

**THE LEICESTER GILD OF
TALLOW CHANDLERS**

BY

S. H. SKILLINGTON

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At the end of October, 1928, an extremely interesting Leicester document was given to Mr. George Farnham by Major C. H. Gregory-Hood, of Loxley Hall, Warwickshire, a nephew by marriage of the Hon. Mrs. Tennant, of St. Anne's Manor, Sutton, a helpful member of our Society. With the donor's approval, Mr. Farnham has decided to present his valuable acquisition to the city, that it may be permanently accessible in the muniment room about to be erected as part of the scheme for extending the Leicester museum. Our chairman will thus be setting an example that should be followed by all who have Leicestershire deeds, or other historical manuscripts relating to the county, at their disposal. Before handing over the original, however, he thinks it desirable that its text should be printed in *Transactions*, with such comment as can be made in the short time that remains before publication. The main body of this, which is neatly written on one side of the parchment, consists of the rules of the occupation or craft gild of the Tallow Chandlers of Leicester, as these were sanctioned by the borough authorities in the mayoralty of John Wigston, who held office from Michaelmas, 1469, till the same feast in the ensuing year.

During the centuries that followed the Norman conquest, the industries of nearly every English town of any size, London and the Cinque Ports being notable exceptions, were regulated by a comprehensive municipal brotherhood known as the Gild Merchant. The Leicester institution so designated, which appears to have been founded in the reign of William I,¹ was controlled in the general interest by the mayor and twenty-four jurats, or aldermen, who, deriving their authority from the earls of Leicester, formed the ruling council of the town. Except on market days and at fair times, the only persons allowed to trade freely in the

¹*Records of the Borough of Leicester*, i, 1.

borough and its suburbs were the members of this powerful association, whose chief aims were to protect local monopoly, to maintain a sound standard of quality and workmanship, to prevent such practices as regrating and forestalling, and to fix wages and prices that were fair to all concerned, including the public. Measures were taken to secure obedience to the rules of the fraternity, whose gatherings were called morningspeeches, and refractory brethren were fined, set in the pillory or expelled for ever, according to the magnitude of their offences. Though rigidly exclusive in its attitude to outsiders, the gild had a remarkably liberal internal policy, and its laws were framed with the object of affording equal opportunities to all who enjoyed its franchises and shared its civic obligations.

So long as industry remained in the more or less elementary stages, the gild merchant held its own; but the growth of specialisation caused it to be gradually superseded by the craft guilds, or organisations of particular trades, until at last nothing was left of it but the name, used to denote the aggregate of the separate occupations. The weavers and the fullers² were the first to show signs of breaking away. For a considerable time after these enterprising craftsmen were found to be holding meetings among themselves, at which they attempted to fix their own scale of charges, the official rulers of the parent brotherhood made vigorous efforts to reduce them to submission; but a Leicester fullers' gild is mentioned in the Pipe Roll as early as 1209-10, and eventually the rest of the crafts appear to have succeeded in forming their special fraternities. They did not, however, emancipate themselves from the municipal authority of the mayor and his brethren, without whose confirmation their ordinals had no validity. When they had settled down as recognised constitutional bodies, as much under mayoral and aldermanic surveillance as the old gild merchant had been, the occupations became potent determining factors in the commercial and political life of the borough. This development was not peculiar to Leicester, but, with minor variations, was general throughout England. As industrial societies, the occupations continued the good work begun by the gilds merchant. By the valuable institution of apprenticeship, and in other ways, they consistently

²*Ibid.*, i, 89-91.

sought to promote a high standard of craftsmanship; and, by regular searches in the workshops, organised by the masters and wardens, they did their utmost to protect the public from adulterated food, base materials, and other products of original sin. The spirit of rectitude that invariably characterises the statutes of these obsolete fraternities may be attributed to the fact that they were all ruled from above, by men who, themselves brought up in an atmosphere of responsibility, had a worthy conception of what was becoming and right.

