

Dover's Medieval Guilds and Craftsmen

..... *By Ivan Green*

Like most old towns, Dover had a number of guilds. Some were craft guilds, of which those connected with leather were prominent in the town which had a great reputation for the product of its two tanneries, and of goods made from it. The tanners, shoemakers and saddlers were all craft guilds, while the drapers and mercers were small shopkeepers. All these operated in Dover.

The old organisation of the Cinque Ports Pilots had a strong base in Dover, and were members of the Court of Lodemanage of the Cinque Ports. Lodemanage, the name of their court, may seem to be an odd title, but in early times it was often written as two separate words, Lode and Manage. When one considers that one of the several meanings of Lode is a water course, the meaning becomes plain, the managers of the water, a fit description of the work of the pilots.

The Court of Lodemanage was more regularly organised for the control of the pilots by 1526, when four pilots from Dover, one from Deal, and two from Margate were licensed. Deal and Margate were of course members of Dover, in the Cinque Ports organisation. An important Dover guild in early times was the Fellowship of the Passage, created to control the sailings of ships between Dover and the continent. The Fellowship was instituted by a royal charter dated the 14th of September, 1312.

Parts of it are well worth quoting: 'Be it known unto all men... that whereas debates, contents and riots have often

been stirred up in the town of Dover... by which many of the said town have been impoverished and like to be ruined, because they could not pass with their ships, nor gain as the powerful and the rich did: it is agreed and assented to by all the Companions of the Company... in the presence of the Mayor and of the whole Commonalty... that from the day of the making of this document henceforward no passenger ship shall cross except by turn, that is to say, each ship three fares as soon as it can well be done, and after the three fares finished and completed, that ship shall not cross with passengers until all the passenger ships that belong to the Company... shall have made three fares in like manner..., and if any of the said Company causes his ship to cross against the form of this ordinance, be it by force or by prerogative... and can be convicted thereof, let him be amerced in 100 shillings sterling. It is also ordained and assented to by all the Companions... that four good and loyal members of the said Company be elected Wardens to protect the said ordinance well and loyally... The word 'fares' in the document means individual crossings

The hackneymen were concerned with land transport to and from the port of Dover. They drove the horses and bullocks which pulled the carriages, wagons and vans which carried passengers to and from the ships, also large quantities of goods to and from the warehouses at the harbour, but they were not concerned with the loading and unloading of the ships. They

travelled extensively, and were often away from their homes for times ranging from days to weeks.

All guilds had certain important functions. Senior members controlled membership of their guilds, limiting them to suitable people, and insisting on certain standards of performance. Many of the craft guilds operated tests by means of which members could advance their status. The word masterpiece comes from the guild 'master's piece' a test piece by means of which a member could achieve a higher position in his guild.

Senior positions in their guilds, gained through long years of training, resulted in many guild members being well qualified to serve their local authorities as important administrators and many Dover guild members did indeed serve the town as community leaders in all grades from mayor downwards.

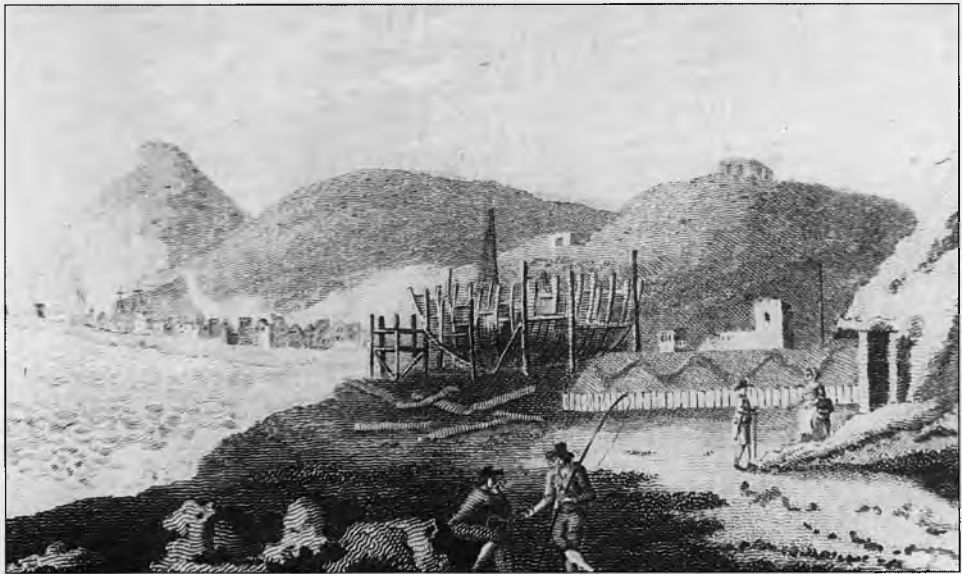
An important function of the guilds was to maintain quality and price so as

