London in the twelfth century was a teeming and prosperous place, and, in so far as it can be said to have had a common mind, it thought very well of itself. Always the largest town in England, it was then and for long afterwards the only one that could bear comparison with the great cities of continental Europe. That notion would have been only superficially acceptable to a medieval Londoner, for informed comparisons might soon venture into disparagement. Nevertheless London was open to the excitements and concerns that played upon other, larger and smaller, communities at that time. What was distinctive about it in its European context was not so much its size, and still less, if we consider the cities of northern Italy, its sophistication, as its relations with external authority, in the all-too-familiar persons of the kings of England and their advisers.¹

Like other European cities, however, London had its pretensions and aspirations, and they need not be harshly judged by their outcome. It procured some striking favours from Henry I in the most euphoric time of his reign.² The citizens supported Stephen to some effect, but their rejection of the Empress probably cost them money and political power under Henry II. In his reign there were nevertheless concessions enough to maintain good will, and perhaps a security that was lacking under Richard I’s lieutenants, when much was for sale, or under John, when, however, the high risks taken brought some political rewards. Londoners and their sovereigns often had different perceptions of what constituted freedom and good customs, but the citizens did not invariably come off worst from their disagreements. They held their own pertinaciously enough throughout an uncertain and over-exciting


century, and they bargained with a fair sense of what they had to offer and to protect. If, when they were susceptible to the communal fever, they truly had dreams of a commercial republic, their dreams were delusory, but waking reality had its compensations. John proved a harder touch as king than he had seemed as leader of His Majesty's disloyal opposition, but by the end of his reign the Londoners' commercial strength and innate vigour had given their city an assured, though not always a comfortable, place in the carefully documented order of the English kingdom.

The documents that survive from the crucial time are rewarding but uneven. On the king's side his relations with London are mainly reflected in the Pipe Rolls, the Exchequer's annual statement of royal income and the sheriffs' incidental disbursements, and in a number of charters. From the city itself we have no original administrative records, but many private deeds and a good deal of ecclesiastical material, including William fitz Stephen's famous encomium upon London as the birthplace of St Thomas. What the citizens', or their clerks', own administrative skills may have been it is now difficult to judge. Their courts were carefully regulated, and they were evidently interested in precedents. Although the earliest original enrolments now surviving date only from the middle of the thirteenth century, London is most unlikely to have been behind the larger provincial towns in devising and maintaining records.

If the returns for London had reached the pages of Domesday Book in 1086-87 we should have had more material to consider, and possibly more illumination from it. It might be over-sanguine to suppose that it would have been markedly less enigmatic than what survives from other towns, but it should at least have told us something about the size of the city's population, and in references to charges and exemptions it might have given some further indications of the extent and nature of London's trade and its regulation. What it most probably would have revealed is a welter of jurisdictions, in which the public domain, which in the twelfth century could be referred to simply as the king's soke, existed beside and amidst many other privileged enclaves.

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It is in the resolution, under the growing royal authority, of conflicting claims and obligations, and the creation of an effective hierarchy of groups and orders, that the chief interest of London’s twelfth-century history resides.

In that long process, the guild played a central role. Its history in England has long been bedevilled by the abundance of our legal records, and the bias towards formal classification that our historical studies have imbibed from them, or have taken over the centuries by some sympathetic resonance with the states of mind that shaped the common law. Historians and others have anxiously or confidently differentiated and arranged guilds by kind, treating them as institutions with obscured but distinct family histories according to their type. The fact is that at all times, beginning with the most remote, the guild was not an object in itself, but a means of getting things done. Its origins in northern Europe appear to lie in sacrificial feasts, with beer coming to symbolize the victim. Its earliest manifestations, in pursuit of the sublime, probably entailed ceremonies of a hair-raising kind, and the Church had some ado to come to terms with so potent and deeply rooted a rival. Within the period of our documentation, however, when we see it at its most extensively useful, the guild, with its sacramental qualities adequately reconciled with Christianity, had acquired a nature relatively bland in itself, but applicable to any purpose. It was, accordingly, in constant use.

