

## RICHARD WHITTINGTON

Richard Whittington - or at any rate Dick Whittington - is the possessor of undoubtedly the best known name in the long history of the City. It is the more surprising, therefore, that he should not hitherto have been the subject of a G.H.A. paper. For most of us the historical figure of Richard Whittington and the Dick Whittington of legend and pantomime are inextricably mixed, and if truth be told it is probably the elements of the pantomime story which linger most vividly in our minds. Which of us does not recall those visits to the theatre at Christmas time, the glamour of the principal boy, the furry appeal of the cat and the age old attraction of a rags to riches story.

According to the popular story, Dick Whittington, a poor orphan employed as a scullion by a rich merchant, Sir Hugh Fitzwarren, sent his only possession, his cat, on one of his master's trading ships. Meanwhile, distressed by ill treatment Dick runs away from his master but turns back when he hears Bow bells pealing "Turn again Whittington", only to find that his venture has brought him a fortune, for the King of Barbary who was plagued with rats and mice had purchased the cat for a vast sum. Thereupon Dick marries his master's daughter, succeeds to his business and goes on to become thrice Lord Mayor of London. It has to be confessed at once that this charming story did not appear until more than 150 years after Whittington's death. How did it come into existence? To find out we must look first at what is known of the story, more sober perhaps but scarcely less remarkable, of the historical Richard Whittington. Much research into the facts of Whittington's life has been done of late, particularly on the topics of the sources of his wealth and on his benefactions, and the account which follows is heavily indebted to two recent studies, "Richard Whittington: the Man behind the Myth" by Dr. Caroline Barron which was published in 1969 in Studies in London History presented to Philip Jones, the former Deputy Keeper of the Records, on his sixty-fifth birthday, and The Charity of Richard Whittington by Miss Jean Imray which was published in 1968 to mark the re-building of Whittington's Almshouse by the Mercers' Company.

Although a number of counties have laid claim to be the birth-place of Richard Whittington, it seems now to be generally accepted that he came from Gloucestershire and was born at Pauntley, the third son of a local

knight, Sir William Whittington, and his wife Joan, who was the daughter of one sheriff of Gloucestershire, William Maunsell, and widow of another, Thomas Berkeley. Richard Whittington, therefore, was gentle born but as the third son of the family he would have had to make his own way in the world. Sir William's lands at Pauntley and elsewhere passed on his death in 1358, first to the eldest son William who died without heirs, and then to the second son Robert who was to outlive Richard. In later life Richard himself acquired some property interests in Gloucestershire, notably the manor of Over Lyppiatt which seems to have come into his possession through his maternal uncle, Philip Maunsell, and which after Richard's death was in the hands of the descendants of his brother Robert.

The year of Richard Whittington's birth is uncertain for he was born long before parish registers existed to record baptisms, marriages and burials. It was almost certainly in the late 1350s. By the time of the first known reference to him, in 1379, he is already in London and sufficiently well established to be among those citizens contributing to a civic loan, albeit in the lowest category of those giving five marks. By 1384 he was a common councilman for Coleman Street Ward; in March 1393 he was elected alderman of Broad Street Ward; in the following September he was chosen as sheriff.

Whittington was a member of the Mercers' Company and his activities as a mercer in the early years of his career in London were to lay the foundations of his great wealth. In the 1380s and early 1390s he is known to have supplied velvets and other rich materials to a number of royal favourites and courtiers, and in 1389 there occurs the first record of the sale of goods by him to the king, to wit two cloths of gold. The splendour of the court of Richard II and the young king's personal fondness for and lavish expenditure upon rich clothes and jewels is well known. Only one account of the royal Great Wardrobe survives for this reign but this shows for 1392-4 expenditure of nearly £13,000 of which approximately a quarter was due to Whittington for fine cloths and luxury goods. When Richard II was deposed in 1399 he owed Whittington £1,000 for goods supplied to the Wardrobe and money lent to the king and this sum was repaid by order of his successor, Henry IV. The courts of Henry IV and Henry V were less lavish than those of Richard II. Whittington continued to supply mercery to the royal court, although on a declining scale, and it is of interest that he provided cloths of gold and pearls for the trousseaux of two of Henry IV's daughters, Blanche and Philippa, on their marriages to foreign princes.

Richard Whittington was three times Master of the Mercers' Company in 1395-6, 1401-2 and 1408-9. Many of his closest associates were mercers and it was to the trusteeship of the Company that two of the most outstanding of his charitable benefactions were to be entrusted. But it seems that he took no new apprentices in the Company after 1401, probably because his principal activities now had their centre elsewhere than in mercery. Richard had moved into the world of royal finance and was lending money as well as supplying goods to the crown. The researches of Dr. Caroline Barron have shown that between 1388 and 1422 Whittington advanced money to the crown, occasionally jointly with other merchants but usually on his own, on no less than fifty eight occasions. The first few loans in 1388-90 were for trifling sums but in 1397 came the first of his substantial loans, £572 in March, £382 in September and £666 in December, and it is to be remarked that it was in June of this year upon the death in office of Adam Bamme, the elected Mayor of the City of London, that Whittington was appointed by King Richard II to serve out Bamme's year of office.

