

JOHN CARPENTER – A FAMOUS TOWN CLERK 1417–1438

It seems to be the case that few Town Clerks of the City of London have marked out notable places for themselves in the City's history. John Carpenter, however, is an exception. Every City of London school-boy knows about John Carpenter, for it was he whose benefaction led to the foundation of his school. For this reason as well as for the valuable service which he gave as Town Clerk (or Common Clerk as the office was then called) and to the community generally he well deserves the high place which he holds in the estimation of succeeding generations of the citizens of London.

John Carpenter became Common Clerk in 1417, four years after Henry V came to the throne, and he continued to serve for twenty years in the long reign of his successor Henry VI. He resigned in 1438 and died four years later, when he was about sixty-five years old.

The Lancastrian period, which began with Henry IV in 1399 was not a peaceful epoch either at home or abroad. His son Henry V strove to divert attention from the growing rivalries of the Yorkists and Lancastrians by carrying war to France, where he gained the celebrated victory of Agincourt in 1415 and a French princess as his queen. The war, which is known to us as the Hundred Years' War, lingered on into the following reign, but soon after the burning of Joan of Arc in 1431 all France was lost except Calais. Carpenter lived throughout these stirring times.

Of one who lived in the Middle Ages it is not possible to present an intimate picture of his upbringing. No authentic portrait or statue of him survives, but many facts about his life are known, and these with judgments one may form from a perusal of the testamentary dispositions of himself and his wife Katherine reveal the character and nature of the man.

Carpenter lived all his life in the City. His family home was in Billiter Lane (as the street was then called), and he had close connections with the parish church of St. Peter in Cornhill, where he lies buried. He had brothers and sisters, and as his elder brother was also named John he was referred to as John Carpenter Junior. The historian Stowe uses for him the name Jenkyn Carpenter, the diminutive of John. The educational establishment nearest his home and of which he was probably a pupil was St. Anthony's Hospital in Threadneedle Street. This was part of an ecclesiastical foundation (which he remembered in his will) comprising a church and a hospital as well as a school, and derives its fame from the fact that Sir Thomas More was a pupil there. Its site is now marked by one of the familiar blue plaques.

One may infer that Carpenter was studious and intelligent, as he appears to have started his public career in the department of the Common Clerk at Guildhall. He obviously gave a good account of himself, for in 1417 he was elected to succeed the retiring holder of that office John Marchaunt, who had retired through ill-health. Carpenter's good nature is shown by his agreement to forego part of the emoluments of office for the benefit of his predecessor.

Very quickly after taking office Carpenter realised the advantages to be gained for administrative purposes from the existence of a composite written record of the ordinances and usages of the City which lay scattered throughout its books, rolls and charters. He would have acquired a growing knowledge of this material during his early years at Guildhall, and he set himself to produce such a compilation. This was at length completed in 1419.

The work evolved into a large volume divided into four books. It was written in Latin and in the Anglo-Norman language; happily a translation was made by H.T. Riley and published in 1859. Its value, of course, is now historical rather than practical. It is a mine of information about the roots of present day procedures of the Corporation. A great deal of Carpenter's thought and effort must have been devoted to this work. I must, however, resist the temptation to enlarge on its contents in detail in this paper. The name Carpenter, without any initials, appears on the inner side of the first page. This is in accordance with the general practice of clerks of those days, but which now survives only in the case of the Town Clerk of London.

The book stands as a monumental contribution to the Corporation archives, which can only have been produced with help from Carpenter's staff. One calls to mind another magnum opus of a later period when Dr. Samuel Johnson worked at his dictionary in Gough Square surrounded by numerous amanuenses. Carpenter's book was at first called LIBER ALBUS. The original book is still preserved in Guildhall and is one of the Corporation's greatest treasures. Through the courtesy of the Deputy Keeper of Records I have arranged for the volume to be produced at this meeting, as I felt that it would give my fellow historians, as it gave me, especial interest and pleasure to see at close quarters such a valuable and notable relic of the Middle Ages.

No doubt the book acquired its title, Liber Albus, from its white binding. Later the book became known as LIBER NIGER, probably because frequent handling had blackened its covers, a tribute to its usefulness.