The guild was characterized by some form of oath, by feasting, or at the very least drinking together, and by a common fund directed to a common purpose or purposes. The oath, which was the first and fundamental act, established the principle and sanctions of fraternity amongst those who had no other sure ground for trusting each other, and the business of feasting expressed and confirmed that relationship in a universally intelligible and acceptable form. The payment of fees and dues, which was as essential as the oath itself, and to which the oath was a commitment, assured the means of continuance beyond the present repast, and the achievement of whatever further purposes the association might intend. In those respects all guilds were the same, and only their purposes are usefully classifiable. Any common endeav-

* The definitive work on the nature of the early guild is E. Coornaert, ‘Les ghildes médiévales’ *Revue Historique*, cxcix (1948), 22–55, 206–43, which corrects everything published before it appeared, and not a little of what has been published since. For some further references: G.H. Martin and S. McIntyre, *A Bibliography of British and Irish Municipal History, i. General Works* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972), 297–300. In important recent studies O.G. Oexle has pointed out that some of the characteristics of Carolingian guilds, which are the earliest documented in medieval Europe, are not demonstrably drawn from Germanic pagan religion, of which we know very little, but have, especially in the oath, classical and early Christian avatars: ‘Conjuratio et Ghilde dans l’Antiquité et dans le Haut Moyen Age: Remarques sur la continuité des formes de la vie sociale’, *Francia*, x (1982), 1–19; and ‘Conjuratio und Gilde im frühen Mittelalter: Ein Beitrag zum Probleme der Sozialgeschichtlichen Kontinuität zwischen Antike und Mittelalter’, in *Gilden und Zünfte: Kaufmannschaften und gewerbliche Genossenschaften im frühen und hohen Mittelalter*, ed. B. Schwinekoper (Vorträge und Forschungen, xxix. 1985), 151–214.
our that involved members of more than one family was safer, more effective, and for most of the time only attainable through the operation of a guild: small, private, even secretive, or large, public, and imposing, according to the needs of the cause. Thus churches were founded by guilds, and maintained too, as church ales remind us, and universities were established and managed, and trade was furthered, and plots were laid, to any number of ends, and a great many agreements were negotiated. Guilds were particularly important in towns, where a large and shifting population needed the reassurance of their embrace, and where the furtherance of public affairs often called for resources beyond the means of the wealthiest individual. It is difficult to think that any of the borough charters that we have from the twelfth century, which owe anything to any degree of local initiative, were adumbrated, framed, or paid for without the interposition of a guild. There is no evidence that London ever had, or needed, a guild merchant to advance its trading interests, but the name of the Guildhall is an enduring reminder of how medieval men expected municipal business to be accomplished.

One of the purposes to which guilds were particularly well suited, in an association which in London has assured the survival of a number of them to the present day, is the regulation of trades and crafts. A guild could define and control its own membership, and could use its private proceedings to keep its own affairs confidential and to project its power more effectively in public. In that role it was bound to attract the attention of the king, who always liked to know what his subjects were about, and could himself attain two ends, of maintaining authority and augmenting income, by formally endorsing those enterprises which he did not need to suppress. The Pipe Rolls accordingly bear numerous references to the licensing and reprobation of guilds in which the various interests of the citizens were expressed. The interests extend not only to the management of trade and manufactures, but also to the enterprise, in which a number of public and commercial and charitable

9 Such guilds would have no necessary connection with the guild merchant, which was a looming presence in English municipal historiography until it was defined and dissected by Charles Gross, The Gild Merchant (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), esp. i. 77–105. Gross’s magisterial essay was tempered a little by Tait, Medieval English Borough, 222, and although its general effect was salutary, it may unwittingly have reinforced the notion that guilds are best understood by reviewing them in categories.

motives were mixed, of building and maintaining London Bridge.\textsuperscript{11} One end of such dealings with the king appears in a charter granted by Henry II to the guild of weavers in the earliest years of his reign.\textsuperscript{12} It accords them the liberties and customs which they had enjoyed in Henry I’s day, and forbids anyone outside the guild to meddle with its lawful affairs. One would suppose from its tone that nothing was closer to the king’s heart than a fellowship of tradesmen, but it is evident from other references to guilds that the road to acceptance could be a long one.

An earlier stage in the process of attaining respectability and recognition is represented by a document which concerns not the weavers but the saddlers of London, and comes from the college of St Martin le Grand. The records of the collegiate church and royal free chapel of St Martin le Grand came into the custody of Westminster Abbey, where they now lie, in 1503, when the college’s estates were appropriated to the endowment of Henry VII’s Chapel. They include, amongst much other interesting material from the period, a convention apparently drawn up in the middle of the twelfth century, and probably quite early in Henry II’s reign.\textsuperscript{13} The document reads:

