

MAKING A DATE WITH CHESTER'S ANTIQUARIANS

REED editing involves working through a vast number of documents looking for the occasional reference to what might be accepted subsequently as “dramatic, ceremonial and minstrel activity”. Most of these documents are official records – city and company accounts, official enactments, etc. - which provide valuable evidence about how such activity was organised. But they give no indication of how the individual citizen responded to such activities. In this paper I want to look at a group of documents from Chester which may provide such evidence, the Mayors Lists or annals (hereafter indicated as ML together with the number assigned to that list in *REED:Cheshire*).ⁱ

I first set the context for the discussion by looking at the genre and the kind of people who wrote or copied annals and other documents. I then describe the presentation of these documents in *REED:Cheshire* and the kind of evidence and problems they present. I conclude by discussing the different attitudes expressed by the annals towards the productions of the Whitsun Plays in 1572 and 1575.

1. The Genres

Chester's antiquarian documents fall broadly into two categories, town histories and town annals. Chester had a tradition of ecclesiastical history writing based upon St. Werburgh's Abbeyⁱⁱ. From there in the late twelfth century a monk called Lucian produced what is misleadingly called a town history in praise of Chester (*De Laude Cestrie*), which contains incidental accounts of entertainments, processions, and a tournament. Lucian's work may have been an inspiration for the various versions of David Roger's *Breviary of Chester History*, the first of which was written in 1609. Chapter 4, on the 'lawdable exercises' used in the city, gives invaluable accounts of Chester's customary celebrations, including the well-known description of the production of the Whitsun Plays with its much discussed account of the pageant-carriage.ⁱⁱⁱ

The second group of documents is the annals, which develop as an offshoot from Mayors Lists. The creation and copying of lists of mayors and sheriffs of Chester seems to have been widespread; in *REED: Cheshire* we have identified 34, of which 21 contain material relevant to REED. What were they for and why were they so often copied?

A possible clue lies in the first Assembly Book, begun on the initiative of a reforming mayor, Henry Gee, in his mayoralty of 1539-40. Designed as a record of the rights and resolutions of the city's governing body, the Assembly, the book is the first known attempt to bring order and system to the city's administration. Its opening folios contain descriptions of the duties and powers of the city's officers, but in so doing they also define the administrative limits of the city and the history of its independent authority. The city's physical identity is defined by a description of the city's outer limits and by a list of the streets that lie within the city walls. Its administrative identity is defined by a list of the mayors and sheriffs beginning with Sir John Arneway in 1326. The list is in one hand to 1567-8, which is therefore the date at which the list was written in the Book. It may have been purposefully compiled from records held by the city, or copied from an earlier list, now lost. But its presence at the start of the Assembly Book gives it an air of official sanction. Like the list of streets, however, it is a conservative document. The street-list fixes the shape of the town. And although the names and years change on the Mayors

Lists, the offices continue, a historical validation of the present and continuing authority of the city's chief officers. There is no sense here of political or social change. Moreover, over the years the same family names recur. Conservatism extends from the office to the family, so that the Lists perpetuate the impression of a ruling elite. City and family interconnect to consolidate power.

These lists provided a framework into which notes of events perceived as significant could be entered. Their content shifts as the record progresses, from the unquestioning transmission of material copied from earlier lists to a contemporary continuation of on-going events by the new compiler. Each subsequent writer drew upon the earlier lists, perhaps introducing new material, new phraseology or new misunderstandings. But he might also maintain the annals, writing in contemporary events to which he had been witness, and expressing his own opinion on them. As Peter Clark says of content of the genre in general:

Attention was focused on the *cursus honorum* of the ruling elite, on public works and buildings, those most visible expressions of urban consciousness, and on the major threats to the urban polity of the time – high prices, poverty, plague and disorder.^{iv}

For REED the annals provide information on the reception of visiting nobility and, mainly from the 1560s onwards, performances of the Whitsun Plays appear in the annals.

2. The Antiquarians

Most of the annals are anonymous, but the interdependence of the various lists suggests that they circulated widely among an interested elite. Clark claims that:

Everything suggests that chronicling was the work of substantial local men writing for civic consumption.^v

These were public documents from a literate group with an interest in the past. David Rogers addresses his *Breviary* to 'many that desire to heare of antiquitie' and the number of copies indicates a substantial ongoing demand.

The 1590s, one of the most prosperous periods for Chester, saw a sharp increase in awareness of the city's past. Randle Holme (c.1571-1655), the first of that family of Chester heralds^{vi}, was collecting material and documents. His son, Randle Holme 2 (1601-59), annotated a number of our extant annals, probably in the second quarter of the seventeenth century but probably drawing on documents in his possession that have since been lost. The first copies of the cycle based on the "Original" were being made by the self-styled "scholar of Bunbury", Edward Gregorie, in 1591 and by the ironmonger and clerk to Holy Trinity, Chester, George Bellin, whose hand is also detectable in four Mayors Lists^{vii}, in 1592, 1599 and 1600. They were followed by the clerk to St. Peter's, Chester, and scribe to the Brewers, William Bedford, in 1604, and James Miller, rector of St. Michael's and precentor at the cathedral, in 1607. Robert Rogers, archdeacon of Chester and rector of Gawsworth, was collecting the manuscripts that form the basis of David's *Breviary*. And William Aldersey, Mayor of Chester in 1594-5, a merchant from the richest family in Chester, revised the "official" list of mayors exemplified by the first Assembly Book.

