THE WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF WEAVERS

'WOOL, WEALTH AND WEAVERS: A MEDIEVAL GUILD IN ITS HEYDAY'

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Introduction

Thanks.

I'm not presuming to lecture the Weavers directly on their own history, but as a historian of medieval and early modern London I have found it interesting and challenging to reflect on the early history of the craft and the company, and to on how they fit into the evolving history of London itself.

The 'Heyday' of the medieval Weavers' guild was probably the 12th and early 13th Century. This is a distinct period, not part of a generic 'middle ages' – there is as long between the date of the Weavers' charter and the time of Elizabeth I and Shakespeare as between that era and the present day – the course of events was perhaps slower-moving, but still profound change.

What was London like in the 12th-13th centuries?

What were Weavers doing at this time?

What were guilds, including the Weavers, at this time?

12th-century London

Sources and governance

First thing to say is that for the historian, researching 12th-century London, when the Weavers obtained their charter, is quite a lot harder than researching 15th, 14th or even later 13th-century London. The main reason for this is that there are very few written texts – our stock in trade – from this period, surviving either in their original material form or preserved in a later copy. Literacy was limited to a comparatively small – but powerful - sector of society, and the use of writing to communicate, establish, and record was much less pervasive than it had become by 1300, let alone 1400 or 1500. The king's government used writing, of course, keeping records of court proceedings and of the payment of debts, and issuing charters granting and confirming property or privileges, but comparatively few other secular institutions did. The use of writing to document everyday business or simple transactions between private individuals is virtually unknown. So the Weavers' charter is not just early in itself, it's one of very few pieces of written evidence from the period to survive. Its issue marks an important historical moment in the life of the city as well as the guild: 1155, just after the accession of Henry II brought to an end the strife of King Stephen's reign; certainly a moment for an organisation with interests and ambitions to establish good relations with the powers that be. The city sought a charter confirming its rights and privileges, just as the Weavers did, and for much the same reasons.

So what was the London of that era like?

I used to think of 11th and 12th-century London's history as bit like the primordial soup we used to be told about: murky waters, swimming with large and obscurely portentous shapes, inchoate but indicative of future forms and developments. London in 1155 was certainly a substantial urban centre by the standards of the time, but not yet the undisputed capital; it shared that function with Winchester (where indeed the Weavers' charter was issued). It had aldermen, probably a hereditary patriciate, and sheriffs, appointed by the king, but no mayor; it had civic assemblies, such as the Court of Husting and the folkmoot, but little or no civic bureaucracy or administration, and no guildhall in anything like its present form.

The material city

Documents may be in short supply, but archaeology and architectural history help us to recover and envisage the material city of the 12th century, though continuous occupation on the same spot has blotted out many features.

I'm using as the background to this talk and my slides, the new Historic Towns Trust's map of London in the late 13th century, to which I contributed. We could not make a map of London in 1155, because of the sparsity of firm, mappable evidence, but we can use this somewhat later map to point to continuities as well as differences.

Someone who knows the city today would be able to identify many landmarks and sites of importance in the 12th-century city, even if they didn't look much like they do today. You could walk through the city from Newgate to Aldgate in 1150, along streets with the same or similar names as today, past buildings and churches whose successors occupy those very sites.

Thames, Fleet, Walbrook and underlying topography

Obviously one constant within the city is the underlying terrain – the Thames, the steep slopes running down to the river, the ups and downs of Ludgate Hill and Cornhill. The river Fleet and the Walbrook stream have disappeared underground now, but their locations are marked by streets with those names, and by the contours of the land.

Most of us experience the city on foot, at least some of the time, and are subconsciously aware of these basic features; cyclists certainly will.

Roman walls

The urban settlement of the 12th century inhabited a space laid out by the Romans, virtually abandoned by the early Saxons, and re-colonised in the 9th and 10th centuries. The Roman walls were probably quite a lot larger than the settlement needed, but the walls and gates defined it effectively, and there was a narrow zone immediately outside the walls deemed to be part of the settlement: Portsoken – literally, the town's soke or jursidiction.

Street plan and street names

By the time the space within the walls was recolonised, the Roman street pattern had disappeared, and a new grid of streets was laid out over the top of it, the basis for the city streetplan we see today. The gateways in the Roman walls still determined the major access points, but within the walls the lines of streets diverged quite markedly; even the central crossing-point of the Walbrook stream was in a different location. The only places where the Roman street-plan had a strong influence is within the area of the Cripplegate fort, where something of Roman rectangularity survived; and what remained of the Roman riverside wall dictated the line of Thames Street along the waterfront.

