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Acts of Court of the
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1453–1527

With an Introduction by

LÆTITIA LYELL

assisted by

FRANK D. WATNEY

*Clerk to
the Mercers' Company*

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INTRODUCTION

THE MANUSCRIPT from which this book is printed is the first volume of a series entitled *Acts of Court of the Mercers' Company*, preserved where it was originally written at Mercers' Hall, London. The series runs almost continuously from 1453 to the present day, but this first volume is of exceptional importance, as it contains not only the minutes of the Mercers' Company, but also those of the Merchant Adventurers for the period 1453 to 1527. The first volume of *Wardens' Accounts* (1347, 1391–1464), which is in manuscript at Mercers' Hall, also throws valuable light on the activities of Mercers and Merchant Adventurers alike, but, unfortunately, after this there is a gap of a hundred years and the second volume of Accounts is concerned exclusively with the affairs of the Mercers. Until further records of the Merchant Adventurers are discovered, our knowledge of the internal organization and activities of the London group must rest almost entirely on the evidence furnished by these two sources. It is impossible, therefore, to overestimate the significance of the first volume of the *Acts of Court*, which provides us with the detailed minutes of the meetings of the Mercers and Merchant Adventurers over a period of great importance in the development of both bodies.

This manuscript was compiled about the end of the first quarter of the sixteenth century from “sondry boke belongyng to the felyship” by William Newbold, clerk of the Company and a former servant of Dean Colet. It consists of 446 folios and a table of contents of twenty folios, written in a clear sixteenth-century hand on paper, and is in an excellent state of preservation. The entries are arranged chronologically, Mercers and Merchant Adventurers mixed together, with two breaks in the order. On 10 June, 1524, when the clerk was dealing with the events of 1506, “six olde boke . . . whiche cowde never be herde of afore” for the years 1465, 1466, 1481, 1485, 1486 and 1487 suddenly reappeared and were inserted between 1506 and 1507.¹ Again in the middle of the 1523 entries, we find the note “here sessyth the course of this boke unto six olde boke be past, which were founde the 14 day of June 1525 and coude

¹ 277–306.

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never afore be found nor be harde of afore, whyche tyme thys boke was wrytten hytherto”, and the entries for 1493, 1495, 1496, 1497, 1498 and 1499 follow.¹ Some of the early entries are rather scanty and there are unfortunately none at all for the years 1454, 1455, 1458, 1460, 1462, 1464, 1467, 1470 and 1471.

In preparing the text for press the original spelling has been preserved, although many words have been extended to the form most commonly met with in the manuscript when the word is written at length. ff as a capital has been printed F, and k, l and w, for which the manuscript gives no capitals, have been printed K, L and W when a capital seemed indicated. The only punctuation in the original is a dash / which has been rendered by a comma or a full stop according to the sense of the passage. Latin and French passages have been transcribed as written, although it is clear that the scribe’s knowledge of both languages was extremely slight.

Like most other medieval institutions, the early history of the Mercers’ Company is lost in the mists of time. We know that guilds existed in Saxon times from which, ultimately, evolved the medieval trade guilds. That part of Cheapside where the Mercers’ Hall stands to-day, was already the Mercery in the reign of Henry II, and in the Company’s *Register of Writings* there is a copy of a grant made about 1190 by Thomas Helles and Agnes his wife, sister of St Thomas Becket, to the Master and Brethren of the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon of a piece of land formerly belonging to Gilbert Becket, where the saint was born, that they might build a church upon it. At the same time the Mercers were constituted patrons of the Hospital.² By the middle of the thirteenth century both the Mercers and the Merchant Adventurers had adopted St Thomas Becket as their patron saint, and in 1390 the Mercers were using the Hospital as their headquarters and holding their meetings there. In 1394 they received their first charter from Richard II, enabling them to hold land to the value of £20 a year,³ and in 1407 they purchased a chapel and “la sale del Mercerie” from the Hospital. In 1396 they were confirmed in their original charter and additional privileges, and they received a further charter from Henry VI in 1425, confirming by inspeximus all their previous grants.⁴

¹ 572–661.

J. Watney, *Mercers’ Company*, privately printed, London, 1914, 10–11, quoting *Register of Writings*, f. 1.

³ Watney, 39–40.

⁴ Watney, 42.

