

MUNICIPAL LIFE IN TAVISTOCK.

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

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TAVISTOCK is fortunate in the possession of one of the finest collections of parish records in existence. There are deeds dating back to 1287; churchwardens' accounts commencing in 1385—forty years earlier than any other warden-roll known to be in existence; miscellaneous documents beginning in 1370. Through the liberality of the Duke of Bedford these have all been examined, and a full calendar printed;¹ and my present object is simply to indicate some of the directions in which they throw special light on the local and personal history of the locality.

The first distinct mention of an organised system of local government is in a deed which dates itself either in 1320 or 1348, by the mention of Robert David as member for the borough, and which quit-claims a house and curtilage to Robert ffolka, "as it was determined by our common counsel and assent." Robert Blakesmyth is named as being then portreeve, the earliest on record, unless it be Henry de Kestawyk, who appears as "senior" of Tavystock in a deed that may be *temp.* Edward I.

In 1325 we have a grant made by Walter Cullyng, Roger Stacey, William Seleman, Robert the Salter, and John Populston, as brethren and wardens of the light of St. Mary in the parish church of Tavystoke, to Reginald of Eggecombe, clerk, and this is the first definite mention of the existence of a guild.

A guild seems to be implied, however, in the reference to the "great bridge" as then existing in an undated deed,

¹ *Calendar of the Tavistock Parish Records*, by R. N. Worth, F.G.S.

probably *temp.* Edward I. An imperfect document of the reign of Henry VIII. sets forth property belonging to the "Jesus yelde," some of it connected with the Cause, which appears to have formed one of the approaches to the bridge. The name Guile Bridge, familiar in the story of Childe, the Hunter, is really Guild Bridge; and we know that it was built some time before 1370, because in that year there was an appeal made by Stephen, Abbot of Tavistock, and the convent of the same place, with certain *burgesses* of the borough, for "alms towards the sustentation and repair of the great stone bridge adjoining the town of Tavystock over the great water called the Tavy, which runs down violently from the moor, where there is no good ford." The bridge is there said to have been erected "*per antecessores nostros.*"

It is worthy of notice that the burgesses named are twelve in number, and that they are evidently intended to represent the borough, which looks very much as if we had here a kind of corporation, possibly connected with the manor jury, by whom from time immemorial the portreeve was chosen. The names given are: John of Meauwy, Richard Lamborne, John atte forde, Richard Tope, Robert Reeke, Roger Milleton, John Wendout (Windeat), Thomas Ock, William Strout, Robert Ayschforde, Luke Selyman, and Robert Joce. Two of these we elsewhere find filling the office of portreeve—John atte forde, in 1364, and Robert Ayshforde, in 1390. John Forde represents the borough in 1382 and 1388, and John Wyn-doute in 1378 and 1386; and these facts also point in the corporate direction.

The list of portreeves to be gathered from the documents is very imperfect.

Edward I.	Henry de Kestawyk
1320-48 (?)	Robert Blakesmyth
Edward III.	Robert Kroker
1330	Richard Kroker
1338	Ralph atte Wylle
1340	David of Milemete
1342	John Wytham
1360-61	Walter of Lanstharaforde
1364	John atte forde
1366	William Stapledon
1375	William Mey
1378	Richard Estecote
1382	William Thorne
1386	Walter atte Barne
1390	Robert Aysforde

1398	Walter Bradeleygh
1402	John Walraddon
1403	John Lybbe
1406-7	Richard Piper
1417	Richard ffr[en]ch
1434	William Aysheforde
1464	William Drake
1497	Richard Lybbe

These all occur as witnesses to deeds, and the last is given Mayor [Maior]. It will of course be borne in mind that portreeve is a distinctive title of a Saxon "headman" of a township, and that its use therefore implies the existence of a system of local government in Tavistock before the Conquest.

The parochial year in Tavistock ran from the Feast of the Invention of the Holy Cross; and the names of the first wardens given are Thomas Ley, appointed 1384, and William Strod, mentioned as in arrear in 1386, who was probably Ley's predecessor. There was only one warden, and he was at first called "warden of the light of the Church of the blessed Eustachius of Tavistock."

But there were other wardens. Three accounts have been preserved, written on small pieces of parchment, and not on rolls, for 1405-6, 1407-8, and 1411-12, and these set forth the receipts and expenditure of the "warden of the *store* of the blessed Eustachius." This store consisted of live stock—oxen, cows, sheep, and goats; and the net receipts were paid to one John Nyk, or Nyks, gubernator of the church.