\textbf{C.Y.R.O.G.R.A.P.H.U.M.}\textsuperscript{14}

Conventus Ecclesie Sancti MARTINI Londonie .N. Aldremano et .XV capellano et .N. quatuor Schivinis et Omnibus Senioribus Gilde / Sellariorum amicis et confratribus suis, salutes et orationes in Christo. / Notum sit vobis tarn presentibus quam futuris, hoc esse antiquitus statutum inter nostram / ecclesiam et vestram congregationem: scilicet vos esse confratres et participes / omnium beneficiorum que fiunt in Ecclesia Sancti Martini nocte et die. / in Missis, et psalms, et orationibus et vigiliis. Et preter hec sciatis / esse vobis concessas nominatim unaquaque ebdomeda duas Missas,/ videlicet unam pro vivis et alteram pro defunctis fratribus vestre / congregations; Et sciatis concessam esse vobis sonationem camparum nostrarum / nostre ecclesie, et processionem et Cimiterium / libere et honorifi/ce; Et sciatis canonicos pro tempore esse paratos auxiliis et / consiliis vestre domus tanquam fratern et vestros coadiutores; / Vos autem sicut ante statutum\textsuperscript{15} fuit, et modo in capitulo vestro recordatum est. ad festum Sancti Martini de vestra / presentia et de vestra elemosina / cum cereo inde facto Ecclesiam Beati Martini / visitabitis/ De Saulesoth vero et de divisis et alis beneficiis vestris, Ecclesiam / Sancti Martini in multis indigentem sicut appetit et vos videtis re memorare si vobis / placuerit, nos precamur. Antiquitus autem consuetudo fuit et modo recordatum est / in capitulo vestro tempore domini \textit{A}ernaldi vestri Aldremanni, quod de unaquaque / fratris defuncti receptione/ et campanarum pulsatione, Ecclesia Sancti Martini octo / denarios habe/bit. Valete.


\textsuperscript{12} F. Consitt, \textit{The London Weavers’ Company} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), 4–5, and app. 2.

\textsuperscript{13} London, Westminster Abbey Muniment Room (cited hereafter as WAM with document no.), WAM 13184.

\textsuperscript{14} The term chirograph, which literally means a manuscript, is used as a marker to authenticate the parts of a text that have been divided by cutting. In this instance the cut is straight, not indented, and only the lower half of each letter remains.

\textsuperscript{15} The superscript \textit{tu} of \textit{statutum} has been added in a later hand, as it has been to the copy of the text in the College cartulary. WAM Mun. Book 5 (see n.18, below).
There are two medieval endorsements: 'littera de Ghilda sellariorum Londonie admissa in confraternitate' (c.1300); ‘Indulgencie’ (c.1340).

The text was first noticed by Thomas Madox, who printed it in Firma Burgi.\(^\text{16}\) It is written in a strong and clear book-hand, to which in a few places tails and serifs characteristic of cursive script appear to have been added by the scribe.\(^\text{17}\) The wording is business-like but quite elegant, and the script is set out confidently and spaciously, on a piece of parchment some seven inches long and six inches wide, which at another behest could well have furnished two royal charters of the time. The whole effect is one of a comfortable assurance. When Madox saw the document it had a seal, already detached but with the endorsement breve de gildis, apparently of the same date as the main text, on the tongue. The torn root of the tongue is still visible at the foot of the parchment, but the seal cannot now be identified. Madox says only that it was fragmentary, and of yellow wax, whitening with age. It would be interesting if the seal were the guild’s own, which is what might be expected on the portion of the document retained by the college, but quite apart from the earliness of the date (and if we had more guild muniments we might have seen more and earlier guild seals), it is remarkable that anyone should add a seal to a draft. And a draft the text was, unless we are to believe that the officers of the guild were all catechetically endowed with the same initial.

On the other hand, there are the traces of Cyrographum at the head, which is another gratuitous formality, and implies the existence of a counterpart. And, as drafts go, this one is reasonably well informed. The four skivins or scabini of the guild correspond to the later wardens, the name of the former alderman Ærnelad is unambiguous (though it sounds Old German rather than Old English, like the name of Ingelric, the founder of St Martin’s), as is the statement that the guild had acknowledged and recorded, with some ceremony, the arrangement with St Martin’s that had obtained in his day, including the payment of Saulesoth, or soulscot, as a mortuary fee. The tenor of the agreement is that former practices have been defined and confirmed, and that they shall continue improved to the advantage of both parties. The administrators of the college evidently regarded the text as authoritative, and copied it into their cartularies as well as preserving the original.\(^\text{18}\)

Although the document is not in itself proof of what has often been

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\(^{16}\) T. Madox, Firma Burgi (London: published by subscription, 1726), 26-7, and note D. Madox’s observations are, as ever, acute and eminently sane, though as his notes are commonly in Latin they have not always been read closely. His reading in capitulo vestrō in line 14 differs from the text in WAM Mun. Book 5, which has nostro, but he comments particularly on the point, and the original scribe consistently differentiates \(u\) and \(e\). On the cartularies see also n.18, below.

