

GLOUCESTER AND DISTRICT ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH GROUP

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~ MEDIEVAL AND LATER GLOUCESTER ~

From the Saxons to the present

by Philip Moss

Saxons and Normans

In the seventh century the Hwicce, a subordinate Saxon tribe of the Mercian dynasty, had settled in Gloucestershire and part of Worcestershire. In 679 Osric, king of the Hwicce, founded a monastery at Gloucester dedicated to St Peter on or near the site now occupied by the cathedral. By the tenth century the town was an important centre of the Kingdom of Mercia and had been re-fortified and re-planned by Queen Aethelflaeda, daughter of Alfred the Great, against the incursions of the Danish armies. The street plan of Gloucester is a direct legacy of this revitalisation. She also founded the New Minster church of St Oswald, about 900, which became a national shrine following the installation of the bones of the seventh century king and saint.

During the reign of Edward the Confessor the great hall of the Royal Manor or Palace at Kingsholm became the regular meeting place of the King and the Great Council - the Witanagemot - raising the status of Gloucester to that of Winchester and London.

In 1066 William of Normandy claimed the English throne and continued the practice of holding meetings of the Great Council at Gloucester. It was at one such gathering in 1085 that William I called for the detailed survey of his kingdom resulting in the production the Domesday Book. The conqueror also had a profound effect on the religious life of Gloucester when he appointed Serlo of Bayeux, Norman monk, to restore the flagging fortunes of the near defunct abbey of St Peter. Serlo began by building the great abbey church in the Norman style and the huge pillars of the nave are an important feature in the present cathedral. Perhaps the first Norman building to be imposed on the town was a motte and bailey castle. The 20m. (65ft.) high mound was built in the south-west corner of the walled town and was topped with a timber tower with a defended enclosure bailey on its east side. This together with the rebuilding of some of the town gates became a symbol of the king's authority over, Indigenous Saxon population. The timber and earth castle was replaced in the early twelfth century by a large stone keep, complete with surrounding walls and deep moat, just to the west on the east bank of the River Severn.

In the dispute for the throne between King Stephen and Matilda, Robert Earl of Gloucester, supported his half-sister Matilda. The town transferred its allegiance from the king to Matilda but no fighting took place.

The Plantagenet and Tudor Period

Gloucester's importance was confirmed under the Plantagenets the grant of its first charter by

Henry II in 1155, which gave the to privileges equal to those of Westminster and London. On 28th October 1216 the nine year old Henry III was led from the Royal Palace at Kingsholm to his coronation in St Peter's Abbey. He is the only English monarch since the Conquest to be crowned outside Westminster. Henry was a deeply religious man who did much the church in Gloucester during his long reign. It was he who was responsible for the grants of oaks from the Royal Forest of Dean for the building of the Dominican and Franciscan Friaries in the town. Remains of both houses survive: Blackfriars - England's most complete Dominican Friary dates from 1239 and Greyfriars from the rebuild of the early sixteenth century. The house of the Carmelites or Whitefriars erected just outside the north-east corner of the town wall was similarly endowed but today, sadly, no trace remains. Henry's zeal for establishing religious houses was tempered by his political troubles. By a strange quirk of fate the city of his coronation became his prison when in 1263 Simon de Montfort held him captive in Gloucester Castle during the Barons War. Many significant parliaments were held at Gloucester in the following one and half centuries including one held by Henry IV in 1407 which paved the way for bringing public finances under parliamentary control.

The fortunes of medieval Gloucester were strengthened in 1327 at when Abbot Thokey accepted for burial at St Peter's Abbey the body of King Edward II who was murdered at nearby Berkeley Castle. During the next two centuries many people were moved to make the pilgrimage to Edward's tomb, resulting in increased wealth and importance for the city and abbey. Craftsmen began restoring and beautifying the church and by the 1470s the building had reached its present size, complete with exquisite fan tracery in the cloisters and the glorious tower of Abbot Seabrooke. In this period other ancient city churches were also rebuilt and adorned with Perpendicular style towers.

In 1471, during the Wars of the Roses, Queen Margaret's Lancastrian army was refused entry to Gloucester. She continued north to lose the Battle of Tewkesbury.