Not only were the major and minor streets of the early medieval city on the same lines as today, many of them bore the same or recognisably similar names. The names of the gates in the wall are certainly old, and influenced streetnames around them. The two main landing places on the river were in existence before the conquest. Billingsgate was so named by the early 11th century, while the western landing place, once known as Aetheredeshyth, was being referred to as the queen's hithe or landing place – *ripa regine* - by 1200. The names Cornhill, Fenchurch, Gracechurch, date from the 12c. or earlier, as do Wood Street, Bread Street, Milk Street, and Honey Lane, surrounding the market place or '*vicus forl'*, also known as Westc[h]eape.

Some names from this period are particularly interesting and indicative. Lothbury and Aldermanbury, Saxon-origin names, commemorate the *burhs* or fortified enclosures of someone called Lotha, and an or the alderman, respectively, the latter possibly the site of the earliest civic headquarters. The names of Basinghall Street, where Weavers' Hall stood from the 16th to 19th centuries, and Bassishaw ward, both derive from the *haga* or enclosure of the men of Basingstoke, possibly an urban headquarters for an important provincial group.

Castles

The Normans' most indelible mark on London's landscape was the building of strategically-placed castles – the Tower in the east, where the Roman wall ran down to the river, and two lesser and now lost ones, Baynard's and Mountfitchet's, in the west, in the corner between the Fleet and the Thames.

The royal Tower began as a keep, the White Tower, with some surrounding embankments or fortifications, and was impressive enough to overawe a low-built city in the 12th century. The Tower's present form, with rings of walls and moats and elaborate fortified entrance-gates, dates from the 13th and early 14th centuries. It was a royal residence – at least some of the time - as well as treasury, armoury and archive, functions it retained when the kings built a more comfortable residence at Westminster in the 13th century. Building these castles is indicative of London's importance to the Crown, and the fact that its loyalty could not be taken for granted. In the civil war of the mid-12th century, London's support was vital to Stephen's early success, and Matilda's failure to secure London after it fell to her, effectively doomed her campaign in the long run.

Bridge

A key feature of London at all dates was the river crossing. There was a bridge in the Roman period, and one or more successors in the Saxon/Norman period, before the building of the famous stone bridge in the later 12th century. The Saxon/early medieval bridge was probably of timber only, though it must have had solid foundations; it would have been close to, if not actually on, the alignment of its stone successor. It may well have had a drawbridge to allow ships to pass through to the upper waterfront; we know that, for example, traders from Rouen had the use of Dowgate from the 11th century, and the merchants of Cologne a house at the site of the later Steelyard, where Cannon Street Station is now, by the mid-12th century. The area of Vintry was known for its wine taverns and cookshops by the mid 12th century; there was a significant wine trade with Normandy after the Conquest, but the wine trade with Bordeaux was boosted from the mid-12th century with the accession in 1154 of Henry II, king of England and duke of Aquitaine through his wife Eleanor.

Churches

The profusion of churches in the present-day city strikes any observer, but those now standing are only a fraction of those that once existed. Writing in the later 12th century, William Fitz Stephen boasted that London had thirteen conventual churches and one hundred and twenty-six lesser, parish churches. He seems to be counting churches in the environs as well as in the city itself, but even so this is an amazing total, especially since this is before the foundation of the great houses of friars – Greyfriars, Blackfriars, Whitefriars and Austin Friars – which date from the 13th century, and the 14th-century monasteries of the Charterhouse and St Mary Graces built after the Black Death.

The two great foundations of St Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey were already several centuries old, and standing on their present sites, but both churches were extensively rebuilt and remodelled in the 12th and 13th centuries, so that little of the early medieval fabric survived to more modern times.

Early medieval preference seems to have been for multiple small parish or local churches in towns, with a very high ratio of churches to worshippers, rather than one or more large town churches. The 10th to 12th centuries saw the proliferation of parish churches, and all or almost all the hundred-plus city churches in existence by the time of the 16th-century Reformation were in place by 1200. They were founded by lords, by laypeople, by religious patrons and communities. Dedications to the Saxon Botolph, or the Norse Olaf or Olave, give some clues to founders or benefactors, as do the personal names attached to some churches – Acon, Coleman, Hubbard, Orgar, Wulfnoth – though the majority are dedicated to biblical or liturgical saints and identified by a topographical surname – in the east, by the Tower, in Cornhill, by Paul's Wharf.

Quite small congregations were able to support a church building and the services of a priest. Church buildings themselves may have been very modest to start with – 'Gracechurch' may mean 'grass church', or thatched church - and most of their fabric has been lost in subsequent rebuildings and enlargements, but some early stonework remains, for example at All Hallows Barking, and the Norman crypt at the major church of St Mary le Bow. Parish boundaries, circumscribing the houses of the congregation entitled to the services of their priest and liable for tithe to support him, were also largely formed by 1200; their importance in later local government preserved them through to the 20th century, and the parish boundary markers we see today remind us of parishes and churches now gone.