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The internal organization of the great companies differed little from each other in essentials. At the head of the Mercers were the wardens, or rather the master and three wardens, vested with great executive but no legislative powers. They served for a year at a time, at the end of which they each selected two members from the livery whom they considered fit to serve as wardens. These names were submitted to the court of assistants, and, if they made no objection, the wardens each chose one from their two names as their successors.¹ It was quite common for one man to be master twice or thrice and warden as often, although an ordinance of 1347 laid down that “no one who had been Master or Governor of the said mistery should be elected to govern in the said office within the five years next ensuing”.² By the middle of the fifteenth century there was a well-established tradition that the master was an alderman and throughout our period the real power of the Company was concentrated in the hands of a small oligarchy. But though the wardens had power to assess the members for loans, fine them and send them to prison, arbitrate disputes and negotiate matters of commercial policy with the King and foreign powers, they were only empowered to do so by ordinances made by the whole Fellowship.

In 1463, as the “holdyng of many Courtes and congregacions of the felyshipp... is tedious & grevous to the body of the felyshipp, and specially for maters of no grete effect”, it was ordained “hereafter yerely shalbe chosen & assosiatte to the Custoses,... 12 other sufficient parsones, to be assistyng to the said Custoses so beyng”.³ Such a standing committee or Court of Assistants was eventually adopted by all the Companies and was mainly composed of past masters and wardens and any aldermen who were members of the Company. In the case of the Mercers it met once a week, as it does to this day, and transacted all the everyday business of the Company. The whole Fellowship automatically met four times a year at quarter-days, and at other times if summoned for a particular purpose.

The wardens were held responsible by the Fellowship for its financial affairs, and the collection of rents and the management of property were made the special concern of one of them, the renter-warden. They were also expected to engage in corporate trading with part of the funds

¹ 115–16, cf. Ellis and Blackburn, *Reports*, 1855, iii, 384–5.

² *Wardens' Accounts*, i, f. 2.

³ 58.

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of the Company, and in 1347 it was laid down that “the money of the said company should be in the hands of the four wardens . . . to trade with, and they should give security of good account, rendered at the end of the year, according to the customs of the said Mystery”,¹ an admirable arrangement for the Company, as the entire risk was borne by the wardens. This communal trading was in full swing in 1464, the last year for which we have accounts, but had probably ceased by the end of the century. The Mercers were steadily buying up land, and as we know that several of the other Companies had ceased to trade communally by the end of the century, it is probable that during the latter part of our period most of the Company’s spare cash was being absorbed in landed property. Besides rents, fees and fines, and profits from trading, the Company increased its capital by legacies from members, and, to encourage this, two “solicitors or remembrausers” were appointed in 1457, “to labor to all agied men & to syke men of the Mercery in their last dayes for the encreas & wele of the comen box”.² This revenue was spent in various ways, such as salaries to servants of the Company, pensions for “decayed brethren”, diplomatic negotiations, and the new buildings on which they embarked in 1517.

Unwin believed that originally all members of the guilds wore the same livery and shared in the same privileges.³ By our period, however, only about half the freemen of the Mercery were “in the livery”, which had gradually become limited to the more opulent members, who were invited to join it, and to pay for joining it, by the wardens and assistants. Thus when it was known that Edward Grene was about to “wedde the wyfe of Thomas Graunte, vyntener, whiche is a worsshipp to the felyshipp a yonge man owet of the lyuerey to be preferred to suche a riche mariage”, he was immediately admitted to the livery.⁴ The livery itself was changed every two years, the colour being chosen by letting “euery man pryk to what Colour he wolde”.⁵

Those “outside the livery” tended to belong to a subordinate organization, the Bachelors, who were governed by their own eight masters, chosen annually by the whole Fellowship, and lived a separate social life, holding their own feasts, wearing their own livery and appearing

¹ *Wardens' Accounts*, i, f. 1.

² 42.

³ G. Unwin, *Gilds and Companies of London*, 116.

⁴ 299.

⁵ 308.

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in processions in their own barge. At the beginning of the fifteenth century the Bachelors were the journeymen of the Company, often in opposition to the livery, but by the end of the century this had changed. From the oath prescribed for an apprentice taking up his freedom it is clear that he was expected to work for a time under another man for wages, before setting up on his own account,¹ and the state of bachelor was one through which everybody had to pass. Accordingly we now find two elements in the Bachelors' Company, journeymen, small traders and shopkeepers who would remain bachelors all their lives, and ambitious and rich young men on their way to join their friends and relations on the livery. That these elements failed to mix is not surprising, but the wardens showed little sympathy towards Thomas Kitson, who snobbishly refused to wear the Bachelors' livery or to go with them to the Mayor's feasts, for they fined him £4 and, when he refused to pay, sent him to prison until "he had better avised hymself", a process which was accomplished in one night.²