In 1483 Richard III granted the charter on which the city's local government is largely based. It conferred on the burgesses of Gloucester the right of electing a mayor and twelve aldermen. To maintain the dignity of these new officers it also provided that the mayor should have a sword of state carried before him with two sergeants at mace to serve him. King Henry VIII and his new wife Anne Boleyn visited Gloucester in July 1535 staying as guests of the abbot of St Peter's. It was in this same year that the Act of Supremacy was passed making Henry the Supreme Head of the Church of England and by 1536 the suppression of the smaller monasteries had commenced. By 1540 the dissolution of the larger monastic houses of Gloucester was well advanced and the episcopal see of Gloucester was established. The abbey church became the Cathedral of the new Diocese.

Henry VIII had made England a Protestant country, a policy which his son Edward VI continued, but Mary Tudor, his daughter, was determined to restore Roman Catholicism. So many Protestant clergy were martyred during her reign that she acquired the nickname 'Bloody Mary'. During these persecutions Bishop John Hooper, the second Bishop of Gloucester, suffered martyrdom for his faith by being burnt at the stake in St Mary's Square on 9th February 1555. Mary was succeeded by the Protestant Elizabeth who granting Gloucester the status of a port in 1580. The city is the most inland port in the country.

Kings and Commonwealth

In 1642 civil war broke out in England. The cause of the war being Parliament's struggle against the absolute government of King Charles I, his alleged encouragement of popery and his illegal taxation. The strong growth of Puritanism in Gloucester from the late sixteenth century determined its support for the parliamentary cause. Within a year of the outbreak of war the parliamentary forces suffered many reverses and Gloucester alone stood against the king in the west. On 10th August 1643 a royalist army commanded by the king himself lay siege to the city. Gloucester was the only Roundhead garrison between the recently captured Bristol and the north-west, its capture would control the River Severn at its lowest crossing point. The garrison in Gloucester was commanded by the 23 year old Lt. Colonel Edward Massey. Under his command were two infantry regiments, 200 horse and dragoons and a few trained bands amounting to 1500 men. At the height of the siege the king had at his disposal a force of some 30,000 royalists. It says much for Massey and his puny garrison that with only the rather dubious protection of Gloucester's medieval town walls and some hastily thrown up earthworks the citizens resisted the artillery bombardment for 26 days. The king was forced to retreat on hearing that a relieving parliamentary army from London was nearing the city. 'Ever remember the fifth of September' was a motto adopted by Gloucestersians following the raising of the siege and this date became an annual holiday known as 'Gloucester Day'.

In 1644, the year following the siege, John Biddle, the Master of the Crypt School in Southgate Street, drafted what he called 'Twelve Arguments Against The Doctrine Of The Trinity'. For this he was removed from office, but by producing this text John Biddle had founded English Unitarianism. He became a martyr to the new religion in 1662, a few years after the Restoration of Charles II, when he died of fever while in Newgate Prison unable to pay a fine of £200 imposed for Unitarian worship.

In Recent Centuries

The eighteenth century saw the steady growth of Gloucester both in size and as a social centre. Local industry continued to flourish due to the proximity of iron-ore, coal and timber in the Forest of Dean. The city became renowned for pin manufacturing and the centuries old industry of bell founding continued apace. It has been said that many belfries in England contain at least one bell cast by the famous Rudhall family of Gloucester.

During the same century Robert Raikes, editor of the influential Gloucester Journal, established his Sunday School movement and George Whitefield the fiery evangelist began his ministry in the city.

Sir George Onesiphorus Paul gave practical evidence to Parliament of his concern over prison reform by recommending the building of the present Gloucester Gaol which was, at the time, the finest and most advanced in the country.

In 1823 Gloucester came to the fore with the construction of the County Asylum in Horton Road, now Gloucester's finest Georgian building, one of the first purpose-built psychiatric hospitals in the world.

Progress was accelerated during the early nineteenth century by the completion of the Gloucester and Sharpness canal in 1827 which resulted in the growth of the local timber industry. The waterway was then the longest, deepest and widest ship canal in Britain and afforded a direct route from Gloucester to the Scandinavian countries. The port facilities were expanded,

including new dry docks and additional warehousing for the handling of grain. The coming of the railways in the 1840s also served to make the city more attractive to industry. In the Victorian era the city boundaries were extended, the population grew six-fold and many exuberant buildings were constructed.

The twentieth century witnessed the establishment of other notable industries such as aircraft production, railway rolling stock, motor cycles and match manufacturing. Although some of these firms are no longer trading, the city has maintained a diverse commercial and industrial base. This together with the important contribution that tourism makes to the local economy will ensure that the city continues to thrive.

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For a full and comprehensive picture of the archaeology and history of Gloucester, see the following works: 'Gloucester - a history and guide', Carolyn Heighway, 1985 and 'Historic Gloucester', Philip Moss, 1993.