and attracted visitors to the city, new industrial conditions were changing its trade advantages into disadvantages. Still it is impossible to blame those in whose hands the management of affairs was placed. On the whole the study of the records leaves an impression of strictly defined objects pursued with steady English persistence. Many of these objects seem to us absurd, but their intention was not indefensible. The laws against aliens dealt the deathblow to the cloth trade in York; still the town was not flooded, and the standard of living lowered, by swarms of poor foreigners. The strict guild regulations seem tyrannical, still before the age of free competition some check on dishonest trading was necessary. A man who had been sentenced

to be sette upon a scaffold in open market with a paper on his forehead written in grete letters This is for mixing white wax with rossall and turpantyne together & puttyng the same to sayle for good wax to the grete deceapte of the Queenes subjects, and to have two cakes of wax hong on him one behynde and one before and so continue there untill one of the cloke in the afternoon and then to be hedde to prison¹³—

would not be likely to offend again. The unfortunate cobbler who was imprisoned for keeping boots longer than three days when repairing them possibly inveighed against the law, but his customers doubtless rejoiced.¹⁴ Even in the midst of nineteenth-century civilisation we cannot help feeling a slight lingering regret for the time when cosmopolitanism was regarded as a vice, when the objection to dishonest trading was not looked upon as a narrow prejudice incompatible with wide commercial views, or stealing as an empty 'feat when it's so lucrative to cheat.'

MAUD SELLERS.

¹³ *Ibid.* 14 Eliz. book xxiv. f. 266.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 5 James I, book xxiii. f. 146.