

Anglo-Saxon Origins of the Civic Trust & The Dover Society. Jack Woolford



Mediaeval Law Court (from manuscript)

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The roots of amenity societies in general, and of the Civic Trust and The Dover Society in particular, go back a very long way to concepts of representation and consent within communities. At latest these are of medieval origin, although there were certainly ancient Greek and Roman precedents and it is not impossible that there was some community participation in decision-making in palaeolithic, mesolithic, neolithic, bronze and iron age societies if not in their neanderthal and hominid precursors.

Anglo-Saxon chiefs were elected before the 5th century invasions of what became England, and Anglo-Saxon and Danish freemen participated in the various political, administrative and judicial functions of the *moot*, an assembly of freemen. In 12th century England the institution of the *jury* involved popular participation in the courts of *common law* and by the end of the 13th the bases of *parliament*, the House of Commons (i.e. *communities*) as well as Lords, had been created. Craft and Merchant Gilds in towns regulated both manufacture and trade: representation and consent were thus already institutionalised in both central and local government. Before the middle of the 15th century the principle that the redress of grievances should precede the voting of supplies (i.e. taxation) had been asserted: the whole unique and precious apparatus of charters, statutes, petitions, of local quarter sessions as well as assizes, and of locally-based sheriffs and justices of the peace had been established.

By what means? Predominantly by rebellion! Initially it was essentially aristocratic, baronial rebellion which placed fetters on kings but victories like *Magna Carta* (1215) were so worded as to be plausibly interpreted much more widely: *no taxation without representation*, ultimately for commoners as well as lords, was the outcome. Moreover, at least from the 1320s, there were lower class revolts, notably the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, and from the contemporary Lollard preachings of John Ball the whole subsequent radical programme for what came to be called 'democracy' could (with hindsight) be deduced.

In the 15th century the Wars of the Roses were exclusively baronial but in the 16th Henry VIII exalted the power of the Reformation Parliament in order to challenge the Papacy and although Queen Elizabeth I tried to resist parliamentary limitations on her political, financial and religious powers, in the 17th century Civil War we see not only the permanent abridgement of despotic monarchy by the execution of Charles I on Jan 31

1649. All the techniques of petitions, pressure groups, propaganda, judicious (or wicked) displays of force and every imaginable political ploy are there. Since then, though the processes have been much prolonged, not to say delayed, the Leveller principle that "what touches all should be approved by all" has been transformed into universal suffrage and eligibility for office.

The transformation has resulted from popular movements for political reform, notably the vote, and for the rights to organise religious sects, trade unions, political parties and other self-help and self-protecting organisations. Forming and running committees, appointing chairmen, secretaries and treasurers, keeping minutes and accounts, collecting subs,



MEDIAEVAL INNKEEPER, DYERS AND GLASSBLOWER from various manuscripts
 electing officers, organising support, learning the necessary technical and legal expertises and jargon, propagandising, lobbying, petitioning, parading, and occasionally showing necessary teeth, are techniques which we all learn in school, at work and at play in our multifarious clubs and societies. It is no exaggeration to say that the key to such success as we have in running a democratic constitution derives immediately and directly from our mother's milk of community membership and committee participation in its affairs. Moreover it is the *networks* of committees with overlapping memberships, for example of parish councils and councillors with district and county councils and councillors (and officers), with amenity societies, charitable trusts and professional organisations *ad lib* and *ad infinitum*, which makes possible the necessary achievements of compromise and consensus. As the late Lord Balfour said, the foundation of a democracy is a people so fundamentally at one that they can safely afford to bicker.

It is not, therefore, surprising that this should have happened in 1964 for the Civic Trust and in 1988 for The Dover Society by people with a particular concern for the environment. Their founders were only repeating what the founders of the nonconformist churches, the Whig and Tory parties, the Amalgamated Societies of Woodworkers or Engineers and the National Trust, the Victorian Society, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings *et al* had done earlier down the centuries stretching back continuously to 5th century Angles and Saxons and beyond. It is a worthy succession and it offers an invaluable occupation!.