

The Muster Roll for Leicester of 1608

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In the Handlist to the Records of Leicester Corporation a separate section deals with Musters Papers (BR II/12). This contains such records of musters as survive, starting in 1573 and finishing in 1613. Musters were held irregularly on instructions from the central government depending on both internal and external conditions. Threat of war or invasion might call forth a muster, but so might possible internal insurrection and a muster might be a way of testing loyalty. In general Leicester's muster records are fragmentary, the details on them are scanty and the whole impression given is one of perfunctory performance of instructions the need and purpose of which are hardly taken seriously. Only on a few occasions is there a sense of urgency as in the 1588 muster when 31 papers relating to it survive though the details on them do not tell us much about the town, its people, trades or layout. Papers for the town's musters survive at all because summonses for holding them were addressed to the mayor and they and any returns became incorporated into the town's own official records. No similar sets of papers survive for the county as a whole, at least locally. In the county the summons to muster seems to have been directed to the Hundred and though it is possible that some returns survive in private papers of some family descendants from the Lords Lieutenant of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries none from this date are noted as being in the Leicestershire Record Office (Jones 1985).

In some areas chance has preserved county returns in some detail. Thus in 1608 in September a muster was ordered and recorded in Gloucestershire which was detailed enough to be used by the Tawneys to provide 'An occupational census of the seventeenth century' (Tawney and Tawney 1925). They comment on the exceptional fullness of this document the original of which was in Lord Sherborne's papers and was copied by John Smyth. It was his copy in the Smythe of Nibley papers then in the Gloucester Public Library which they used. The muster of 1608 may have been exceptionally rigorously carried out for a return almost as detailed as that for Gloucestershire survives for the town of Leicester and forms the subject of this article.

The process began, as far as the town was concerned, with the arrival of a letter of 10 September 1608 (BR II/18/9 No.265) to the Mayor from the Earl of Huntingdon. It is notable that in the postscript the order to summon all men 'within the said Hundred' is changed by a superscript to 'your said Borough'. So it is clear that summonses were sent to the rest of the shire. The Earl refers to an order he had received from the King for a general view of forces 'trained and untrained' and the need to supply defects 'boath of men and armes'. The mayor was to cause the constables to summon all 'of what condicon or sort soever' from 16 to 60 years old to come in their best apparel before the Earl or his Deputy Lieutenants (Sir Thomas Cave, Sir William Turpin and Henry Cave) at Leicester on Friday 21 October at 9 a.m. The constables were also to bring all the armour 'as heretofor by former commandments have bin imposed on them'.

There are two postscripts to the letter. One charges the mayor to 'warne the petty

constables to gyve in the names of all the persons that are to be mustered before us and of the common and pryvate armour in a bill fayre written'. The other charges the mayor to summon all the clergy to appear also 'with their severall Armes heretofore apoynted unto them'. In view of queries about the armes raised later in this paper these phrases assume some importance.

All this bears strongly on the Muster Roll which survives. It is certainly 'fayre written'; the divisions are as charged; only the clergy are not included. Just how the muster was accomplished, whether the Earl or his deputies did appear to check the lists, we do not know, but the fayre written book contains an enormous amount of information about the trades, names and locations not available from any other source.

The document itself consists of a narrow folio volume 15cms wide and 41cms tall made up of six 30cms by 41 cms sheets sewn in the centre to form the twelve leaves. It is certainly carefully written and would appear to be the fair copy from the evenness and regular spacing of the entries and various summaries. It is dated for the twenty first of October 1608 and headed 'The Generall Muster taken at Leicester'. Whether this is the return demanded by the Earl and not sent or whether it is a second copy is not clear.

The list is arranged by Wards, of which there are eleven. Each ward is headed by the name of the ward alderman. The subsequent names are in no clear order but there is some indication from the groupings that either the arrangement was by houserow or by some sort of family relationships. Perhaps in attending the muster groups tended to form up adjacent to friends, family or close neighbours. They are certainly not grouped according to arms; muskets, pikes and so forth being all in haphazard sequence. Against each name is an abbreviation of the arms allotted to him. These will be discussed later. Also against a few, obediently to the Earl's instructions, there is a mark 'tr' indicating that the man was in some degree trained in his arm's use. After each name is the trade of the man concerned. The total number of names on the roll, excluding the Mayor and Aldermen is 568.

We thus have on the roll a substantial list of townsmen with their trades and an indication of their localities.