to convince the local authority that both these matters were satisfactory. It was important for the guilds to maintain good relations with authority, whether it was the local institution, or on major contracts for the civic or church authorities who granted the contract.

Another essential was the care for, and the maintenance of, sick and old aged members, and of their families, especially when the member was working away from his family and home. In times when travelling was very slow and difficult, perhaps involving walking for days or even weeks, this was very important. Many building workers, like the pilots and hackney men, though based in the town, pursued their calling far away from their home bases.

No details of any guild of early local paper makers seems apparently to survive. It seems probable that the first paper produced locally was done by religious refugees from the continent.

In 1636 the Corporation granted 'the lease of a chamber over Biggin Gate for



An old drawing of ship building on the beach at Dover. Old St James's church is shown on the right.

22 the convenience of the Guild of Glovers, Shoemakers, Saddlers, Collar makers and Cobblers who had their guild house there'. This was long after the great days of the old guilds, so it was probably a 17th century amalgamation of what was left of them for mutual assistance and support.

Dover had many other craftsmen who were not incorporated into guilds. They included those who built the town's ships. Ship building, was a communal activity carried on the open beach, but the oversight of the work, and the exercising of some important skills tended to become family concerns, handed down from parents to their children, in particular the building of wooden ships, the making of ropes and sails, and the caulking of the hulls.

Many men, not incorporated into guilds, worked in the various building

trades, and were responsible for the houses and commercial buildings and, in the 14th and 15th century, the erection and the maintenance of the town's walls and gates.

The great buildings, in particular the castle, the Maison Dieu and Dover Priory, were in the hands of travelling masons who were an elite, with no permanent bases in the town. They moved all over the land, and even over Europe. They travelled from one great stone building project, be it cathedral, castle or mansion, to another wherever their skills were needed. The first known King's Master Mason, Maurice the Engineer, worked as the head of a group of masons of varying degrees of skill for some years in Dover. Having built the new castle at Newcastle for King Henry the Second, he was sent by the king to Dover, where he was in charge of a large group of masons



An old print of Dover. All these buildings, work of local craftsmen, have long since gone.

The old doors of the Museum beneath the Maison Dieu. They were originally the entrance doors to old St James's Church.



building the great keep of Dover castle. Other groups of masons also worked in the town, building the Maison Dieu and Dover Priory, to name the most outstanding, but they had no communal base here. When a particular building was finished, they moved away to another.

Some carpenters, also an elite group of craftsmen, also accompanied the masons, to work on roofs and interior fittings and furnishings of the buildings, though many were employed on more local work, especially the wooden houses and warehouses of the town. In contrast to all these organised groups of craftsmen, blacksmiths were usually

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completely independent and locally based. There were, it is true, itinerant blacksmiths who were always on the move, setting up temporary forges to work on great estates, some of them producing considerable works, such as great entrance gates, some of which were wonderful examples, both of art and of fine craftsmanship.

However, most blacksmiths were permanently based individuals in the community - separate and a little aloof, but very highly regarded as the workers of metal for the needs of the community, especially for the metal fittings of ships, coaches, wagons, harness and general repairs. They made and repaired the metal tools for all other craftsmen, and even produced quantities of nails for the woodworkers.

They became immensely important in Dover in the 19th century when the first steam powered ships were

used, by producing many replacement parts for the new engines. They were often of brusque manner, but highly regarded for their mastery of metal.

The 19th century saw the growth of the friendly societies, many of them becoming of countrywide importance. These confined themselves to the charitable work of the old Guilds, but local groups of men still joined together for mutual support and assistance in time of need. A fine example was the River 'Papermakers' Friendly Benefit Club, the early years of which form the basis for another article.

All illustrations, including the cover picture, are from Ivan Green's collection.