Below the Bachelors were the apprentices, the great bulk of the Company's servants. Regulations had early been laid down that "nobody of the said mystery should take an apprentice who had carried packs in the country nor the son of a villein". In 1510 it was repeated that nobody should be taken who was not "of the full age of 16 yeres, fre of birthe and not maymed nor disfigured in body or membres"; but as "dayly there be presented and also admytted dyvers apprentises whiche be verrey litill in growyng and stature, so that the Wardens . . . can not well iuge nor diserne for trauthe that they shulde be of the said age of 16 yeres . . . withoute the said apprentises or their Frendes shuld be compelled to Swere, whiche is not to be done for dyvers consideracions, and especially in eschewyng of periury", nobody was to be taken who did not look sixteen.³

Apprentices were frequently entrusted with large sums of money at home and abroad and were often their masters' representatives at the mart. The temptation to trade on their own account and to pledge their masters' credit must have been very great, judging by the number of ordinances forbidding masters to send their servants overseas without letters of attorney registered in London,⁴ and forbidding merchants to deal with servants or apprentices without a "knownen token from the

¹ *Wardens' Accounts*, p. 7.

² 345.

³ 382.

⁴ 505–6.

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Maister".¹ Nobody under twenty-one was to be a factor at the mart and no apprentice was to be sent overseas without first taking a special oath before one of the wardens.² Nevertheless, a certain amount of illicit trading went on, and news often reached the wardens that "menes seruauntes haue wares lying in diuers and strange places as Tavernes".³ The medieval apprentice is one of the few traditional figures whose character is confirmed by research, and these records leave little doubt as to the difficult task of the authorities in controlling him. Frays between the apprentices of different Crafts, between apprentices and foreigners and even between apprentices and the King's servants were common, and there is something almost pathetic in the ordinance made after one of these riots that "euery parson be of curteis demeanyng and of langage, aswell in byyng as in sellyng and also in proferyng their wares for to sell, and for any nyst or symple worde put furth & spoken, not for to gyve any sedicious wordes and uncurteis aunsware ageyn whiche shulde cause any rankur or debate".⁴

Besides apprenticeship, there were two other means of joining the Company, by patrimony and by redemption. By the ordinance of 1469 freemen's sons were admitted upon payment of two shillings,⁵ and this became the usual method for those whose fathers were already members of the Company. A few merchants, however, held the views expressed by Sir Thomas Gresham when he said that "my father Sir Richard Gresham being a wyse man knew although I was free by his cōpye it was to no purpos except I were bound prentisse to the same whereby to come by the experience and knowledge of all kinds of merchandise",⁶ and both Sir John Brown I and Richard Rawson bound their sons apprentice to them. For those who were unconnected with the Company by birth and did not wish to serve an apprenticeship, there remained the alternative of admission by redemption. Foreign and provincial merchants, members of minor London Companies, officials and country gentlemen all found membership of the Mercers' Company desirable, and were prepared to pay largely for their privileges. Fines up to £10 were fairly common, although many men were admitted for much less. Rich noblemen assumed a sort of honorary membership by such payments as "two bucks at the wardens' supper", a hogshead of red wine,

¹ 110.

⁵ 47.

² 469.

⁶ Watney, 102.

³ 77.

⁴ 107.

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or six gilt spoons, while there were numerous officials and “friends at Court” whom the Company found it expedient to admit free. John Illingworth, Chief Baron of the Exchequer, Thomas Clerke, Auditor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and various legal advisers came into this class, and when the Merchant Adventurers were in trouble over the payment of subsidy, two of the Chancellor’s cousins were admitted.

In 1638, before a Committee of the House of Commons, the Merchant Adventurers claimed to have originated from “some few mercers of London” called the Brotherhood of St Thomas Becket, and to have obtained privileges from John, Duke of Brabant, in the thirteenth century and from Edward III and Henry IV.¹ But although there was undoubtedly an early connection between the two bodies, there is little direct evidence for their claim. The trading privileges granted by the rulers of the Low Countries in the thirteenth century were quite general in their terms, giving to “all Englishmen and others in Antwerp the right of choosing a governor to settle difficulties among themselves, and of appearing before the Courts of the Low Countries against natives”.² In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the merchants who had acquired these commercial privileges included both Staplers and Merchant Adventurers and were known collectively as the “merchants of the realm trading to the parts of Flanders”,³ but by the early fifteenth century the Merchant Adventurers, dealing almost entirely in cloth, had become clearly differentiated for the first time as an independent organization. Among these cloth merchants the most important were those of London, and of the London group, consisting chiefly of Mercers, Grocers, Drapers, Skinners and Haberdashers, with a sprinkling of Tailors and Fishmongers, the dominating influence was the Mercers’ Company. Thus the policy of the whole fellowship of merchants from all over England came to be dictated by the Mercers of London, although often much against the will of members of other Companies and merchants from other towns.