Many of the records from which the size of the population could be deduced are unavailable or defective. The ecclesiastical census of 1563 recorded 591 families in Leicester. The Liber Cleri of 1603 suggests 450 communicants (over 14 years old?) in St Mary and St Martin (the only Leicester parishes given). The Registers of St Mary do not start until into the 1600s and so forth. Estimates of population size are therefore hazardous and the best that can be suggested is that the total population of the town was between 4000 and 4500 in 1608. Allowing an even distribution of the sexes this would give a male population of about 2000 to 2500 in total. Allowing too (and each allowance increases the margin of error) for the sort of age distribution which obtained in other places we arrive at a probable figure of between 1200 and 1400 for the males of the town between 16 and 60. This may be on the generous side and does not take into account those incapacitated by sickness or infirmity. Even if it is generous this implies that the Muster Roll provides us with a record of approaching half the males in the town with their trades at a specific time and with specific locations for them. This is far greater than the proportion and numbers available to us from any other source and is therefore worthy of detailed study and consideration.

However, we must recall that this was first and foremost a Muster Roll and before we examine the demographic information in the record it is as well to dispose of the more military aspects.

Each man mustered is allocated a weapon. The abbreviations used are 'p', 'pp', 'm', 'c', 'la' and there is some doubt about the exact interpretation of these and their significance.

Weapons had developed rapidly in the previous half century and the old 'bills and bows' provision was no longer acceptable. In 1589 an instruction to the corporation insisted that at musters muskets, calivers and corslets were acceptable but all bows, arrows and bills generally must be refused. It is clear therefore that 'm' must stand for musket, 'p' for pike and 'la' for lance. 'pp' is unexplained, there are very few of these, only 13 in the whole muster, and it is notable that a substantial number of these is borne by butchers. It is possible that 'pp' was some form of poleaxe which butchers would normally have had. The real difficulty is with 'c'. Does it stand for caliver or corslet? Both occur in other musters both in Leicester and in the county as a whole. If 'c' is corslet then the majority 'weapon' is in fact a piece of defensive armour for there are 237 'c's. If it is caliver then the quantity of firearms rises dramatically for there are 150 muskets as well giving a total of gunpowder weapons of 387. Only 150 pikes, 18 lances and 13 'pp's are mustered. Can there really have been 387 firearms in a total population of 4000? It seems unlikely. There is no evidence of an appreciable civic armoury in the town's accounts and the existence of so many weapons in a peacable town seems impossible. There is a strong possibility that 'c' is corslet but even here there must be doubt. Muskets, calivers and corslets are not cheap items. Was there that much armour in Leicester, and what about matching supplies of powder and ball to provision them. Though the muster instructions insist that men should assemble with their weapons may it not be that these are in fact the weapons which are assigned to them, the weapons they ought to have had and that they have no more material substance than the machine guns which every platoon of the Home Guard was assumed to have when the Guard was formed in the Second World War? Drill can, and has been, done with imaginary weapons or even with dummy replicas and broomsticks.

By making another, and perhaps justified assumption, some idea of the ages of those mustered can be deduced. A comparison of those mustered with names on the Freemen's records (a subject to be discussed in detail later) and assuming that the freedom was gained at the age of twenty-one we can get some idea of the ages of about half those mustered. Of the 262 men to whom we can assign a probable age only 13 were over 40, 4.9%. The distribution by quintiles is given in the table below:

<i>Age group</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>% of total</i>
16-20	48	18.3
21-25	80	30.5
26-30	60	22.9
31-35	44	16.8
36-40	17	6.4
over 40	13	4.9

The fall-off from the age of 32 onwards is most marked, only 49 being over that age. If the Earl's injunctions were carried out, then there were very few able-bodied men over about 30 fit to bear arms and the proportion of the able-bodied men from the town as a whole under 30 on the Roll rises considerably, it could well be substantially over half.

The next point to be considered concerns the boundaries of the wards into which the list is divided. How far is it possible to ascribe boundaries to the wards and thus, from the roll, provide some picture of the distribution of trades within the town? The only detailed description of ward boundaries is given in the Corporation's Hall Book for 7 April 1484, over 120 years earlier. As those who defined the wards were more interested in whole streets and which streets were in each ward rather than where the dividing lines ran between them along the back premises it is difficult to plot them accurately onto a map for modern use. Thus in 1484 'The first ward shall begin at the High Cross in Leicester aforesaid on both sides the street northwards to the Mayor's Hall with Appullgate to St Nicholas Church, the