And beyond these again there is casual mention of various guilds, whose accounts were evidently their own private affairs. The phrase "warden of the light" for the general church accounts disappears in the 15th century. In 1470 John Brune is "custodis legitti;" in 1538 Roger Collen is "warden of the high store of the parish church of Tavistock;" in 1522 Walter Gloubbe is "warden of the pyshe;" in 1555 Richard Bater is "warden of the parishe church." Two wardens first appear in 1561, and they for some time vary between warden of the "church" and "store," the most notable entry being that of Margaret and John Wythecombe, as joint wardens in 1594. But there were practically two wardens as far back as 1539, when John Lybbe accounts as bailiff of the parish lands.

The first account preserved, that of 1385-6, sets forth six properties as belonging to the parish: the park of Crewelake,

gardens of Christina Crokker, of Richard Spora, and Saint Marie, garden formerly Robert Wodemanyswell, and tenement formerly Robert Brente, the total rents being 9s. 9d. By various gifts the possessions of the church gradually and steadily increased, until a rent roll *circa* 1535 sets forth thirty-eight properties, yielding an annual rent of £16 2s. 1d., besides six chief rents amounting to £1 1s. 4½d. This was independent of the rent of the Jesus Guild—£2 19s. 8d.

But it would seem that while these lands and tenements are said to belong to the parish church, and were certainly managed by the wardens, some of them must have had a special appropriation. The expenditure in the early accounts is strictly upon church matters; but when we reach 1470 we find the almshouse introduced. Unfortunately there is a gap of forty-three years between this account and the preceding one preserved, so that we cannot say more than that the almshouse comes into the accounts somewhere between 1427 and 1470. Subsequently it became the custom to make a separate account for the almshouse, and to associate for that purpose special wardens with the churchwardens. The earliest of these accounts preserved is dated 1586.

It was the practice to make special collections for special purposes as early as 1423, when money is said to have been collected for the "new bell."

A new element is introduced in the account for 1555, in the provision of a bedstead for the schoolmaster, and we have also money laid out in paving on the East Bridge. In 1561-2 there are several items of expenditure on the schoolhouse itself; and from this date the rolls begin to assume that general character with which we are so familiar in churchwardens' accounts down to practically the present time. A church rate appears in 1566-7: "Itm receyved of the pissheners towards the mayntenaunce and repaying of the churche," £8 6s. 6d. But the wardens had then somehow acquired a more important source of income in the market houses and fairs, which yielded £14.

In this year we have the first extant entries of payments for killing foxes, for the relief or sending away of poor people, for sugar and wine to justices when they kept sessions, for soldiers, for a lawsuit about the commons, and the like. Soon after we get gifts to people who begged by licence—for lazar houses, for prisoners; and in 1574 we learn that the vicar had £10 a year for teaching the scholars, and William Shere £4 for teaching the little children.

In 1588 we have, in addition to the church rate, a rate

made for the "settinge fourthe of Souldyers for the guardinge of the queene's maties person," money paid to various preachers, John Drake the grammar school master, and the first of many entries of relief to Irishmen who begged by licence, with sometimes an Irish gentleman or gentlewoman.

Side by side with the manor court, and with the more distinctly-defined ecclesiastical organization of the parish and the guilds, there grew up a quasi-municipal authority (of which the list of burgesses given in the already-cited document of 1370 may be a vestige), neither created nor confirmed by charter, but eventually exercising considerable powers.

It is possible that the custom of appointing feoffees of the lands belonging to the church, the almshouse, for general parish purposes, and in later days of the lands of the Maudlin house of St. Mary Magdalen and St. Theobald, may have helped the growth of what at first was only incidental. There is documentary evidence of the appointment of feoffees in the fourteenth year of Henry VI., there is a complete list of the feoffees then existing in a deed of 1460; and in 1483 we find a distinction observed between Tavistock borough and Tavistock parish.

Now in 1552 we have acting as feoffees, and granting leases in conjunction with the churchwardens, under the title of the "eight men"—John Badge, Henry Willy, John Glubbe, William Grills, John Glandfild att Wyll, John Cornysche, Walter Master, and William Poynter, otherwise Kedly. In the previous year eight men, but not so-called, take a grant on behalf of the parish, including Badge, Kedly, Glandfyld, Glubb, Grylles, Wylles, and Mayster, John Touker taking the place of Cornysche. In 1540 other eight act on behalf of the parish, six of whom are described in 1533 as feoffees.