Wealth, wool and weaving

Everything I've said so far indicates that London in the mid-12th century, when the Weavers obtained their charter, was a thriving and populous city.

Population size and origins

Estimating actual population sizes in the era before any kind of written census or tax return is notoriously difficult, and we have to proceed by extrapolation and inference. Working back from c. 1300, when a combination of evidence suggests that medieval London was at its peak of population, and may have reached 80,000; through the evidence for marked economic, demographic, and physical development through the 13th century, so that London c. 1200 might have been at most half that size; 50 years earlier, somewhat less, so maybe 20-30,000. Small as it sounds to us now – and it did not fully populate the area within the circle of Roman walls - this was nevertheless a substantial concentration of population within one area, unequalled within Britain.

Londoners of the time were, then as now, a mixture of peoples: English – themselves a mix of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and probably British origins - Norman French; Flemish; and a substantial community of Jews brought by the Norman kings. The jaundiced – or perhaps satirical - chronicler Richard of Devizes

wrote in the 1190s that 'all sorts of men crowd there from every country under the heavens. Each race brings its own vices and its own customs to the city.' The language of written communication was Latin, with some Norman French; the language of worship was Latin; the languages of the streets must have been an east-midland dialect of Old English, Anglo-Norman French, and various forms of low German or Old Frisian.

Wealth

Urban growth is usually a function of economic growth – the concentration of economic activity attracting migrants and traders, and funding building development, production for consumption, and social and cultural activities. Market function was central to the growth of early medieval towns and cities: the exchange of goods and services on a local, regional, and national level, and London did well in all of these. The great international fairs provided some competition, but over time these ceded their role to cities, including London, operating as perpetual fairs.

Evidence for 12th-century London's wealth comes from a number of sources, but the huge sum demanded for the ferm or annual payment to the Exchequer – temporarily reduced on some occasions, for economic or political reasons, but normally running at £500 in silver in the second half of the 12C – is an important marker. The reduction of the ferm to £300 under Richard and John is not a sign of faltering prosperity but rather of London's increased bargaining power with a weaker and financially-strapped crown. The building of so many churches, both parish and monastic, is a useful indicator of plentiful resources to spare for cultural projects.

Crucial to London's growth was the role of the crown: its ability to draw resources from the country as a whole by means of taxation, and through the imposition of a system of law and justice that focused on the king's court. The settlement of royal governmental functions at Westminster under the Norman kings gave London a huge boost, attracting bureaucrats and adminstrators, lawyers, litigants, and petitioners, and all the support infrastructure they required. Minting coin of the realm, originally quite widespread, came to be concentrated in London, dominated by London moneyers. London's goldsmiths prospered, appearing often by name in royal records, and forming a guild or association by 1180 which paid the large sum of £30 for coming into existence without formal approval. Management of the money market – a vital aspect of royal government – likewise centred on London. The three leading parties supporting large-scale credit for the crown and leading nobles and churchmen were London's Jewry, imported by the Norman kings, a number of wealthy Christian usurers or lenders, and the Knights Templar, founded in the 1110s with their headquarters originally in Holborn but very soon on the site of the present Temple.

In addition, the tastes and consumption patterns of the sophisticated Anglo-French court offered numerous opportunities for profitable production and retail. The earliest financial account for Henry I, in 1130, shows the sheriffs of London accounting for wine, pepper, cumin, ginger, herrings, unguents, oils, nuts, cloth and clothing bought for the king and in some cases transported to other royal residences such as Woodstock. Provincial lords, lay and ecclesiastical, established houses in London to stay in when summoned to the king's or archbishop's councils, and, according to a contemporary, spent lavishly there, on hospitality and supplies for their home base. Once London itself was of significant size, its own demands stimulated production and retail activities.

We have comparatively few records for the scale of overseas trade in the 12th century, but plenty of incidental evidence. The merchants of Rouen, Cologne, and Bordeaux have already been mentioned. Archaeology uncovers coins and objects, and precious artefacts survive in museums, or are memorialised in medieval inventories. William Fitz Stephen's panegyric of 1170s London stated that the renown of London was more widespread, and its money and merchandise travelled further afield, so that it stood head and shoulders above other cities. 'Traders from every nation under heaven are pleased to bring to the city ships full of merchandise', he asserted, citing gold, oils and spices, weapons, silks, and furs.