The ordinal of the Tallow Chandlers is of special value because it is the only *medieval* document of its kind, relating to Leicester, that is known to be still in existence. There are several references in the municipal records to the local occupations of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; but these consist mainly of borough ordinances³ concerning them, and tell us next to nothing of their internal constitution. The tallow chandlers' rules provide us for the first time with direct evidence of what a Leicester trade society was like in the century before the Reformation, which took away from such guilds as were permitted to continue some of their most picturesque features. The chandlers' document measures twenty-three inches from top to bottom, and is nearly eleven inches wide. It is made up of two pieces of parchment joined together by a horizontal seam; the lower portion has a margin of an inch and a half on either side of the writing, the upper a margin of one inch on the left side only. The two portions are written in different hands. The upper portion is lighter in colour than the lower, and the writing upon it is less faded than that on the lower portion, which appears to be the older of the two. On the reverse side of the lower portion, and reading from the top, which corresponds to the bottom of the obverse, are the names of nineteen men who had been masters of the craft, with

³By a borough ordinance of 1488, it was enacted "that all tallowe chandlers as well of the towne as of the countrey, that makythe candell to sell, do not in any wise take vpon them to sell any candell but after suche assyse as Mr. Mayer for the tyme beyng and the Justices shall give vnto them and they that takythe vpon them after this acte be proclamyd to breke any part of the meynyng thereof, without the consent of the seid Mayer and Justices for the tyme beyng, shall forfeyt for euery tyme makyng default iiis. iiid., and further that yf any tallow chandler do at any tyme hereafter withdraw them selues from thorder of this acte that than euery suche offendour shall suffer imprisonment duryng Mr. Mayre and the Justices wyll and plesure".—*Ibid.*, ii, 318. See also ii, 280 *et seq.*

indications that other names were to be added as occasion required. Though the document is stained in a few places, and certain words are obscured or obliterated, on the whole it is in very good condition, and the sense of every paragraph is quite clear. It begins with this preamble :—

“ These ben the Ordinances and Rueles of the crafte of Talowe Chandelers of the towne of Leycester mayde and constituted in the feste of the concepcion of our lady the Virgin⁴ the ix yer⁵ of the Reigne of Kyng Edwarde the iiiijth in the tyme of office of John Wygston being maier of the sayd towne of Leycester by a full Agrement and consent of All the Occupiers of the forsayd Occupacion at that tyme yn the towne of Leycester everlastyngly to be contenued and without fraude or delay duely to be executed through the assistance and good supportacion of the forsayd maior and his successors to come maieres of the towne of Leycester and for the executyng and due mynistring of the said ordinances were electe and chosen masters ”

So far we have followed the original spelling, except that we have extended a few words slightly abbreviated by the scribe. It will be convenient to give the rest of the paragraphs in modern orthography. They are as follows :—

“ First in pleasure of God.....⁶ of such things as hath been or hereafter may happen to be misused among them of the fore-said Occupation contrary to God’s pleasure and health of their

⁴The feast of the Conception was celebrated on the 8th of December.

⁵The years of Edward IV’s reign were reckoned from the 4th of March, 1461.

⁶The omitted word looks like *maineumēt*, or *manieumēt*, and may be connected with *meinie*, also spelt *maynee*, *meinge*, *menyeie*, *meigne*, *menie*, *meynie*, and in several other ways, which the *N.E.D.* defines (1) as a family or household, and (3) as a company of persons employed together or having a common object of association. The *Nottingham Records*, iv, 247, tell us that in 1598 the burgesses in a certain ward were required “ to mete a meny of honest Burgesses ”. If our conjecture is right, the meaning of the passage in the ordinal may be that the rules were framed by the assembly, met together, by the pleasure of God, for the purpose of establishing them. The ordinary name for a gild meeting was *morowspeche* or *mornspeche* (*L. maneloquium*).

We regret that a more definite interpretation cannot be given, and hope for enlightenment when the document has been examined by others. Shakespeare (*Lear*, ii, iv, 35) uses the word *meiny* to denote a body of retainers.