lane behind the said church and to the Blackfriars Lane', so that both sides of the streets were in the same ward. This was an eminently sensible arrangement for policing if not for cartographical purposes. In 1484 there were twelve wards and their presumed boundaries have been worked out (Charman 1951). There is a brief ward description in 1606 and it is clear from this that many of the ward boundaries are substantially as before. However there are a few significant changes. In the 1608 Roll there are only eleven wards not twelve. The old third ward has been divided into two, both under Alderman Hugh Marshall, Sanvey Gate now forming a separate ward. This addition to ward numbers is reduced by the amalgamation of the old eleventh and twelfth wards as a Southgate ward under Alderman Robert Alton while Alderman William Martin has a ward amalgamating the old sixth and seventh. The results of these amalgamations and divisions with the new ward numbers are roughly indicated on the accompanying map (fig.1). The base on which this is made is the Roberts map the survey for which may have been as early as 1710 and is the first cartographically reliable map of the town. There had obviously been not only population growth but also shift and it is not invariably possible to be certain into which ward some of the minor streets or lanes fell. However, the general picture is clear enough to allocate concentrations of trades within the town.

In all some 69 different trades are recorded on the roll but it is clear from them that some classifications are not represented in spite of the instructions to muster 'all..of what condition or sort soever they be'. We may be surprised that there are no victuallers on the list and only three Innholders. We may suspect that to a large extent the trades entered were those used by the individuals to describe themselves so that some were more grandiose in sound than fact and the three vintners may only have been superior publicans. Some trades are only represented by a solitary individual where more might be expected. Surely there must have been more than one farrier between 16 and 60 and more than one carrier, cobbler, grocer, mason, painter, potter or shepherd.

Distribution patterns are most clearly seen in the concentration of particular trades in certain wards. Only two wards (3 and 9) have more than one tanner, ward 3 having seven and ward 9 nineteen as well as two whittawers. Ward 9 encompassed the Northgates down to the Soar with its water supply so necessary for tanning. It was also downstream of the lowest mill so the waste produces could be safely deposited into the stream without annoying the townsmen, whatever villages further downstream might feel.

While tanners were concentrated close to the river, butchers were mainly in ward 5, in Shambles Lane and round St Nicholas Church. There must have been a steady traffic of raw skins down from that area through the old High Cross Street to the tanneries. All wards had a good supply of labourers except wards 7 and 10 which had only one in each, while wards 2 and 6 could supply 20 and 22 respectively. This may be an indication of the relative prosperity of the areas. The concentration of labourers in the outer areas of the town is an almost exact reversal of that of the tailors, nearly a third of whom were in ward 7. After labourers the largest trade was that of the shoemakers, 48 of whom were distributed across all wards except ward 9, the greatest numbers being in wards 2 and 4. It is difficult to see how a town of only 4000 people could have given a living to so many butchers, tanners and shoemakers and the explanation must be that these trades in particular served a wide area of the county through the market and other trading outlets and they, together with the trading mercers (25) and tailors (37) may have been the trades which brought in cash from the outside areas.

The full list of the trades and their distribution by wards is given in table 1.

This table also gives the numbers of those named in the roll who are recorded in the Freemens records as having taken out the freedom. Many previous estimates of trades in