As a key figure in the life of the City Carpenter had many influential friends, several of whom appointed him as executor of their wills. His predecessor John Marchaunt did so, but the most famous testator

for whom he acted in this capacity was Richard Whittington, the leading civic figure of those times. Before his death Whittington had taken steps to set up a collegiate chapel of priests with some almshouses at the church of St. Michael Royal near his home in what is now College Hill. His will provided for the completion of the scheme, and this was carried out by his executors. The original ordinances of this charity still exist in the possession of the Mercers' Company, of which Whittington was a member. On the first page is a homely illustration of Whittington on his death bed. Alongside the bed are depicted John Carpenter and his three co-executors with a group of almsmen. The figures are named; Carpenter in the forefront is shown as short in stature, but one cannot be certain, of course that the facial representation is correct.

It is probable that Carpenter took the lead in dealing with Whittington's affairs, and as such he must have been a busy man. In carrying out the will the executors rebuilt Newgate prison and the City gate there, repaired St. Bartholomew's Hospital and contributed to the completion of Guildhall (the building of which had been commenced in 1411) by lining the floor with purbeck stone and doing other works. They also obtained a charter from Henry VI, confirming a grant by Richard II, creating the Mercers a corporate body. This brought Carpenter into close touch with the Mercers, which no doubt led to his becoming a member of that fraternity.

Another testamentary duty on the part of Whittington's executors was to join with the executors of one William Bury in erecting a library for the books and documents of the Corporation on a site near Guildhall adjoining the chapel there. This was a task very much to Carpenter's taste, for he was a great lover of books, and to judge from the large number mentioned in the will which he made in 1441 he had a valuable collection. Thomas Brewer, the first secretary of the City of London school, wrote a memoir of the Life and Times of John Carpenter (from which I have derived much help in preparing this paper), in which he sets out this will in extenso, and as an appendix gives a list of books belonging to Carpenter with comprehensive notes on each. The books are largely classical and theological, and reveal Carpenter as a scholar, a man of piety and a bibliophile. It should be remembered that the books were all in manuscript, Caxton not having set up his press in Westminster until the later years of the century.

Carpenter's activities in connection with the library would have quickened his interest in the adjoining Guildhall chapel, especially as it was used for weekly services attended by the mayor and commonalty. Dedicated to St. Mary and All Saints the chapel had a chequered history, and was finally demolished in 1822. My fellow historians may remember the three regal stone figures of Edward VI, Elizabeth I and Charles I which formerly adorned the outside of the chapel and now stand on an inner staircase within Guildhall.

Carpenter made two wills. The one which I have mentioned deals only with personal property, but it contains a reference to another will of his lands and tenements. No trace of this other will has ever been found.

Writing in his Survey of London in 1598 the historian Stow briefly mentions a benefaction by Carpenter for maintaining and educating four poor men's children. Historian David Clackson in his paper read to us in May 1961 and printed in volume III of our Transactions explains that in 1960 fresh light was thrown upon this statement as the result of research by Dr. Philip Jones, sometime Deputy Keeper of the Records. Dr. Jones showed that the revenues from Carpenter's lands and tenements had long been applied by the Corporation for the benefit of the choristers at the Guildhall chapel, and he suggested that the reason for the absence of the will was fear that transferring land to a corporation might lead to forfeiture to the crown under the laws of mortmain. The practical course was to convey the land to a friend or friends in reliance upon their integrity to carry out the benefactor's wishes.

This apparently was the course which Carpenter adopted, so that it must be accepted that his benefaction derives not, as originally thought, from any direct testamentary disposition of his own, but through intermediaries. Carpenter made over property (of which full details survive) to his two Guildhall friends Chedworth and Langford. The latter having died, Chedworth decided to pass on the property to John Don, a citizen and mercer, (who should not be confused with the metaphysical poet and eminent divine John Donne, who became Dean of St. Paul's). By this time the possibility of forfeiture had faded and John Don made a will faithfully carrying out Carpenter's wishes. Historian Clackson in his paper quotes the will at length. Don directed that the revenues of the property should be used to find and maintain in perpetuity four boys within the City who should be called in the vulgar tongue "Carpenter's Children" to assist at divine service in the choir of the chapel, and study at schools most convenient for them. The will gives interesting particulars of the provision to be made for the clothing, boarding and general welfare of the boys.