Perhaps at this point it is appropriate to deal with the oft asked question of whether Whittington was mayor three or four times. As we have just seen he served by royal appointment from June - October 1397 in place of Bamme but was himself to be elected in the customary and constitutional way on three occasions and to hold office as elected mayor 1397-8, 1406-7 and 1419-20. He was mayor rather than lord mayor for the latter title did not come into current usage until the close of the fifteenth century and, incidentally, there is no evidence at all that he was ever knighted. Many of the attributions of knighthood to medieval mayors are later fabrications.

But to return to Richard's loans to the crown. These were made irrespective of political and dynastic changes. The first substantial loans were made to Richard II and indeed in the last two years of the reign when the king was becoming increasingly unpopular Whittington was the only individual Londoner to advance money to him. Yet this loyalty did not harm him. As already mentioned Henry IV ordered that the deposed Richard II's outstanding debts to Whittington should be repaid, and Whittington continued for the rest of his life to make many loans to the Lancastrian kings, Henry IV and Henry V. The scale of these loans was unmatched by any other contemporary London merchant and reached, for example, nearly £5000 in 1402 and nearly £3700 in 1408.

It seems unlikely that the direct financial profit to Whittington from these royal loans was in any way excessive. In Dr. Barron's view his chief motive in making them was the influence which he obtained in high places. In the

first year of Henry IV's reign, Whittington was one of three Londoners who, in recognition of the important part played by the City in the king's accession to the throne, were appointed briefly to be members of the king's council, the others being John Shadworth, also a mercer, and William Bampton, fishmonger. Whittington was also named in many royal commissions, including several relating to the seizure of ships and claims to cargoes where his experience in commerce and knowledge of the law merchant was doubtless of especial value. He served as mayor of the staples of both Calais and Westminster. He was consulted by many persons eminent in the affairs of the realm, and he must often have been privy to matters of royal policy.

Whittington's civic career, too, as we well know, was a notable one and was doubtless fostered by the general respect which was felt for him and by royal favour. When in June 1397 he was appointed mayor in Bamme's place, he removed from Broad Street to Bamme's aldermanry of Lime Street. This was not unusual for at this period aldermen were wont to change aldermanries one or more times in the course of their civic careers. However, once established in the ward of Lime Street, Whittington remained there until his death over twenty-five years later. When the time came for the mayoral election in September 1397 it was doubtless the knowledge of Whittington's good standing with Richard II which led to him being chosen by the citizens. Among the notable events of his first elected mayoralty was the organisation of Blackwell Hall as the City's market for the sale of cloth.

An innovation which accompanied his second mayoralty is of especial interest since it initiated a tradition which is still followed today. Before the election a mass was held in Guildhall Chapel, following which the citizens made their nominations for mayor "peaceably and amicably, without any clamour or discussion", and to perpetuate this desirable result it was ordained that such a mass should be held annually on this occasion. The custom of holding a religious service before the election is still observed, as you well know. At the time of his last mayoralty in 1419-20 Richard Whittington was at least sixty years old, his election being a remarkable tribute in a period when high civic office was usually served at a younger age. The court of aldermen in the fifteenth century was very busy with day to day administration of the City but it appears that Whittington missed only two of the sixty-five recorded meetings during his last mayoralty.

Whittington's loans to the crown were repaid sometimes in cash but often by assignments upon various sources of royal revenue, such as the tenths

and fifteenths and, most important, the wool subsidies. On three other occasions repayment took the form of a licence to export wool without paying the subsidy until the royal debt was paid, and it may have been because of this that Richard Whittington first became involved in the wool trade which was to become another major source of his wealth. Certainly he was exporting wool, perhaps on his own account or perhaps as the head of a group of mercers, in the years after 1404. Whittington's involvement in royal loans also led to his appointment as collector of the wool subsidy in London 1401-3 and 1407-10, which gave him the means of ensuring firstly that the assignments made to him upon that source of revenue were promptly paid, and secondly that his licences to export wool without paying customs could be executed without difficulty, and thus that the loans which he had advanced to the crown should be repaid.

In order to be able to make his large loans to the crown and perhaps sometimes to others Whittington must have kept much of his wealth in the form of liquid assets. In this he was exceptional in his time and he invested his wealth to a far less degree than was usual with many of his fellow merchants in real property. He acquired comparatively few lands outside London and those usually only briefly or for some special purpose and while his properties within the City were considerable they were by no means as extensive as might be expected of a man of his estate.