From the *Acts of Court* it is possible to get a fairly clear view of the

¹ W. E. Lingelbach, *The Merchant Adventurers of England*, Univ. of Pennsylvania, Translations and Reprints, 2nd series, vol. ii, p. xxi, quoting B.M. Stowe MS., 303, f. 99.

² Lingelbach, xiv.

³ E. M. Carus-Wilson, “Origin and Early Development of the Merchant Adventurers’ Company as shown in their own mediaeval Records”, *Economic History Review*, 1933, 147–76, quoting Statute 12 Hen. VII, c. 6.

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organization of the Company. In London the headquarters were established at Mercers' Hall where the muniments and treasure chest (of which the wardens of the Mercers, Drapers and Grocers each held a key) were kept. Abroad they flitted between Bruges, Barrow (Bergen-op-Zoom), Middelburg and Antwerp, refusing to establish a cloth staple in any one town.

Up to the early sixteenth century, the constitution of the Merchant Adventurers was extraordinarily fluid and incomplete. The Fellowship had not quite detached itself from its parent companies and while it negotiated as a body with the authorities on matters of commercial policy, chartered ships, arranged convoys to the marts, and, determined times of sailing, its members traded individually and remained closely connected with the Craft of which they happened to be members.

At the head of the Merchant Adventurers was the Governor, always a London mercer throughout our period, except in 1486, when, through the protests of the other companies, John Pikeryng was discharged and Robert Rydon, a lawyer, was appointed. "But when he hadd a shortt seson occupied, he was agayn dischargid and then a draper namyd Robert Drayton occupied that rum for a tyme afftyr."¹ The Governor moved constantly from England to the Netherlands and back, holding his courts at Mercers' Hall in London and at the mart town in the Netherlands. The problem of a deputy gave some trouble and various expedients were tried, such as having two governors, or a permanent "governor of the realm" in England; in 1517, however, and again in 1518, it was agreed that there should be one governor only, and that the wardens of the Mercery should be his permanent deputies in England.² The Adventurers also had a court of assistants of twenty-four members, out of which twelve "wyse, sad, discrete and substanciall parsones" were selected to go over to the mart, eight "of dyuers felyshippes of the Cite of London & four of other dyvers good townes in Englonde".³ It is interesting to note that the 1519 committee consisted of four mercers, one grocer, one tailor, one draper and one skinner, and representatives of York, Newcastle, Norwich and Exeter. For the rest the Adventurers seem to have used the Mercers' office staff, paying the Mercers' clerk £10 a year to deal with their correspondence.⁴ But while the wardens of the

¹ *Great Chronicle of London*, ff. 116 d–117.

³ 477–8.

² 447, 457.

⁴ *Acts of Court*, ii, f. 10.

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Mercers seem to have regarded themselves as the wardens of the Merchant Adventurers, technically all wardens of the parent Companies from which members were drawn were wardens of the London Fellowship of Merchant Adventurers. When the Lord Chancellor asked to see the “wardens of the felishippes Aventerers”, he was sent a deputation of the wardens of the Mercers, Drapers, Fishmongers, Haberdashers, Tailors “and other mo”.¹

Four marts were usually held in the Netherlands, Cold Mart in the winter, Pask Mart at Easter, Synxon (St John’s) Mart at midsummer and Bamas Mart in the autumn. When a fleet was about to sail for a mart, the Fellowship nominated members to act as “appointers” to arrange for the equipment and protection of the ships; “conduitors” to assess and collect the rates of conduit levied on goods to pay for the convoys and to keep accounts of money levied; and “auditors” to check these accounts. Scottish and Hanseatic pirates were always ready to swoop down on merchant shipping even in peace time, and during the war with France the cost of “conduiting oure shippes comen home from this last Bamas and cold martes” was estimated to come to between £12,000 and £14,000. Both Henry VII and Henry VIII lent their new war-ships to act as convoy to the Merchant Adventurers’ ships, but only when assured that no undue risk was involved.²

In trying to analyse the economic functions of the mercantile Crafts, it is important to remember two points; that by our period no merchant Craft really had a monopoly of the trade after which it was named, and that membership of a Craft was an essential qualification for citizenship. The general feeling of the time, as reflected in legislation, was that wholesale trade should be free and retail trade monopolistic. In fact, however, while anybody with sufficient capital could engage in wholesale trade, the Crafts’ sole authority to enforce their monopoly of retail trade was the “right of search”. Under this rule, the wardens of a Company could search any shop in the City for goods of their trade and confiscate those of low quality.

Outside the ordinary craft organization were the two great bodies controlling the wool and cloth export trades, the Merchants of the Staple with their own peculiar organization, and the Merchant Adventurers with members drawn from a number of different Companies.

¹ 300.

² 214–16, 225–7.