\(^{17}\) The hand has some affinity with, but is distinct from, the more cursive style of WAM 13176, a licence to preach in the diocese of Norwich in aid of the college’s building fund.

\(^{18}\) Besides WAM Mun. Book 5, which dates from c.1450, there are the remains of a cartulary on a roll, WAM 13167, which also contains a copy of the convention, and a number of private deeds. The roll is not noted in G.R.C. Davis, Medieval Cartularies of Great Britain: A Short Catalogue (London: Longman, 1958).
assumed, that the Saddlers' guild is of pre-Conquest origin, there is nothing intrinsically improbable in the notion. The saddlers and the church had a long association, and it is quite as likely to have begun before as after 1066. The precinct of St Martin le Grand lay in the north-west corner of the city, at the southern tip of Aldersgate Ward Within, between the present lines of King Edward Street and Foster Lane to the west and east, and Gresham Street to the north. The site is bisected by the modern street called St Martin le Grand, formerly St Martin's Lane. The college was endowed, or more probably re-endowed, in 1068 by Ingelric, a priest who had served the Confessor before he served William, and who had probably brought the church with him through the crisis of the Conquest. Notorious in its later years as a place of sanctuary for both criminal and political fugitives, the tradition of which survived the final suppression of the college in 1542, St Martin's was at all times closely connected with the royal court, and its deanery and canons were regarded as great prizes for the king's clerks. The saddlers' historic ground was to the south-east of the college precinct, in West Cheap and around the church of St Vedast or Foster, which later served as their company church. There is no reference to a common hall before the late fourteenth century; the present Saddlers' Hall, which is at least the fourth on the site, is cut off from Cheapside by post-war building, and can only be entered from Gutter Lane. The allied trades of the lorimers, who made metal parts for bridles and bits, the joiners, and the painters worked further north, inside Cripplegate, but all, like the saddlers, were within close reach of London's principal horse fair, in Smithfield.

The balance of interests between the guild and St Martin's is more even than it might appear, for either party had something to offer. The church was well endowed, with lands in Essex, which may have supplied the wood and timber market in Wood Street, and although it had been under severe political pressure in Stephen's reign the chapter had proved well able to look after itself, by pertinacity and a strikingly assured use of the law. Nevertheless vigilance, like liberty, has its

20 M.B. Honeybourne, 'The Sanctuary Boundaries and Environs of Westminster Abbey and the College of St Martin le Grand', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* for 1932, ser. 2, xxxviii (1933), 316–33. Dr Honeybourne's observation that the precinct takes in only parts of the three adjacent parishes raises some interesting questions on the historical topography of the area. Cf. A.J. Kempe, *Historical Notices of the Collegiate Church of St Martin le Grand* (London: Longman et al., 1825).
22 The Saddlers have lost at least three halls in four fires, the last of them in 1940: G.W. Whiteman, *Halls and Treasures of the City Companies* (London: Ward Lock, 1970), 132–3.
price, and the college also had a building campaign on its hands, and was in constant search of funds. In a time, too, when parochial and other ecclesiastical rights were ever more tightly defined, by the refinement of canon law and the growing skills of its practitioners, the service of Christian burial, as an unceasing source of revenue, could be as troublesome to defend and maintain as it was attractive to offer. An old connection with the saddlers, who were busier and more numerous, and probably more prosperous, than they had ever been before, was well worth preserving and nurturing.

On the saddlers' part there was as wide a prospect of gain. At the simplest, confraternity with the members of a religious house was an end in itself, with the promise of a reliable and even a superior intercession for the souls of the dead. The saddlers were mortal men, with their own apprehensions. They were also business men, and it would be surprising if their religious, charitable, and convivial observances, which were complementary and which each had their own attractions, never left them with a moment in which they could discuss the affairs of the craft and its market. They had joined together as saddlers, and it was their business that enabled them to maintain their sodality. To advertise that aspect of their gatherings, however, would be to ask for trouble, unless or until it could be assured of the king's approval and license. The canons therefore conferred a substantial blessing when they recognized their pious and clubbable neighbours as brethren and affirmed their long-standing connection with the college. In doing so they established the saddlers' bona fides, at a time of some political irritability, whilst leaving them free to develop their association as they saw fit. Indeed, the agreement did something more, for the clause which pledged the canons' support and advice in the affairs of the guild promised the assistance of as influential, and certainly as experienced, a body of clerics as the kingdom contained. The saddlers may not have needed help with their accounts, though they may have taken advice on their records. At large, whether they sought to deal with the king, whose advisers, if they were not already canons of St Martin would be clerks of the same stamp, or with their fellow-citizens, they would be conscious of having weighty supporters.