Weaving

Where do the Weavers fit into this picture of a growing and prosperous city?

Weaving was the most widespread and important industry in medieval Europe, especially in towns, and woollen cloth the most widely-traded manufacture. The population needed to be clothed, and apart from leather and fur for outer garments, and lightweight linen for inner ones, it had to be woollen cloth. But woven cloth was also needed for blankets and bedding, curtains and hangings and domestic furnishings, tents and trappings for horses. Many different sizes and qualities were needed, from cheap coarse cloth woven on narrow looms to fine heavy broadcloth, dyed and finished to a high degree. And while the scale and profitability of the trade in cloth between countries varied over time, cloth was eminently portable, traceable, and durable, and risks and transactions costs were comparatively low.

While cloth could be made anywhere in the middle ages, urban conditions were best suited to the manufacture of high-quality cloth. Towns are the product of the division of labour, and the urban weaver could maximise time spent weaving because he was the opposite of self-sufficient, entwined in a network that supplied his other needs. The town supplied him and his workforce with provisions and housing and protection; he had better access to credit or capital to set up a workshop and expensive equipment which, by extension, needed to be kept busy; his raw materials and tools could be bought conveniently nearby. Fellow townsmen specialised in ancillary or complementary skills such as the

dyeing and finishing needed to make his cloth marketable. He had greater, if indirect, access to wealthier consumers of his product, so he could respond to their varying demands as well as satisfying basic needs. Over time, towns evolved formal mechanisms for the teaching and transfer of precious skills in the form of apprenticeship, as well as legal systems to police debt and credit, both vital to the successful development of urban manufacturing.

So it is not surprising that the early medieval city of London housed a significant number of weavers, producing medium to high-quality woollen cloth, supplying the middling to upper end of the domestic market. The Weavers' ordinances of 1300 - by which time quite a lot may have changed – indicate that they were then producing a range of different cloths of varying weaves and colours (andley and minuet, rayed cloths, hawes and porries), all fairly light in weight, but with distinctions and characteristics that are lost to us now. We do not know how many people practised the craft, or where they worked; whether their workshops and looms were scattered across the city, or concentrated in one area. If the latter, it was possibly in the vicinity of Candlewick Street, later Cannon Street, where the burellers certainly congregated by 1300.

Nor is it surprising that the London Weavers sought to establish and defend their position in a competitive marketplace. Making cloth is not in itself political, but the craft was hedged with dangers and challenges, and its viability and profitability depended on successful positioning in a political lansdcape.

Towns in general had higher wages and labour costs than elsewhere, so it was desirable to limit the number of producers and prevent their taking production elsewhere; also to promote and police high standards of manufacture so the product's reputation was not jeopardised. Specialising in making cloth entailed dependence on others to market the cloth, wholesale or retail, and these distributors were therefore enabled to influence the price and take a share of the profit. Specialising in higher-quality production opened up the possibility for others of appealing to the market by undercutting, either in quality or price, or both. There was little to prevent other towns or cities becoming even more expert and specialised producers of textiles, and aggressively marketing them to the London Weavers' traditional customers. The volatility of fashion and changing demand for something as personal as apparel and domestic decoration posed further problems. And perhaps less foreseeably, success in meeting challenges could lead to difficulties with an emerging civic consciousness, keen to keep small-group privileges under more general urban control. All of these things happened to the Weavers, and help to explain why the 'heyday' of the medieval guild was comparatively short.

I'll come back to this but first I want to say a bit about guilds and what they were, and became, in this period.

Guilds

Guilds were part of the social and economic fabric of medieval city life; a common feature across European cities, but not all the same. Forming a guild, in the middle ages, was much like forming a society, a club, or an action group now. There were many possible reasons for doing so, including fundraising for a desired objective, sociability and collective festivity, moral and spiritual benefits, occupational or neighbourly solidarity, and the creation of a supportive network in difficult times or places. Many such associations must have been founded, flourished for a while, and then dissolved when the need or enthusiasm of the founders waned. Defence of an occupational monopoly was, however, one of the strongest glues for holding such associations together over time, especially after occupational or craft guilds were co-opted into the organising structures of citizenship and city governance in London in the 14th century.

Early associations with a craft or occupational identity at their core include the Weavers, the Bakers, probably the Fishmongers, the Saddlers, and the Goldsmiths – a not atypical array of urban occupations; certainly cloth, bread, and fish were basic commodities, at the heart of the urban economy. A royal account of 1179-80 notes both the weavers' annual payment of £12 for their guild, and fines paid by 19 other guilds that had come into existence without formal licence. These included the guild of the goldsmiths, fined 45 marks (£30); the guild of Pepperers, dealers in imported spices, fined 16 marks (just over £11); the guild of butchers, fined one mark (13s 4d or 66p); and the guild of '*parariorum*', possibly brokers, also fined one mark. The variety of guilds is illustrated by the fact that there were five guilds dedicated to the bridge, probably fundraising fraternities; one to Haliwell, and one to pilgrims. The rest were identified only by the name of their 'alderman' or warden.