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The majority of mercantile crafts, however, were primarily importers, and articles of general consumption, such as fish or wine, were handled by everybody, the nominal rights of the Fishmongers and Vintners being respected only so far as they could enforce them. The Mercers, through the character of their goods, succeeded in maintaining the monopoly of their trade better than any other Craft, although they had no legal rights over it. Mercery was classified as fine fabrics, such as cloth of gold, damask, velvet, satin, silks, linen and canvas, while thread, hats, amber, ivory and mirrors were sometimes included. The handling of such luxury goods required too much capital for them to circulate freely among other merchants, and canvas and thread were the only articles in sufficiently general demand for other merchants to deal in them to any extent. But while the Mercers' chief trade was in fine stuffs, their brokage rates included, among many other commodities, sugar and spices, wood, wine, oil, tar, fish and hides, and on occasion they would deal in almost anything offering a profit.¹

Their control over the Merchant Adventurers seems to have given them a conspicuous advantage in dealing with the Flemish merchants, from whom much of their stock was bought. In 1477 merchants from Cambrai came over to London and were reported to be selling “grete substaunce of laune . . . to straunge felishippes and straungers, as well as to their olde Customers of oure felishipp”. The wardens of the Mercers immediately sent a letter to the Governor of the Adventurers in Bruges, telling him to write to “the dekons of the lawen men or vnto the rulers & guiders of Cameryk . . . that yf they sende their lawne to London that it be than sent & solde unto their olde Customers or othere of oure felishipp of the mercere & to no other parsones or felishippes”, and if they refuse to agree to this, “than ye shall do make ordonaunce there that non of oure felishipp of the Mercery shall uppon right grete Payn bye any good of them in Merte nor ellis where”.²

Up to the end of the fourteenth century the country fairs had been the chief means of distribution, but, with increased concentration of trade in London and their own growing prosperity, the chief distributing crafts, the Mercers and Grocers, felt themselves strong enough to force the country merchants to buy direct from the warehouse. In 1347 the Mercers forbade their members to attend fairs or markets outside the City.³

¹ *Wardens' Accounts*, i, f. 167–8.

² 104.

³ *Wardens' Accounts*, f. 2.

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A hundred years later, during a period of depression in the cloth trade, the Mercers found that the Haberdashers, who continued to attend the fairs, were taking too much of their country business. In 1477 they presented a bill to the Mayor, urging that every “freman and other dweller withyn this Citie” should refrain from taking goods to be sold outside the City.¹ The Mayor appointed a committee to enquire into the matter, and it was found that while eighteen crafts “graunted gladly to refrayne”, eleven others could “in no wise be therto greable”.² Accordingly the Mercers abandoned their ordinance and “sett euery parson at libertie to go to fayre and Marketh where as shall pleas them”.³ In 1480 they complained of the “grete inconveniences” arising out of attendance at fairs,⁴ and ten years later a deputation was appointed to lay before Parliament “the grete abusion of fayres, . . . used to the grete hurt of this Citie”.⁵ But the vested interest behind the fairs was too strong and the ordinance was never repealed.

The scale on which individual Mercers traded naturally varied enormously: At one end was the small shopkeeper with a modest retail business and little interest in the wholesale trade. At the other were the great merchants, men such as Geoffrey Boleyn, John Allen and William Botery with interests in almost every branch of trade. It is probable that the small man was forced to specialize to a greater extent than the rich merchant, who was frequently a member both of the Company of the Merchants of the Staple and of the Merchant Adventurers, and would equally engage in the wine trade with Gascony, ship wool to Italy, cloth to Antwerp and import fine stuffs from Flanders. Nevertheless, although their interests were widely diffused, they all seem to have specialized to a greater or less extent in the mercery trade. Men such as Botery, who supplied the Court, might be called upon to supply silks to the value of £300 for a “disguising”,⁶ while Allen supplied Wolsey with arras worth £86. Equally they might be expected to provide two ells of holland costing 5s. 4d. and to enter into correspondence with their client over the respective merits of sarcenet. At the same time, most of the great merchants were called upon to finance the King in peace or war to the tune of several hundred pounds. No merchant seems to have

¹ *Journal of Common Council*, 8/163.

³ 116.

⁶ *Letters & Papers, Foreign & Domestic, Hen. VIII*, ii, p. 1452.

² 115.

⁵ 219.

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specialized entirely in the wholesale branches of trade, and the shop seems to have been regarded as an integral part of the business.

In addition to their importance as the chief source for the internal history of the Company, these records give us many valuable side-lights on the political history of the time. Mercers and Merchant Adventurers were frequently appointed to go with the King's ambassadors to a foreign power, while the Merchant Adventurers themselves carried on protracted negotiations with Antwerp. Equally interesting are the Adventurers' dealings with Edward IV, Richard III and Henry VIII over the payment of tonnage and poundage, whilst the entries referring to royal loans, "ridings" to meet great personages, feasts, riots and "malicious rumours" all reflect the contemporary point of view towards the events of the day.