The twelfth century had its sombre side, but it was a good time for saddlery. The London saddlers served the largest market in the country, a city with international connections, and which by an additional bonus was growing continually not by natural increase but by the movement of people. The whole quickening and elaboration of


25 The fire in 1940 destroyed some of the company's archives, and relatively few are left now from the Middle Ages: [Guildhall Library], *City Livery Companies and related Organizations: A Guide to their Archives* (London: Corporation of the City of London, 1989). It is possible, however, to trace some others in incidental references: *Calendar of the Letter-Books of the City of London: L*, ed. R.R. Sharpe (London: Corporation of the City, 1912), 273-6.
social institutions in the period derived first from the growth of population, and the successful efforts made to grow and distribute foodstuffs and other necessities, and then from a refinement of communications that depended not so much upon technological change as upon a larger and expanding use of material resources. The more people walked, the more people rode. Beyond which comforting demand, the development of the war-horse was producing a new market for specialized and increasingly elaborate saddles, for customers who were highly responsive both to technical change and the promptings of fashion. That was the background to the emergence of the Saddlers' Guild as a major city company in the later Middle Ages, and also to the growth, and a consequent restlessness, of the allied trades. The saddlers did not see why their associated craftsmen and finishers should not accept and enjoy subordination, but the dogs-bodies' aspirations led to the mayor's approving in turn ordinances for the lorimers in 1269, the painters in 1283, and the joiners, who were recognized as a separate craft in 1307, and to pitched battle in Cheapside between the saddlers and the rest in 1327. The saddlers continued to resent successful combination by the other trades, but their own position was secure enough, and they were among the first companies to secure formal incorporation, by royal charter, in 1395.

By the time that the livery companies came to dominate the municipal government of London the guild had probably exhausted its innovatory usefulness, though the members of the companies still had uses for voluntary associations, and down to the Reformation both old and new guilds continued to serve public and communal purposes. Even in their heroic age, however, guilds served rather than determined the uses to which they were applied. In febrile and uncertain times they were an assurance to those who belonged to them, and were correspondingly likely to be seen as a threat to those who did not, whether they were such as looked up to, or down upon, the brethren. The guilds' great strength in early times was the confidence that they bestowed: membership of a guild first and last enlarged and improved upon such security as a man's kin afforded him. He was free to choose his own company and bind it to him, and himself to his companions, with ties that were meant to be as strong as, and at the very least were more explicit than, those of nature.

It is not a coincidence that the guild's most vigorous time is also the age of the fulminant urban commune, the sworn association found in the continental cities, which caused such alarm when it seemed likely to become endemic in England. In the commune as in the guild the oath

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28 Unwin, Gilds and Companies, 86-7, 96-7.
29 ibid., 158-60.
expressed faith in the constancy and power of those who received it. That power had then to be tested, and its limits were determined by the resources and skill of those who used it. The urban commune was intrinsically no more revolutionary or more democratic than the guild, but it was most likely to appear, and naturally looked most potent, when other authority was in question or enfeebled. Thus Stephen and John, in different circumstances, came to terms with a commune in London, and John eventually, and ironically, presided over the assimilation of the commune and its symbolic officer, the mayor, into a system of municipal government which no-one had planned, but which proved, like many other contrivances that delegated and accommodated royal power in England, to be remarkably durable. Part of the price of establishing that pragmatic and flexible system was a misleading explicitness and formality in some of the records on which it came to depend, which have sometimes made historians look for rules where, at the time, there were only instincts and opportunities. Nevertheless we have the records, and by a happy dispensation they are available to us not only to study, but to reconsider. The saddlers’ letters of confraternity have lost nothing, except perhaps their seal, over the centuries, and the diverse and wide-ranging questions that they raise are as much part of their history as the intentions and expectations of those who drafted them. A resilient text deserves close attention as well as respect, and to seek to pay it that compliment is something of which Kenneth Hyde would readily have approved.

30 Tait, Medieval English Borough, 291.