

SOME DEVONSHIRE MERCHANTS' MARKS.

BY R. N. WORTH, F.G.S.

(Read at Tiverton, July, 1891).

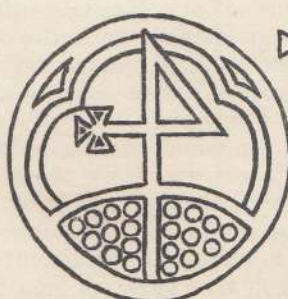
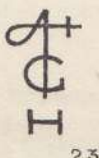
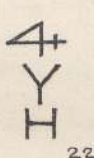
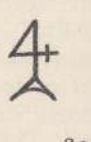
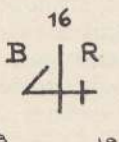
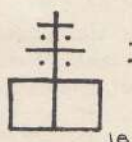
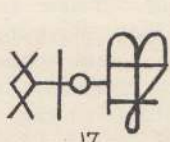
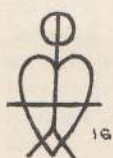
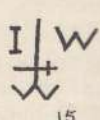
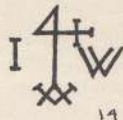
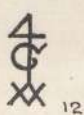
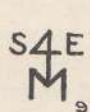
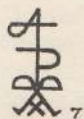
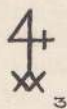
MERCHANTS' marks were in customary use throughout the later Middle Ages, well on to the close of the seventeenth century. They are linked on the one hand to the masons' marks, still to be traced on the older portions of our cathedrals and buildings of similar antiquity. On the other they continue in a modified fashion to the present day in the form of trade marks, and partially in the use of private monograms. When very few men could read and fewer still could write, they enabled the trader to be identified and known by his device; just as the knight was recognised by his shield of arms, or, when town life had fully developed, the place of business by its sign—for it should be borne in mind that, while shop signs, apart from inscriptions, are the exception with us, they were the rule in the middle of the last century, and practically universal in the century previous. The man or woman who could not read over the door of a shop that John Smith, ironmonger, kept business there—the said John Smith not being accustomed to put his stock-in-trade in his windows—would easily recognise the familiar “dog and pot,” as sure an indication of a man who dealt in hardware once, as the golden fleece of a woollen draper.

And so the merchants had their devices engraven on signets, with or without their initials, which sometimes supplied the place of signatures, and sometimes were used to authenticate them, just as the seals of arms of those who were entitled to coat armour were employed. They were in use at a very early date, for *Piers Plowman* mentions “merkes of merchauntes medeled” in painted glass; but their most

common use was in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They will frequently be found on seals to documents, in the carvings in old mansions, in churches, on sepulchral slabs, or indicating, just as a coat of arms might do, the builder or restorer of certain portions of the edifice. The fact that they are so used in the churches of Tiverton and Collumpton (duly set forth in the *Transactions of the Exeter Diocesan Architectural Society*) is, indeed, the motive for these few lines. Dr. Barrington, in his *Lectures on Heraldry*, describes merchants' marks as consisting of "various fanciful forms, distorted representations of initials of names," and as being "placed upon articles of merchandise, because armorial ensigns could not have been so placed without debasement."¹ And that may very well have been, as a rule, but it is perfectly clear that, in the West of England at any rate, towards the close of the sixteenth and well on through the seventeenth century, there was not the same antagonism in social life between landowning and merchantry, so manifest both in earlier and later days. This is seen very remarkably, not merely in the records of our elder municipalities, but in the number of persons entitled to coat armour who issued the tradesmen's tokens of the time of Charles II., and who placed their family arms upon them. Some of the elder merchants put their marks upon shields; and a writer in one of the Harleian MSS. deemed some such device so near akin to armorial bearings as to require the explanation, "They be none armys, but a marke as marchaunts vse; for everye manne may take hyme a marke, but not armys, without an herawde or Percyvaunte."

It seems rather singular that throughout the career of the Devonshire Association no one has touched upon these interesting features of our ancient trading life; and I simply do so now in order to direct attention to the subject as one that is full worthy of investigation. There must be a great number of these marks yet extant in connection with our chief mediæval business centres, deserving record, chiefly on deeds, but in all probability more frequently in connection with churches and other ancient buildings than has yet been recognised; and those which are reproduced in connection with this paper must be regarded simply as an illustrative sample. The four-shaped figure which appears in connection with so many is the distinctive device of the wool staple or official mart, and may be taken as a general indication that those who used it were connected with the woollen trade—

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which mainly absorbed the energies of our western mediæval merchants, and on which the fortunes of many notable families and of many noteworthy churches—as no Tiverton audience should need reminding—were built.²

Annexed is a list of the marks illustrated on the accompanying plate.

1. Philip Blake, 1697, Plymouth.
2. Rowland Breufforth, 1613, Plymouth.
3. Robert Brown, 1529.
4. R. Baxter, 1432.
5. Watermark under the jester's head on a sheet of foolscap at Bodmin, written upon in 1688.
6. William Boon, 1574, Plymouth.
7. John Brooking, 1574. These are attached to the same document in the Plymouth archives.
8. Probably Thomas Holland, of Dartmouth, attached to a deed 30th Elizabeth, in the Plymouth archives, to which Richard Pery, of Exon, and Holland, were parties.
9. Samuel Eastlake, 1672, Plymouth.
10. Unknown. In the Trelawny papers published by the Maine Historical Society; but probably Devonian, with the four following.
11. Appended to a letter from Narias Hawkins, in the same collection.
12. Appended to a letter from Mrs. Amias Mauericke; ditto.
13. Appended to a letter from Edward Trelawny; ditto.
14. John Winter, of Plymouth and New England; ditto.
15. Unknown, 1415.
16. St. Mary Arches Church, Exeter, 1550.
17. Colyton Church, 1612.
18. Axmouth Church, 1570.
19. Used by Henry Wallis, vicar of Plymouth, 1604-33, a proof that "mark" seals were adopted as well as "armorial" seals by others than those to whom they belonged, when they were required for merely formal purposes.
20. Raphus. Skett, Norwich, 1372. Given as an early example.
21. Tiverton, Wm. and John Sellicke (?), 1520.
22. Tiverton Church, 1644.
23. Ditto.
24. Collumpton Church, 1622.
25. Ditto 1585.
26. John Greenway, Tiverton Church.
27. John Waldron, ditto, 1579.
28. John Lane, Lane Chapel, Collumpton. The objects in the base are no doubt intended for wool packs.

² Generally throughout the Middle Ages special towns were fixed as the places where alone the trade in certain articles of commerce could be carried on. These towns were the "staples"—the articles became known as "staple" articles. The most important item of English produce was wool; and Exeter was the Devonshire "staple" for this commodity—dealings in which were strictly regulated by authority, of which the Mayor of the Staple, who had his seal, was the chief. There was also a Company of the Staple, which has survived, in name at least, to the present day; and it may very well be that these merchants who used the device of the Staple were members of, or in some way associated with, that organization.