P.S. Mr. Hamilton Thompson, who examined the original after the above was printed, says that the abbreviated word is *manieumēt* (= muniment), and that the meaning is that the ordinal was a confirmatory declaration.

souls prejudice or hurt of every good people It is ordained and fully stablished that all the occupiers of the same Occupation dwelling in the town or Suburbs of Leicester shall assemble and company iv times by year To say at the feast of the Conception of our lady the Purification of our lady⁷ Pasche⁸ and saint Michael the archangel⁹ at such [places] to them limited and assigned to commune of such things as shall be thought necessary and for their weal And at the feast of [the concep]tion of our lady they shall choose ii masters of the same occupation such as can be thought most able to correct and reform.....that ought to be reformed and corrected in that party among them and to maintain all the good constitutions and ordinances.....with All other that shall be for to be maintained within the same occupation And when the masters be so chosen the occupiers of the same occupation shall present the masters afore the mayor for the time being and afore the mayor the masters to be sworn without fraud or delay truly to execute the ordinances and all other good rules that belong or shall Appertain to their occupation and forthwith afore the mayor all the occupiers of the said occupation shall make oath And faithful promises to obey the masters Assist and support in all the ordinances and customs and rules herein specified and others

[The two pieces of parchment are here joined together by a horizontal line of neat and secure stitching.]

“ Furthermore it is ordained that every Occupier as a master of the foresaid Occupation dwelling in the town of Leicester yearly shall pay ivd. to the sustentation maintaining and upholding of a light¹⁰ continually to be kept and maintained in the worship of God and of our lady and Saint John Baptist in the Church of Saint Margaret¹¹ in Leicester and that yearly to be paid to the master for the time being at the iv feasts aforesaid to.....and the

⁷The feast of the Purification = the 2nd of February (Candlemas).

⁸Pasche = Easter.

⁹The feast of St. Michael the Archangel = the 29th of September (Michaelmas).

¹⁰Lipson, *Economic History*, p. 303, says: “ there are numerous indications that as a rule every gild was wont to maintain lights upon the altars of its patron saint ”, and adds in a footnote, *e.g.*, *Little Red Book of Bristol*, ii, 121 (Weavers); 145 (Cordwainers); 165 (Hoopers): early fifteenth century.

¹¹St. Margaret's was outside the medieval town wall, in an eastern suburb called the Bishop's Fee.

master.....to see the said light be duly maintained and kept and at the end of the year the said master.....account of all manner charges of forfeit¹² and other to all the occupiers of the Craft foresaid.....

“ Furthermore it is agreed that if any of the Occupation foresaid happen to be wedded or else decease in the town of Leicester that then every occupier of the said occupation with reasonable warning of the beadle or other shall be at every such wedding or burying¹³ and there offer and if any of them be absent at such time without cause or excuse reasonable shall forfeit at every such default making to the light half pound wax, *etc.*

“ Furthermore it is ordained that every occupier of the fore-said craft or occupation shall keep the price and assize¹⁴ [“ prise and sise ” in the original] accustomed that is to say when a pound candle is assized by the mayor for 1*d.* that none of the said occupation of the town buy tallow above viii*d.* a stone And when a pound candle is assized at 1¼*d.* none exceeding x*d.* a stone and when a pound candle is assized at 1½*d.*¹⁵ non exceeding xi*d.* the stone on pain of Forfeit every time any of the occupation known or found with the contrary vis. viii*d.* thereof to remain with the masters iiis. iv*d.* And with the chamberlains of the town of Leicester iiis. iv*d.* to the use of the commons And that none of the same occupation nor other of the town or country sell ‘ none condell in the town of leycester ’ but it be lawful both of tallow wick and weight and if any the contrary do and may be found or

¹²Forfeits, as it will be seen, were fines for breaking the rules of the gild; they went either to maintain the altar light, or to the general fund of the gild and the borough chamberlains in equal proportions.

¹³The members of the social-religious fraternities were similarly fined if, without reasonable excuse, they failed to attend the funerals of deceased brothers and sisters. The fullers of Lincoln, whose gild was started in 1297, ordained that “ when any brother or sister dies, the dean shall put four wax lights round the body; and the grace-man shall offer a penny for mass, and the warden a halfpenny, out of the goods of the gild. If any one is in arrear in the halfpence due for the soul, he shall pay half a pound of wax to the gild ”.—Toulmin Smith, *English Gilds*, 181.

¹⁴Assize = the rules officially fixed concerning the quality, weight, price, *etc.*, of commodities.