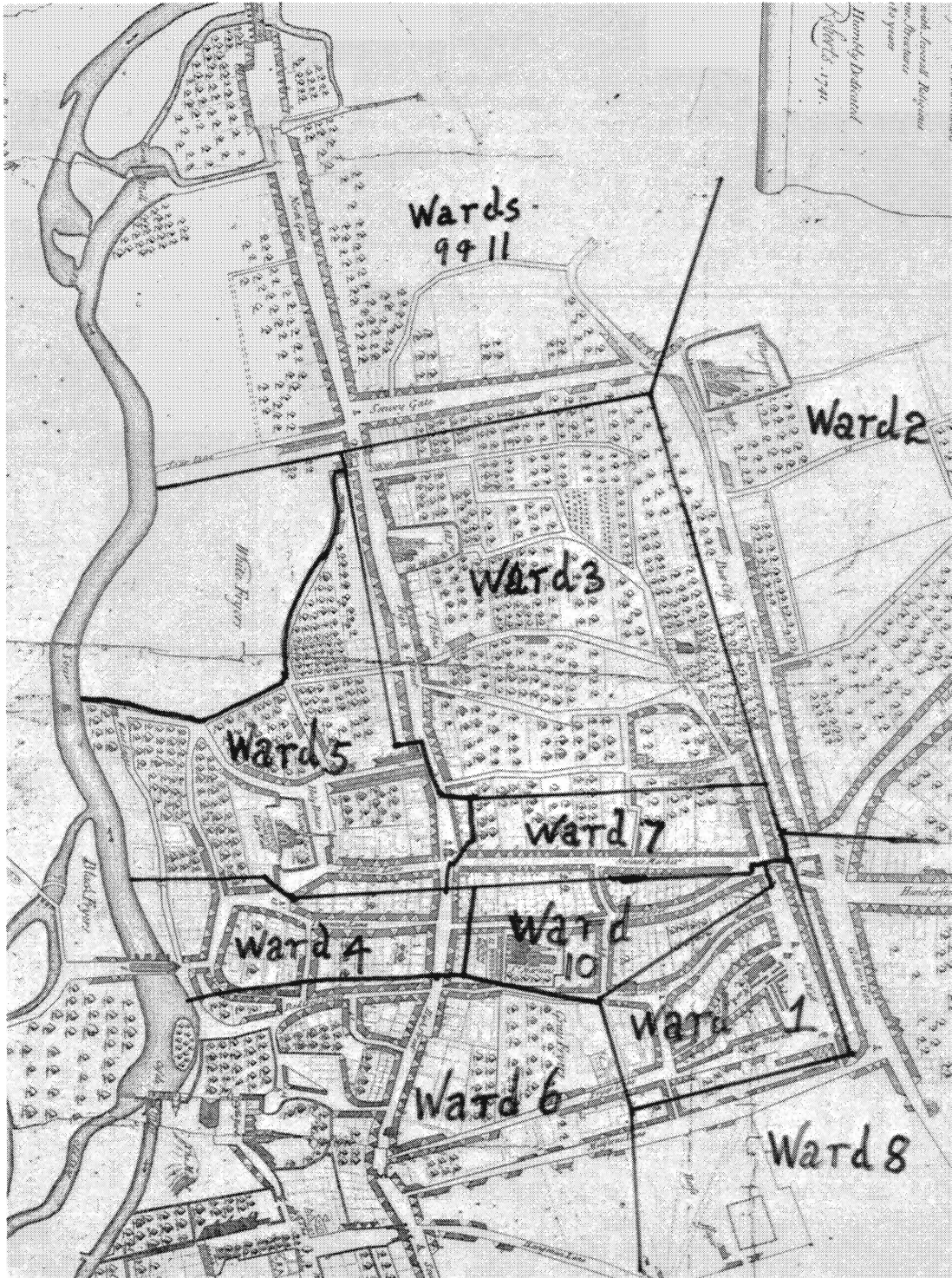


Fig. 1 Wards of Leicester, 1608

the town have had to place reliance on these records almost exclusively as conflated and printed in Hartopp. With this Roll we have an opportunity to check the completeness of the other records, always appreciated as being defective. The Elizabethan statutes dealing with apprenticeships were only a few years old and the town's restrictions, officially, on trading by non-freemen has been largely accepted as operational at this period. However, only 294 out of the 568 men on the roll are ever recorded as becoming freemen (and these do include labourers *pace* Simmons). Of the 274 who do not appear in the freemens records a number are to be found later as having apprentices made free.

With the small numbers involved in many trades, it would be misleading to turn the figures into percentages, but these may be significant where an appreciable number of a trade are recorded. The following list therefore gives the trades or descriptions where more than five of each occur with the proportions of freemen:

<i>60% or more Free</i>		<i>Less than 60% Free</i>	
Bakers	61%	Bellfounders	20%
Barbers	60%	Chapmen	57%
Blacksmiths	60%	Cutlers	28%
Butchers	86%	Gents	42%
Carpenters	66%	Glaziers	57%
Chandlers	65%	Husbandmen	14%
Drapers	66%	Labourers	11%
Fishmongers	60%	Millers	40%
Glovers	66%	Roughlayers	22%
Ironmongers	100%	Shoemakers	52%
Joiners	86%	Weavers	50%
Mercers	68%	Yeomen	15%
Saddlers	60%		
Tailors	70%		
Tanners	85%		
Wheelwrights	80%		
Whittawers	80%		

Many of the 'staple trades' occur in the first column, but so do others in the second. As might be expected labourers come at the bottom of the list, but a surprising proportion of these were in fact freemen.

