

**THE PARISH GILDS
OF MEDIAEVAL
ENGLAND**

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The Parish gilds of mediæval England by H. F. Westlake

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H. F. WESTLAKE

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THE GUILDHALL, HADLEIGH, SUFFOLK.

Parish Guilds, Frentisjice.

THE PARISH GILDS
OF
MEDIÆVAL ENGLAND

BY

H. F. WESTLAKE, M.A., F.S.A.

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PREFACE

It is impossible to understand the social life of England from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries without taking into account the considerable part played by the parochial gilds, yet it is true to say that this type of gild has received no more than casual attention from the social historian, and has been practically ignored by the modern writer on English Church history. The only adequate picture of the system of parochial gilds, that I know, still remains that given by Dr. Rock in 1849 in his *Church of our Fathers*. The picture is doubtless too idealistic, and it was based upon material in no way comparable to that which has since come to light, but it indicates, as I think, a truer understanding of the motives and objects which brought such gilds into being than that shown by any subsequent writer.

The first to call attention to new material was Mr. Toulmin Smith in *English Gilds* (E.E.T.S., 1870). He discovered at the Public Record Office the returns of gilds made in 1389 to Richard II., and printed forty-nine of those made in English, together with the translations of a few others. Unfortunately his death took place before he could record his considered judgment on them, but his daughter was able to summarise her father's views in a valuable preface. It is somewhat ungracious to criticise a pioneer in any subject, more especially when he can no longer reply to the criticism, but there are certain indications in Mr. Toulmin Smith's notes, as well as in the preface by his daughter, that he had little sympathy with the mediæval Church or understanding of the place occupied by such doctrines as those of purgatory, and the efficacy of masses and alms as a means of deliverance therefrom. He thus, I think, mistook the true character of the societies whose records he examined, and denied the existence of the religious motives which, as I shall hope to show, played so large a part in their formation.

That the nature of these societies has been misunderstood in other ways is, to me at least, abundantly evident. A writer in *Social England* (vol. ii., p. 172), dealing with the fourteenth

and early fifteenth centuries, says: "The prevalence of guilds in small country towns is evidence of a wide development of the artisan class." There could hardly be a less legitimate deduction. In the mind of this writer the word *gild* is inevitably associated with the idea of the craft, and he seems to have no conception of the parochial guilds as such, though these must have outnumbered by thousands those associations which had craft interests as their object.

I have endeavoured in this book to supply the materials for a new picture, and it remains for me to define both the scope and the limitations of what is here intended. I have not thought it necessary to draw illustrations from gild-life on the Continent or to discuss the claims of England to be the birthplace of guilds. The guilds-merchant and craft-guilds appear here only in their parochial or religious aspect. Out of the many hundreds of guilds whose records I have examined I have selected those only which seemed to afford the best types of parochial guilds in general or else to exhibit some notable variation therefrom—and, of course, the extent of the remaining records in each case has inevitably influenced that choice. In consequence many a prominent gild may remain unnoticed or receive only casual mention because it exhibited no points of difference from others.

The Appendix should be of considerable value to local historians as indicating the nature of one great source of available information for the earlier period. In the compiling of this I have to acknowledge with gratitude the invaluable aid of Miss Lilian Redstone, B.A., who undertook many transcriptions for which I had no leisure.

The greater part of the work has been based upon a careful study of original documents, but I have tried to indicate other sources of information, and must express my regret if any remain unacknowledged in the text. To Mr. Vincent Redstone, F.R.Hist.S., and Mr. Arthur Coldicott I owe much for the loan of notes and for comments generally. I have a debt also to acknowledge to many others, among whom are the Rev. H. H. King, the Rev. Canon Warren, F.S.A., the Rev. Father Thurston, S.J., Mr. William Martin, LL.D., F.S.A., Mr. W. A. Cater, F.S.A., and Mr. George Clinch, F.S.A.(Scot.).

H. F. WESTLAKE.

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