¹⁵In 1309-10, candles were 2*d.* a pound, and two pounds were sold for 3½*d.*—*Records*, i, 264, 266. In the margin of the Town Book of Acts, against an ordinance of 1467, is scribbled: “ Candylles 1*d.* ob. a pounde xiii to the dossyn ”.—*Ibid.*, ii, 289.

known by the search of the masters or any other person that then the candle so found defective shall be brought unto the mayor and afore the mayor lawfully to be 'understande' and the forfeit of the same candle so found to be distributed to the king to the Chamberlains of the town of Leicester and to the light of the said occupation by even portions

"Furthermore it is ordained that if any huckster of the town of Leicester happen to be indebted for candle to any of the said occupation to the sum of *xxd.* or above and when the debt is asked [it] cannot be paid and he or she that the debt is owing unto make knowledge thereof to the masters for the time being that then none of the said occupation till the debt be paid shall deliver candle to any such huckster And if any so do without warrant shall forfeit every time to their light *xiiid.*¹⁶

"Furthermore it is ordained that none of the foresaid craft of the town of Leicester privily or openly ["prive or Appert"] shall put nor procure to be put any of them other from the customer with whom they be covenanted to buy their tallow in the pain of forfeit every time any proved with such a fault to the light *iiis. ivd.* And that none of the same occupation in any wise presume and break nor change the assize and price of candle that is commanded to be kept by the mayor unto the time the contrary licence be given by the said mayor on pain of forfeit every time any found with the fault *vs. xxd.* thereof to remain with the masters to the use of their light and *iiis. ivd.* with the chamberlains of the town of Leicester to the use of the commons according to the ordinance¹⁷ made at a common hall, *etc.*

"And at such time as any of the same occupation desire a new assize that he she¹⁸ or they shall come to their masters for the

¹⁶As the craft guilds were accustomed to help members who fell into poverty, it was desirable that the making of bad debts should be discouraged.

¹⁷For the ordinance referred to, see *Records*, ii, 294. The word "customer" in this paragraph plainly means the person from whom the hypothetical Chandler was in the habit of buying his tallow.

¹⁸Medieval women often engaged in business, and in some places were enrolled as apprentices; but they were not encouraged to take the places of men. At Coventry, they were employed as knitters, candle makers and cutters of fish.—*Coventry Leet Book*. At Leicester, they worked as wool wrappers and as flock pullers or feather stitchers (*plumatores*).—*Records*, i, 186.

time being and make them knowledge of their intent and the masters in the name of all the occupation at times lawful shall go to the mayor for the assize and after the assize by the mayor given the masters to make knowledge to all the craft And that none of the occupation of the town of Leicester make candle with unwashed wick ["unwashen weke"] on pain of forfeiture every time any known with such a fault to the light *xiii*.

"Furthermore it is ordained that if any of the said occupation reasonably be warned to come to any certain places to them limited and assigned for the choosing of their masters or to come for other causes for the weal of themselves or worship of their craft and at such times appear not 'without excuse or excause reasonable' shall forfeit at every time to their light *vid*. And thereupon it shall be lawful to the masters for the time being the morn next after such forfeit be made or days of payment broken to come and ask such 'dutes [= dues] of them that owe it' and for lack of payment to take sufficient distress and if any person will let the masters in such cause to take sufficient distress [*i.e.*, should prevent the masters from distraining enough to cover the dues] then it shall be lawful to the masters to complain to the mayor for the time being and the mayor at their desire and prayer to commit every person so disobedient ["dishobeunt"] to ward till the 'dute that he owith' be paid and also the same person have submitted him to the masters for the offence against them done, *etc.*¹⁹

"Furthermore it is licensed and granted by the mayor of Leicester that it shall be lawful to the masters of the foresaid Tallow Chandlers well and truly to search and oversee that all the butchers of the country coming to the common shamble²⁰ at Leicester with their victual that they bring the tallow of the same victual with them into the said common shamble and that the same masters may have knowledge that the tallow be sold to the inhabitants in the town of Leicester and if the said masters find or may know any butcher of the country with the contrary that

¹⁹The mayor was the active embodiment of municipal authority, and troublesome persons were often "committed to ward for as long as the mayor likes".