At the beginning of our period the Wars of the Roses were in full swing and, while the Mercers did their best to give their allegiance to the winning side, the bewildering rapidity with which power changed hands placed them occasionally in awkward positions. Thus in June 1456 they gave a banquet to the Yorkists Fauconberg and Abergavenny, but, with the Lancastrian return to power in October, they wished to dissociate themselves from the taint of Yorkist sympathies. Accordingly the wardens were disallowed the £4. 11s. 4d. which they had spent on the feast, and were not reimbursed until the truce of March 1458.¹ This non-committal behaviour seems to have been typical of almost everybody, with the exception of the great nobles, and the Mercers rode with equal enthusiasm and elegance to the coronations of Edward IV, Richard III and Henry VII, while it was necessary to make an ordinance that "non of the Compeny shuld go on pilgrimage" to the tomb of Henry VI at Chertsey.² On the other hand they were equally grudging in the loans they granted to Edward IV for "the spede of therle of Warwick into the North" after Wakefield, and to Henry VII and Henry VIII for their French wars, although Henry VIII was the most successful in raising a large sum of money from them.

Still more grudgingly did the Merchant Adventurers pay the "importable grete Charges of Subsidie of tonnage and pondage". Edward IV was not granted the subsidy until 1464; in December 1479 the Adventurers were in arrears with their payments and offered the King a

¹ 46.² 139.

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lump sum of five hundred marks, to which the Lords replied that “they had non such auctoritie or power to demynysse any peny of the 2000 li. by the Kyng named and sett for to haue, and if it were 40,000 li. it were the Kynges right for to haue it”.¹ Eventually, after a good deal of bargaining, the sum was fixed at £1000 to be levied on the Fellowship, whilst in return the King safeguarded them against further impositions by a pardon.²

On 9 April, 1483, Edward IV died and in May the Adventurers made a further stand, claiming that the grant of subsidy had been made to Edward, and thus became void at his death. The Customers disagreed, and were reported to “besy them gretely to contynue thexecucion of thoffice as they afore tyme used to doo”.³ A common fund was opened, “euery Felishipp to bryng yn a certen summe of mony”, and members were told “boldly to take up their goodes” and, if “interupte or lett”, their costs were to be paid from the fund. Legal advice was taken, a petition was presented to the Lord Protector and the Adventurers won the day, the Chancellor ordering the Treasurer to “gyve commaundment unto alle suche his officers, Collectours & surveyours of the forsaid Subsidie to surces thexcersysyng & takyng of suche subsidie”.⁴

They adopted the same attitude towards Henry VII and Henry VIII. Henry VII, being less secure, demanded no subsidy until the day of its grant by Parliament, but Henry VIII was determined to exact every penny. Upon his father’s death, the Adventurers ceased to pay the tax and hoped to postpone it until Parliament granted it again. But when Bishop Foxe was approached, he merely said that “to labur to the contrary it was but foly. . . that he wolde speke no thyng for us in that mater”,⁵ whilst little help was to be expected from a Parliament which consisted for the most part of “gentilmen whiche bayre no charge of the said Subsydie, and be willyng to graunt the same to be payde as it hath ben”.⁶ A deputation was sent to Westminster to waylay the King coming from mass and to put before him the petition, another to Thomas Lovell, President of the Council, with “a galon of Ipocras and two boxes of Waffers”,⁷ and a third to John Cutt, the Under-Treasurer, with “too boxes of wafers and too galons of ypocras, oon galon red, another claret”,⁸ but all in vain. The King’s decision was that the merchants

¹ 122.

² *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1480, 243.

³ 149.

⁴ 153.

⁵ 349.

⁶ 347.

⁷ 354.

⁸ 355.

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should pay subsidy from the first day of his reign with a rebate of one-third of the total amount due,¹ and although the Treasurer and Foxe were sounded “particulerly and secretly . . . whether it wolde profit to sue any more to the Kyng or not in this behalfe”,² nothing further could be done.