It is not my intention in this paper to explain the steps by which Carpenter's benefaction for the choristers through John Don led to the building by the Corporation of the first City of London School in Honey Lane Market off Cheapside opposite Bow Church. That is another story and has indeed already been told by Historian Clackson in his paper to which I have referred.

No one can dispute that it was Carpenter's act of bounty for the choristers which led to the foundation of the City of London school. Although it is the province of old men to dream dreams Carpenter could not have imagined that he was benefiting generations of London

boys in a school such as the City of London school, and securing for himself lasting fame. Tall oaks from little acorns grow.

As the years passed Carpenter grew in standing and influence. In 1431 the Corporation granted him a lease of property in the parish of St. Peter for eighty years at the rent of a red rose, a period which would obviously have covered the remainder of his life. The site is now part of Leadenhall Market. This was followed in 1436 by a patent of exemption from public duties other than those which he was then performing, but notwithstanding this easing of his responsibilities Carpenter gave up his post of Common Clerk two years later. His sense of public duty, however, prompted him to accept appointment in 1438 as one of the City's four representatives in a parliament which first met in Cambridge and then in Westminster, but in the same year Henry VI granted him letters patent of exemption for the whole of his life from all military and civic duties whatsoever, including being returned to parliament. Idleness, however, was not part of Carpenter's nature, and in the last three years of his life we find him acting as counsel for the Corporation in various causes.

John Carpenter predeceased his wife Katherine by sixteen years. They had no children of their own, but they adopted two. A reading of the 1441 will provides an insight into the sort of man he was. He begins with the solemn introduction customary in those days, leading to the direction "my vile corpse to be buried near the entrance to the chief chancel of the church of St. Peter in Cornhill, where I am a parishoner". To judge from the multiplicity of individual bequests of silver and money Carpenter accumulated a fair degree of wealth, and from his numerous gifts for pious observances one may infer that he was a religious man, especially as a legacy is included for Sir William Tailliour, who is described as "my chaplain living with me". One is not surprised to note the many legacies of books, all individually and carefully identified.

His qualities of humility and compassion are shown by his direction for the sale of "my furred gowns and other sumptuous vestments which, God forgive me, I have many times abused in superfluous and useless performances", and for the proceeds to be used in the purchase of clothing for "poor devout persons having need thereof". There is also a bequest of money to the prior and convent of Charterhouse "of which I am an unworthy member". He remembered also the poor lepers at Holborn, at the Locks Hospital in Southwark and at Hackney, as well as the poor madmen at Bethlehem, and he gives an additional legacy to be disposed of by turns, according to the discretion of his executors for the poor prisoners in certain London prisons, which he names. His residuary estate is given to his executors for works of piety and mercy, with a proviso that —

“if any good or rare books shall be found amongst the said residue of my goods which may seem necessary to the common library at Guildhall, for the profit of the students there, and those discoursing to the common people, then I will and bequeath that those books be placed by my executors and chained in that library, under such form that the visitors and students thereof may be the sooner admonished to pray for my soul”

The name of John Carpenter will always be honoured at the City of London School. In a prominent place on the grand staircase facing the entrance to the school the Corporation has set up a life sized statue of him in his robes, holding his beloved LIBER ALBUS, and at the Lord Mayor's Visitation each year for prize-giving the Head Boy delivers a panegyric in his honour. Through the generosity of the Corporation scholarships are given at the school, continuing the line of "Carpenter's Children" of long ago. The memory of the boy choristers is preserved by the presence of the choristers of the Temple Church, who are all educated at the school. The Old Boys have adopted his name as the title of their club, and each year at their annual dinner a Silent Toast is drunk to his memory. An annual commemoration service is held at St. Peter's Church, Cornhill, when a wreath is laid by the President of the Club at the entrance to the chancel, where his body lies, the tomb itself having been destroyed at the Reformation. The Club has also erected a fine memorial tablet in the church.

In the long annals of the Corporation the fame of John Carpenter rests secure, and his name will always be held in honoured remembrance.

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