²⁰The locality of the common shamble is suggested by the fact that the old name of St. Nicholas street was Shambles lane.

then the masters to present the said butchers to the mayor for the time being for a remedy

“ And it is stablished and fully agreed that every stranger that hereafter shall come and occupy the foresaid craft in the town of Leicester [At this point, marked by a caret, two words that are now illegible have been inserted above the line] first he or she shall come to the masters of the craft for the time being and make promise and faith to obey them and all the good rules pertaining or belonging unto the craft and also pay unto the maintaining and upholding of the light *xxd.* And every person of the town dwelling that hereafter in likewise that (*sic*) setteth up shall in like manner and form do and pay unto the said light *xiiid.* And that none of the said craft shall teach and informe none other not of the craft any manner points of the said craft on pain of forfeiture every time any known with such a fault *iiis. ivd. xxd.* to the maintaining of their light and *xxd.* to the chamberlains of the town of Leicester to the use of the commons ”

The rules of the medieval tallow chandlers, and what we have said about them, may be illustrated by comparison with certain of the nineteen regulations of the Leicester glovers and fellmongers, printed on pp. 464-6 of Thompson's *History of Leicester*, which were confirmed by the justices of assize, as the law then required, in the fourth year of the reign of James I. The medieval occupations were no doubt all organised on pretty much the same lines, and we shall select for our purpose such of the later ordinances as seem to be obviously derived from the general practice of the middle ages. The first of these may be quoted in full: “ All the masters of the said occupations shall yearly, at or before the last of October, upon notice, without reasonable let [hindrance], meet together in some convenient place in Leicester, and then and there amongst and forth²¹ of the said masters of the said company, they or the greater number of them, choose, name, and appoint, one steward and two wardens, such as shall be thought meet and able persons to rule and govern and execute the orders following, upon pain to forfeit and pay to the use of the corporation of Leicester, ten shillings for every default; and if any, upon lawful demand made by the said steward and wardens, do not pay their fines and forfeitures under them, within six days

after, at some of their houses, then he to be for ever disfranchised. And if any of the said officers do refuse the said office, or not carefully execute the same, then to forfeit for every default ten shillings; and then after such choice, all the said masters, or most part of them, are to present the said officer to the mayor of the said borough, to be sworn before the mayor and aldermen for due execution of these ordinances", the next of which begins: "That none of the said masters take any apprentice but that he be bound and serve according to the statute, and to be bound within forty days next after his entry or coming to his master, or else to be put away; and the indenture [of apprenticeship] to be made by the town clerk, and enrolled before the mayor, according to the custom of the said borough, upon pain of ten shillings". The first of these citations bears a strong family likeness to the preamble of the old tallow chandlers' fraternity. The oath of those entering a Leicester craft, which resembled that taken by new members of the earlier gild merchant, and the oath of the gild officers, in its seventeenth century form, are given on pp. 126-7 of Mr. C. J. Billson's *Mediæval Leicester*, in a chapter that contains a good deal of classified information concerning the Leicester occupations. Both show how closely the details of industrial practice were, as of old, superintended by the town officers. A plea before the borough court (the portmanmote) relating to an apprentice's covenant is recorded in vol. ii, p. 179, of the *Records*. This belongs to the year 1378-9, and implies a somewhat indefinite binding procedure, which was probably amended in the following century. Special attention was given to the regulation of trade in the reign of Edward IV,²² from whom several of the London crafts, including that of the tallow chandlers, received charters of incorporation.²³

The fifth rule of the glovers and fellmongers echoes numerous medieval ordinances of a similar kind. It runs: "That if any of the said masters die and another (not free of the said occupations) happen to marry his wife, he or his wife (after the said marriage) shall not occupy the said occupations nor any of them within the

²¹Forth = from, out of. As we might now say, the choice was to be made from among the said masters, etc.

²²See *Records*, ii, 280.

²³Unwin, *The Gilds of London*, 163.

said borough, except by license of the greater part of the said masters of the said company under the hands and seals of the said officers for the time being first had, on pain of five marks". If the widow married a competent craftsman who was acceptable on general grounds to the members, he was doubtless readily enfranchised; but the brethren were not willing to admit an undesirable person to their fraternity. This rule, and the fourteenth: "That if any of the said masters shall be convicted for felony, or be accessory to any felony, upon due proof to be disenfranchised for ever", are redolent of medieval feeling in these matters.