The picture which emerges from a study of the roll is of a much more complex series of relationships than has sometimes been assumed, but the crucial question which is highlighted by the high proportion of those who did not take out their freedom is: how important in fact did the citizens of Leicester in this period consider the freedom to be? It is not possible to determine how many freemen who are in the lists evaded the muster as it is not possible to say whether a freeman who, say, took out his freedom in 1590 was still living in 1608; some of the parish records being defective prior to this. Even so it looks as if the privileges conferred were not as sought after as sometimes assumed and that it was perfectly possible to trade and prosper in the town without being a freeman even when others in the same trade were. Freedom to pursue a trade was evidently widely available and formal apprenticeships were either not served or at least not recorded at a period when the corporation's control of apprenticeship and trading might be expected to be at almost maximum extent. The 1599 Charter gave the Corporation full powers to prevent non-freemen from trading and the 1601 Poor Law with its apprenticeship conditions was only seven years old.

TABLE 1
1608 MUSTER ROLL

TRADE	Number in each ward											TOTAL	No. in Freemans Rolls
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11		
Apothecary							1					1	1
Apparitor	1											1	1
Armourer	1											1	1
Baker	4	4			3			4	2	3	1	21	13
Barber	1			1			1			2		5	3
Basketmaker	1											1	1
Bellfounder			5									5	1
Blacksmith		3			3			2		1	1	10	6
Bonelaceman			1									1	—
Burneman		2										2	2
Butcher		1	6	3	23		1		1		1	36	31
Carpenter		8		1	2	1				2	1	15	10
Carrier						1						1	—
Chandler	2		4	3		1	4					14	12
Chapman		1		1		1			2		2	7	4
Cobbler									1			1	—
Cook				2		1		1				4	2
Cooper	2	2										4	4
Costermonger		2										2	1
Currier	1			2			1					4	2
Cutler		4						2		1		7	2
Draper (woollen)	3	1	1	1			4	2				12	8
Dyer					1							1	—
Falconer	1											1	—
Farrier				1								1	1
Fishmonger	3							1		1		5	3
Fletcher											1	1	—
Gardener								1				1	—
Gent	1			2		2		1		1		7	3
Glazier			2			2	1		1		1	7	4
Glover			1		8							9	6
Grocer							1					1	1
Haberdasher	1						1					2	1
Hatter	2											2	2
Husbandman		1			1	4		1				7	1
Innholder			1	1		1						3	1
Ironmonger	2		1	1			2					6	6
Joiner		1		7	2		4			1		15	13
Labourer	8	20	11	13	3	22	1	7	8	1	14	108	12

TRADE	Number in each ward											TOTAL	No. in Freemans Rolls
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11		
Laticeman				1								1	1
Locksmith							1					1	1
Maltster	1									1		2	—
Mason						1						1	—
Matmaker				1	1							2	1
Mercer	9	3	1	7	1		2	2				25	17
Miller		1				3					1	5	2
Musician		3					1					4	2
Neatherd		1										1	—
Painter	1						1	1				3	1
Parchmentmaker					1							1	—
Pewterer				2			1					3	2
Pinman									1		1	2	1
Potter								1				1	1
Ropemaker								1				1	1
Roughlayer									1		8	9	2
Saddler		2		1		1		1				5	3
Scrivener		1										1	—
Shepherd			1									1	1
Sherman		1						1				2	1
Shoemaker	3	11	4	11	1	2	8	1		2	5	48	25
Slater				1						3		4	—
Sleymaker				1								1	1
Tailor	6	2	2	4	1	4	11		3	4		37	26
Tanner			6		1				19		1	27	23
Vintner							1	2				3	2
Weaver		3	6		1	3	3	1	2	2	1	22	11
Wheelwright		2				2					1	5	4
Whittawer				3					2			5	4
Yeoman	3		2	3		2		2		1		13	2
Total	57	80	55	74	53	54	51	35	43	27	39	568	294

It may be that the taking out of the freedom was more prized as a key to participation in the agriculture of the town's open fields than for 'political' purposes.

No one working from the original records has ever considered that the lists were perfect, but it has not been possible, so far, to assess how imperfect they might be. Here, with 274 out of 568 tradesmen not taking out their freedom, the defectiveness appears alarmingly high and raises the question whether Leicester was typical or not and whether any other provincial town's records are any more complete.

The 1608 Roll does therefore enable us to look at various facets of the town's trades and their locations, to test the completeness of other records and to speak more specifically than has been possible before. There are many other facts about the town, the family

relationships within trades, for instance, which could be pursued, but it is evident that in this document, unexpectedly, a great deal more lurks than was ever envisaged by the Earl or the Mayor.

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