This seems to make pretty clear the development of feoffees into the "eight men." The second mention as "the eight men" is in 1560, when William Nycoll takes the place of Walter Master. They are not, however, now feoffees; for a body of feoffees (twenty-five in number) are found acting in 1563, and other feoffees at later dates; and in 1585 we have the constitution of the "eight men" duly set forth as chosen—

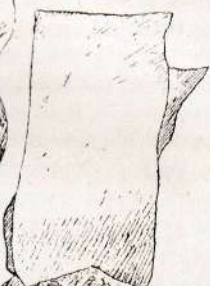
"By gen'all assent & consent of the pishe of Tavistock to be Supuisors and dispensatours to & for the behouf and vse of the saide Churche & pishe of Tavistock & of the

poore people of the same, and also of the lazar and poore people of the hospitall there, namelie for appointinge, doinge, vsinge, dispensinge, and ordringe the yerelie Revenewes, pfitts, lands, tenem^{ts}, goods, chattells, and other affares that any waie touche belong or concerne the said Church & pishe."

Now this is a tolerably large commission, and it did not lose in effect as time went on. By 1660—how much earlier we cannot say—the "eight men" had become "the Masters of the Towne & Parish of Tauistocke," and had agreed to meet together in the church "euery first Monday in the moneth to consult of & consider about the busines of the parish." The custom seems to have been to continue the masters and simply fill vacancies, so that they were in effect chosen for life, precisely as if they had been the aldermen of an old-fashioned chartered corporation. The other public officers—churchwardens, overseers of the poor, collectors of the poor, and sometimes supervisors of highways—were chosen annually.

It appears eventually to have been the practice for the "Masters and Governors of the Town and parish of Tavistock," as they are described in 1678, to take part in—and apparently in some sort to authenticate by so doing—all sorts of public affairs. They authorize payments by the churchwardens, join with the inhabitants in offering rewards for the destruction of foxes, with the overseers in agreeing on payments for the poor, with the feoffees of the Maudlin lands in leasing portions of that property, and themselves act as feoffees of the parish lands. In 1697 they are described as "ffeoffees and Masters Customary of the parish lands of Tavistocke;" in 1705 as "Masters and Governors of the town and parish of Tavistock, and Trustees of the lands commonly called the Maudlin lands." And thus they would seem to end practically where they begun. The masters of 1705 cannot be traced as a distinct body later than 1711, after which we get the acts of ordinary feoffees only, some of whom, as respected a grant by Dame Mary Knivett, were created by a deed of that year. And since we find sundry other properties dealt with by the same feoffees, there is very little doubt that eventually all the endowments of the parish became vested in the one body.

We have only one example in the papers of joint action on the part of the portreeve and the "eight men"—a petition to the Earl of Bedford, *circa* 1677—"of your Portrieve and the Masters of yo^r Towne and Burrough of Tavistock," touching St. John's Chapel, once used as a pest-house.



TAVISTOCK SEALS.

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The portreeve was the most important link between the past and present. Representing the head-man of the Saxon community, with a recorded historical existence and continuance of at least six centuries, long preceding the "eight men" and long outliving them, his public life came to an end in 1885, when the disfranchisement of Tavistock borough closed a line of membership which began in 1295, and relieved him of the duty of returning officer.

These facts, touching the development of local government in Tavistock on the lines of the Saxon township and feudal manor, are scattered through the records in such an irregular fashion that it seemed well worth while to bring them together, the more so as I am unacquainted with the existence of a similar body of evidence in any other non-chartered town. But it is only one line of enquiry out of many—personal, ecclesiastical, social, historical—for which these singularly interesting, albeit chronologically imperfect, records afford material.

I append engravings of a few characteristic seals:

I. Virgin and child attached to a lease of the Maudlin Hospital, 1542. II. Seal to grant of William fresshepond, 1464. III. Seal of Robert folka, 1330. IV. Rush-ring seal to grant by feoffees, 1460. V. Seal affixed by John Wale, chaplain, to grant to Thomas Mewy and Richard Melaton, 1389 (?). VI. Seal of Maudlin Hospital, 1542. VII. Seal to lease from Luke Wyndsore to Roger Bykawylle, 1389.