The references to foreign affairs contained in these records are chiefly concerned with negotiations to improve the English merchants' position in the Netherlands. The first such entry is the assessment of £42 raised for Edward IV's embassy to Philip the Good in the autumn of 1461, which arranged a year's extension of the truce and intercourse of merchandise between England and Burgundy.³ The truce and the intercourse were renewed at intervals until 1464, when Philip, in the interests of the Flemish cloth industry, forbade the importation of English cloth into his domains. From then until 1479 the combined efforts of the English crown and the English merchants were directed towards “thenlargyng of wollen cloth”, and hardly a year went by without the dispatch of an embassy to Flanders on which the Merchant Adventurers were represented. In 1479 a treaty was signed between Edward IV and Mary and Maximilian allowing the importation of English cloth into Burgundian territory and agreeing that only “ancient” tolls should be levied on the merchants trading between the two countries.⁴

Fresh complications arose in 1493 when the Perkin Warbeck expedition was being prepared in the Netherlands. Henry VII retaliated by banishing the Flemings from England and ordering the Adventurers to take their cloth to Calais, whilst the sale of English cloth was prohibited in the Low Countries. In January 1496, when Henry was negotiating the *Intercursus Magnus*, a committee of twelve Adventurers was appointed to look up copies of privileges at Mercers' Hall granted “to the Englysshe nacion by Flaunders and other the townshippes in thoos parties of the Duke of Burgoyne”. On 24 February, 1496, the *Intercursus* was signed and the Adventurers were allowed once more to return to Antwerp. But their troubles were by no means over, as new taxes were imposed on them in Antwerp, and when they refused to pay, their warehouses where they kept their cloth were locked up by the collectors of the tolls who threatened that the Governor himself should be “grevously punysshed and corrected

¹ 358–9, 380.

³ 51–3. C. L. Scofield, *Edward IV*, 1923, i, 191, 212.

² 381.

⁴ Scofield, ii, 235.

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in body and goodes". In despair they paid the tax and appealed to Henry VII, who, while supporting them in public and writing what the Adventurers called "a Sharppe letter from the King to the Duke", in private took the line that they had brought their troubles on themselves by paying the tax. Again they withdrew from Antwerp, this time to Bruges, and, at the King's request, appointed two "sad, discrete parsones" to go with his ambassadors to the Low Countries. For the next ten years or so the Merchant Adventurers moved from one town to another in the Netherlands, refusing to establish a staple in any one, since by remaining free they could "dryve the townshippes by feere of theyre withdrawing and absentyng to refourme their wronges whiche they wolde not refourme yf the Marchauntes and goodes were bound oonly to the said townes". In 1508 they received a letter from Margaret, Duchess of Savoy, on behalf of Antwerp, urging them to "haunt and use the fre fayres of Andwerpe as ye haue wont and bene accustomed to do before the difficulties, obscurities and diffrences".¹ This was followed by a visit from the Pensionary of Antwerp, Jacob de Wocht, to offer "us to chose what strete in all the towne of Andwerpe that may pleas us", and, after several discussions in which Thomas More acted as interpreter for the Pensionary, the Adventurers agreed to return.²

In our study of the Company as an economic organization and a political power, we must not lose sight of its social functions. It was a fellowship in the widest sense of the term, and as much stress was laid by the Ordinances upon the support of "decayed brethren", the settlement of disputes or the arrangements for the wardens' feast, as upon an embargo on foreign trade or permission to visit country fairs. A member of the Company lived his social life with his fellow-members as well as his business life. He traded with them and sat on courts to decide questions of policy, and he also feasted with them, worshipped with them, was guardian to their children, went in procession with them on great occasions, and, at his death, if he were a member of the livery, was covered with the Company's pall and carried to church by his fellow liverymen. True, this last was an unpopular duty and often "by crafty fayned excuses made was refused", so causing "long taryng and stondyng in the strete", but the wardens insisted upon it, and fined those who refused.³

¹ 312–13.² 329–35.³ 318.

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The chief feast of the year was held at the election of the wardens, on the Monday after the feast of the Translation of St Thomas Becket (7 July). In 1491 it was decided that an economy must be made on the “grete Charges yerely spent at Sopers for the felishipp at the Eleccion of the newe Wardens as by callyng & hauyng diuers & many straungers, whoos reportes of saying and shewyng therof hath ben grete cause of suche charges of late to us layde, gretly exceedyng any other felishipp”, and it was agreed that an “honest, convenyent drynkyng” should be held instead. For this the menu was “Venyson bake, fresshe sturcion, Strauberries & Wafures, Ipocras, Maunchett Ale, Wyne red & claret”.¹ Up to 1511 the banquet was held at Mercers’ Hall, but in that year Lady Bradbury offered her house in Old Jewry and, “by reason of Compeny of Gentilwemen that she myndyth to have”, the wardens were allowed £15 instead of the customary £10.² The Company continued to hold their feast with Lady Bradbury until 1523 when their new buildings were finished and they moved back to Mercers’ Hall. In addition to this great feast the wardens, aldermen and assistants dined together two days before every quarter-day, but on a much smaller scale, “havyng oonly but 2 sundry metes & to spende. . . but oonly 26s. 8d.”³ At the presenting of the sheriffs and of the mayor the Company hired a barge to go to Westminster, in 1461 and again in 1464 “Crofte, Bargeman” and “his barge with 8 hores & hymself sterisman” for 10s.⁴ and eight trumpeters at a cost of 53s. 4d., whilst a further 2s. 2d. was expended “for drynke by the wey to the Trompettes”.⁵