The most important of Whittington's City properties lay in the parish of St. Michael Paternoster where in 1402 he acquired the great tenement to the north of the church where he lived for the remainder of his life. At a date which we do not know Richard had married Alice, daughter of Sir Ivo Fitzwaryn, a Dorset knight. The date of her death is equally unknown but was certainly between 1402 and 1414 and probably before 1409 when the work of rebuilding the church of St. Michael Paternoster, to which Whittington contributed so largely, was begun. He may have undertaken this work of piety to provide a fitting place of burial for his wife and later for himself as well as for the salvation of his soul. The rebuilding continued during Whittington's lifetime and was completed by his executors. Whittington himself died early in 1423 sometime between 4th February, when it is recorded that he attended the Court of Aldermen, and 8th March, when his will was proved in the Court of Husting.

Richard and Alice had had no children and Richard's will holds no kinsman, friend or member of his household in individual remembrance. Only the four executors, of whom John Carpenter, Town Clerk of the City, was the chief, and the overseer are individually named. Whittington's charitable

gifts had begun in his lifetime and his will lists some thirty or so specific bequests: to the poor, to inmates of hospitals, to prisoners in the gaols, for the fabric of churches, the repair of highways and other good works. The residue was left to his executors to dispose of in works of charity for the good of his soul. These, the major part of his benefactions, are not specified. The question must be asked therefore, did they derive from wishes expressed by Whittington in his lifetime to Carpenter and his fellow executors or were they initiated by the executors themselves?

The principal benefactions arising from Whittington's will were the rebuilding of Newgate Gaol, the building of the south gate of St. Bartholomew's Hospital, the establishment of a library at Guildhall and the founding of the Whittington College and the Whittington Almhouse. The evidence, which is recounted in Miss Imray's book, is too long to be given in detail here, but there seems little doubt that the rebuilding of Newgate and the establishment of the College of Priests in St. Michael Paternoster and the Whittington Almshouse for thirteen poor men or women were the outcome of Whittington's own wishes. The work at St. Bartholomew's was undertaken in repayment of arrears of a quit rent due to the hospital but the scale of the expenditure, which far exceeded the monies due, may have owed something to the fact that one of the executors, Thomas White, had been master of the hospital. Similarly the library at Guildhall may have owed much to John Carpenter, who himself owned many books, but in his life-time Whittington had contributed substantially to the building and equipping of a library at Greyfriars and possibly had wished to see a library within the new Guildhall which was being built during the last decade of his life.

To endow the College and the Almshouse, the administration of which was entrusted to the Mercers' Company, the executors had to purchase lands in the City additional to those already owned by Whittington. It has already been remarked how exceptional Whittington was in the extent of his liquid assets. Miss Imray has calculated that his executors had about £6,500 or £7,000 to dispose of at his death of which only something over £1,200 was in the form of real property. The story of the College and the Almshouse has been recounted in an earlier paper read to this Association by Mr. Deputy Ralph Peacock. The College of Priests in St. Michael Paternoster came to an end at the Dissolution but the Almshouse, under revised conditions, lives on. It was moved in 1824 to Highgate near to where for more than a hundred years a stone had marked the spot where Whittington had supposedly heard the bells commanding him to turn back, and was

moved again in 1966 to a new site at Felbridge on the outskirts of East Grinstead.

Richard Whittington's eminence in his life time, his success in rising from obscure if well-born origins to become the wealthiest merchant of his time, and perhaps above all the munificent scale of his benefactions, which served to keep his name alive to succeeding generations, are his real claim to fame. They must also account for the attachment to his name of that legend which has ensured for Dick Whittington such an established place in popular mythology. As has been said the legend did not appear until long after Whittington's death and is not recorded, in print at least, until the early seventeenth century. Stow writing at the close of the sixteenth century makes no mention of it in his "Survey" although he was very well informed about Whittington's benefactions. Among early versions of the story are a play, now lost, called "The History of Richard Whittington, of his lowe byrth, his great fortune" which dates from 1605 and a ballad of 1641 entitled "London's glory and Whittington's renown ... being a remarkable story of how Sir Richard Whittington ... came to be three times Lord Mayor of London, and how his rise was by a cat". From these early versions the story has come down to us through popular chap books, nursery tales and in bowdlerised form in modern pantomime. Attempts are sometimes made to explain away elements in the story by theories such as that Whittington made his money from coal carried in Thames barges known as "cattes". But, as we have seen, Whittington did not make his money from coal which in any case was not used extensively in his time nor are there any references to the ships known as "cattes" before the seventeenth century. Another suggestion is that the cat is a confused derivation from the French "achat" meaning "trade". There is no need for such rationalisations. The story of a cat helping its owner to fortune occurs in the folklore of many countries and it is perhaps natural that here it should have become attached to a man of the calibre of Whittington. But however charming the association of Dick Whittington and his cat in story and legend Richard Whittington has no need of the support of his feline friend for his real story was in truth remarkable enough.

A.S.L.  
29.05.79