The eighth rule: "That no fellmongers or glovers shall buy any fells or skins upon the market-days, within the said borough, before ten of the clock in the forenoon, on pain for every skin six shillings and eight-pence", and the ninth, that none "buy any fells of any glover that hath once bought them before in the same market (knowing the same) on pain of every fell six shillings and eight-pence", are directed against practices that were specially repugnant to the fraternal mind from the days of the gild merchant. Dr. Gross says: "The gildsman was generally under obligation to share all purchases with his brethren, that is to say, if he bought a quantity of a given commodity, any other gildsman could claim a portion of it at the same price at which he purchased it. The aim of this law was manifestly to do away with middlemen and keep down prices; it counteracted 'regrating' and 'forestalling', offences which were regarded as especially heinous when 'the culprit was not in the Gild'".²⁴ There is no exact parallel to either of these rules in the chandlers' ordinal; but the regulations about the butchers' bringing their tallow to the common shamble of Leicester are dictated by a similar desire to protect rights in the local market. Such restrictive rules probably suited medieval conditions, or they would not have been so universal; but when industry began to expand, they were found to be very hampering.

The tenth rule: "That, at the deaths and marriages of the said masters' wives, children, and servants, upon notice of the beadle, all the said masters, not having reasonable excuse (to be allowed at the next meeting), shall be present, contagious times excepted, on pain for each sixpence", corresponds to the third

²⁴Gross, *The Gild Merchant*, i, 49.

rule of the tallow chandlers, except that, the Reformation having intervened, there are no offerings for masses and a money payment takes the place of the fine of wax. The last four rules we need quote are exactly in the spirit of the medieval craft gilds, which abound in ordinances of the same kind. Rule eleven says that: "If any of the said masters' apprentices, or dwelling in the said borough, fall into poverty or decay, by God's visitation, by fire, or by sickness, to have relief of such money and forfeitures as shall arise to the said occupations, at discretion of the said masters and greater part of the said company"; rule twelve, that "all the said masters, not having reasonable cause of let [hindrance], shall meet as often as the said officers do for lawful cause so to command, upon pain of every one having lawful warning and no sufficient excuse, fourpence a time, without license of the stewards or wardens upon reasonable excuse"; rule thirteen, that "none of the said masters shall have any more buyers in the market at one time [and so prevent other gildsmen from securing their proper shares of the goods offered for sale], on pain of ten shillings"; and the fifteenth, that "no fellmonger or glover, dwelling within the said borough or without, shall buy or sell any fells or skins or other wares belonging to their trades, within the said borough, otherwise than is in these presents declared, before he have submitted himself and compounded with the said officers for the time being, on pain, every day, six shillings and sixpence".

The tallow chandlers' gild no doubt had its social and convivial sides, and probably contributed its share to the borough pageantry, as the craft gilds of other towns almost invariably did; but these would be matters of custom, and it is not surprising that there is no mention of them in the ordinal, which was a purely business document, drawn up for submission to the municipal powers, just as the later set of rules was submitted to the judges of assize, for sanction, and, if necessary, for revision, in the public interest. Though our editing has of necessity been done somewhat hurriedly, we hope that such remarks as we have been able to make will be found helpful, at any rate by those to whom the medieval system of regulating trade is a new subject.

As nearly as we can make it out, the writing on the back of the tallow chandlers' ordinal is as follows:—

Thys ben the maysters of the Crafte

It[em] pt Tomas Grysby

It Jho Gaylarde

It Wyllyam Ghylys

It Rawlyn Ghylys

It Jho Colyns

It Thom Halle

It Thomas Bochope

It Wyllyam Bythybroke

It Robert Balle

It Tomas Gornerde

It Tomas Wyndebanke

It Awlson Sklater

It Wyllyam Bocher

It Wyllyam Awnghede

It Jho. Stabirforde

It Jho Bylsdon

It Jho Lokke

It Recharde Balle

It Wyllyam Peryn

Several of the surnames are to be found in the *Records of the Borough*; but as the entries to the freedom are missing for the period in which they must have been admitted, it is not possible to trace many of the bearers of them that appear in this list. All these were presumably substantial business men, who enjoyed the confidence of the rank and file of the craft and were acceptable to the municipal authorities.