Another occasion when the medieval passion for pageantry was indulged to the full was at the Midsummer Watch, when, on the Vigils of St John the Baptist and St Peter and St Paul, bonfires were lit in the streets and feasting and dancing would continue all night. Then every man’s door was “shadowed with green Birch, long Fennel, St Johns wort, Orpin, white Lillies, and such like, garnished vpon with Garlands of beautifull flowers”,⁶ the streets were lined with standing watches drawn from the City Companies, whilst the Mayor at the head of a marching watch of about two thousand men also drawn from the gilds, on horseback and on foot, armed with bows, guns and pikes and accompanied

¹ 217–18.² 391.³ 442.⁴ 53.⁵ *Wardens’ Accounts*, 1464.⁶ John Stow, *A Survey of London*, ed. C. L. Kingsford, Oxford, 1908, i, 101.

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by pageants and Morris dancers passed through the principal streets of the City. In this the Mercers played their part with the other Crafts, commanding their wardens to watch and fining members of the Company who refused on a sliding scale, according to their rank.¹

Quarrels were fairly common between the members, and the wardens must often have had a difficult task in carrying out their duties of arbitration. There was the occasion when John Shelley fell out with his brother Thomas and, when the matter was brought before the wardens, called him “fals harlott, knave and dryvyll, and said that he was neuer his trew begoten brother but as oon founde and Chaunged at the landes ende”, to which Thomas replied with “grete derysion & skorne, japed & mokked his said brother of his Shirrifhode, callyng hym boye Shirrif and said . . . that by mean of my lady he was made shirryff, and other more ungoodly & unconuenyent langewage”.² Then there was the shocking and highly complicated affair which came to the King’s ears, when Thomas Wyndout made a bargain to pay John Llewelyn, an attorney, £540 Flemish when he had married the wife of Thomas Shelley, “whiche bargayn cowde not be kepte but uppon assuraunce of the deth of the said Thomas Shelley . . . whereby it may appere evidently that the bargaynours ymagyned his said deth”.³ Nevertheless, the wardens usually seem to have succeeded in smoothing over disputes and preventing the antagonists from going to law which was against all the “good old rules and custumes of oure feliship”, whilst their arbitration profited the common box to a considerable extent.

Finally, some mention must be made of the outstanding individual members of the Company. Among those who achieved distinction as great merchants, able financiers and civic administrators were Ralph Verney, John Stokton, Hugh Clopton I, Henry Colet, Thomas Bradbury, John Allen and Thomas Seymour, to name but a few. They were all benefactors of the Company and many of them are still remembered by their public works such as Hugh Clopton’s great bridge over the Avon at Stratford. Yet their real achievement lay in a sound civic administration and a steady expansion of markets which paved the way for the phenomenal advances of their successors. But if these men made possible the foundation of the Muscovy Company and of the East India Company, for example, two other members of the Fellowship, William Caxton and

¹ 98.

² 85–6.

³ 112, 113–14, 125, 130–4, 135.

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John Colet, were among those who made possible the English Renaissance. Caxton was Governor of the Merchant Adventurers from 1462 to 1469, but he retired from commercial life about 1470 to devote himself to printing and literature, so the Company can only claim a small part of his fame. But Colet's greatest achievement, the foundation of St Paul's School, was directly connected with the Fellowship, and remains so to this day. On 16 April, 1510, the Court of Assistants met and "had Communycacion with hym (Colet) for the foundacion of the grammer scole whiche he entendithe to founde & make in Poules Churche Yarde, and the same Maister Deane was verrey glad that he myght have with us Comunycacion therof in whom he pourposeth to put all the Rule and governaunce of the said scole",¹ and he amortised certain lands to the Company on condition that they should be bound to maintain the school according to the foundation. As Erasmus states in his famous letter: "After he had finished all, he left the perpetual care and oversight of the estate and government of it, not to the clergy, not to the bishop, not to the chapter, nor to any great minister at court, but amongst married laymen, to the Company of Mercers, men of probity and reputation. And when he was asked the reason of so committing this trust, he answered to this effect: That there is no absolute certainty in human affairs; but for his part, he found less corruption in such a body of citizens than in any other order or degree of mankind."²

L. L.
 F. D. W.

¹ 362.

² Allen, *Erasmii Epistolae*, Oxford, 1922, iv, p. 518.