An increasing number of occupational associations are recorded in the later 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries, until by 1422 the Brewers' Company's clerk was able to record over 110 'crafts' with some kind of collective identity. Some of these are very specialised occupations, and others have no obvious successor in today's list of livery companies, but most are recognisable. Not all of these will have had formal ordinances approved by the mayor, the late medieval *sine qua non* of a craft guild. Very few will have had a royal charter by this date, though the latter was becoming increasingly desirable, to create an incorporation capable of owning real estate, and to confer rights outside the city boundary. It is unusual for a company to have a charter from before c. 1400, and exceptional to have one from the 12th century.

The Weavers' guild and fortunes

What these early guilds were doing as collectivities or communities is not clear. The Weavers' charter granted in 1155 permits them to 'hold their guild' (*gildam suam habendam*) with all their liberties and customs as they did in the time of King Henry I, i.e. before 1135. Back in 1130 – when for a single year we have the records of royal financial administration – Robert son of Levestan or Leofstan paid the crown £16 on behalf of the guild of Weavers of London, *Gilda Telariorum Londonie*. No other guild did the same, or is mentioned by name in the account. It's quite a sum to find on a yearly basis, and suggests that the Weavers were already perhaps anxious and defensive of their position, and/or that the concessions gained were significant. The liberties and customs are not, however, specified in the charter, leaving a space for interpretation and contest. Later claims focused on control of production quantity and quality, working practices, and the discipline of members; the guild claimed jurisdiction over all cases involving one of their members, something the city was not, by 1300, prepared to accept, but this may have been one of their original privileges. Certainly the Weavers thought it worth defending their charter against the city's attempt to subvert it in the reign of John, and obtaining royal confirmations in 1243, 1301, and 1327.

But this was something of a rearguard action, as once-favourable economic and political conditions changed. London continued to expand demographically and economically in the 13th century, but wool weaving in the city did not prosper to the same extent. By the 13th century, the cloth towns of Flanders were simultaneously monopolising production of the highest-quality cloth for continental and English markets and increasing their cost advantages in the middling and cheaper strata. Over the 13th century the weavers of London and other English towns seem to have found themselves undercut by Flemish cloth imports, and outmanoeuvred by local competition when it came to controlling the marketing of their own cloths. As happened in other manufacturing occupations, the intervention of entrepreneurs – in this case the burellers, originally makers and marketers of cheaper woollen cloths called burels – into the supply chain weakened the position of producers, so that by 1300 many London weavers seem to have been working for burellers rather than independently. And apart from the inherent difficulties of their market position, weavers faced new challenges in the 13th century. One possible factor was the development of mechanical fulling of woven cloth, which required water-power and hence favoured the transfer of production to rural areas. English weavers of woollen cloth may also have had difficulty sourcing their raw material, as English, Flemish and Italian merchants increasingly bought wool directly from the owners of large sheepflocks for export to Flanders and Italy – some of which was then re-imported in the form of woven cloth.

By the end, and possibly by the middle, of the 13th century, London's burellers were numerous and wealthy, selling large quantities of cheap cloth to the crown (for military rather than court use), and prominent at Winchester fair. No weaver is identifiable in the city's tax return for 1292 (compared to 13 burellers and 8 dyers), and in 1300 the Burellers launched a successful challenge to the Weavers' practices, effectively forcing them to accept new ordinances and to renounce some of their claimed privileges.

This decline of the London weavers from a position of early strength and prominence was only one of many fluctuations and reversals in the fortunes of textile production over the centuries. The Burellers themselves faced difficulties in the 14th century – who now has even heard of them - and seem to have disappeared into the Drapers; the export trade in wool peaked in about 1360, and the later 14th century saw the revival of English clothmaking, though not in London. The Mercers as Merchant Adventurers emerged as the principal exporters of woollen cloth by 1500, though the cloth-finishers – Fullers and Shearmen, later united as Clothworkers - complained of being edged out. Winners and losers shifted again in the 16th and 17th centuries as changing markets and new kinds of cloth came to the fore. The Weavers themselves adapted to changing times, integrating competitors and moving into new fibres and fabrics, and as we see, continuing to flourish in the 21st century.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope I have been able to introduce you to the 12th-century city in which the early Weavers first made their mark, and the circumstances in which they did.