3. The Annals of the Plays

Not all annalists include reference to drama and ceremonial. Those that do generally note performances of the plays only from their lifetime or living memory. Since extended annals about the Whitsun Plays appear mainly from the 1560s onwards, the information tends usually to confirm what we know from contemporary sources such as company account books which start to appear in Chester about the same time,

This is not, however, to deny value to the references. Rather, they gain added interest. Take, for example, the entry in ZCR 469/542 under 1566-7:

This yeare Whitson playes played and the greate Onele of Ireland slaine *Sir Henry Sydney* the Lord Deputy.

Wars in Ireland were of major interest to Chester's elite. The city was the port for Ireland. Its merchants traded there and had relatives and contacts there. The soldiers had embarked from there. So, while this information may seem initially to contradict Clark's claims of parochialism, it is understandable that the death of O'Neil was noted. What is significant for us is that the play-performance is juxtaposed with it. What seems today an unequal weighting of information conveys some impression of the perceived importance of the performance to one citizen.

Most of the references to the Whitsun Plays in the annals relate to Elizabethan revivals, the sole exception being a reference to a performance in 1545/6 in Mayors List 4.^{viii} We know, from company accounts, of performances in 1549/50 and 1553/4 but these are not recorded in the annals. But the annals do indicate performances in the mayoralties of 1560/61, 1566/7, 1567/8, 1571/2 and 1574/5, all confirmed by company accounts. These performances were probably notable because, apart from a performance in 1554, the plays had not been performed during Mary's reign, perhaps because of the revival of the Corpus Christi procession. They were revived in Elizabeth's reign, but sporadically. A proclamation by William Newhall, the town clerk, written in 1532-3 provides a defensive justification for the Plays which seems to predicate opposition and may imply sporadic production even then, since it refers to performances 'ffrom tyme to tyme.'^{ix} By Elizabeth's reign, performances had become a more distant memory and therefore noteworthy exceptions to the alternative, the Midsummer Show. Companies continued to pay rental on their carriage-houses, indicating the possibility of a production, but such payments are not indicative of performance.

4. Sources

There were two main sources for these records, documentary evidence and eye-witness accounts. The documentary evidence is itself of two kinds. Scrupulous historians such as Aldersey had access to official documents now lost. He writes: "as neare as I culde by suche of the Recordes and other olde and Ancient evidences which had eny of the saide maiores atestine their vnto I have soughte to have atteyned the truthe" (CCALs ZCR 469/542). From them he was able to show that Walter Lynet was the first mayor and that Arneway's first mayoralty could be back-dated to 1267. But others might simply copy unquestioningly from documents of doubtful authority, perpetuating myths.

The eye-witness accounts, too, come from two sources. One is the testimony of the author himself, the other – rarely admitted - is hearsay. A clear example of the latter is seen in Rogers' claim the mayor had to choose each year between the Whitsun Plays and the Midsummer Show: 'As manye now liueinge canne make their owne knowledge prooffe sufficiente'.

This mixture of sources, not generally verifiable or disentangleable, makes these antiquarian records problematic for editors and readers.

5. The Record in REED

The annals required some changes to REED's usual policies. Items normally appear under the manuscript date, unless the reference is clearly datable to an earlier point, but in the case of the annals it is usually impossible to date the manuscript and the annal appears under the date given in the document. Some further adjustment may be necessary because the mayoral year crossed two calendar years and different lists date the mayoralty according to the year in which the mayor took office or in which he left office. Usually this presents no difficulty, but occasional problems can arise.

The existence of two types of List, one headed by Sir John Arneway and the other, following Aldersey's revision of 1594 headed by Walter Lynet, created a unique problem for the antiquarians, not least because both sets of lists include variations in the dates of their respective first mayors. Since Arneway's mayoralty was traditionally that in which the Plays began, the shifting dates of his term of office lead to conflicting annals of the first performance of the Plays. The effect can be seen in the first six entries in *REED:Chester* which date the origins of the Whitsun Plays variously as 1268/9, 1269/70, 1327/8 and 1338/9.^x Since the annals follow the traditional ascription of authorship to Ranulf Higden, a monk at St Werburgh's from 1299-1364, the earlier dates are impossible, while the overlap in the 1320s does not fit Arneway's mayoralties. The entries exemplify the unquestioning copying of material from annal to annal without regard to historical fact or consistency. Randle Holme 2 comments on the Higden ascription in a 1269/70 annal:

Randle monke of Chester dyed 31 E 3 1357 which is longe after & this is not he (ML 13)^{xi}

The number of Mayors Lists and the considerable degree of shared content between them means that to include all of them in *REED:Cheshire* would produce redundancy and occupy needless space. The editors have therefore selected two lists, one from the Arneway series and one from the Lynet series, which serve as base texts and are always cited, but also include entries from other lists where they provide significant additional information. What constitutes 'significant additional information' is a matter of judgement. The information may range from a variation in phraseology to the addition of substantive detail. Often, too, the absence of material may also be significant. Two examples must suffice.

First, entries under 1498-9 almost invariably refer to the beginning of Chester's Midsummer Watch or Show in that year, the mayoralty of Richard Goodman; e.g.:

In this yeare the watch vpon midsummer Eve beganne (ML 13)^{xii}

But in ML3 this claim is cautiously qualified:

In this yeare *it apeareth* the watch on Midsomer even begonn (ML3, my italics)^{xiii}

Another list, ML15, contains no reference to the Watch under this year, and ML5 also omitted it, but Randle Holme 2 later added a reference to it at the end of the annal. .

ML3's hesitation may reflect a doubt about the authenticity of this claim, but equally it may have some connection to David Rogers' assertion in 1609 that the Watch:

was vsed in the time of those whitson playes, *and before as farre as I canne vnderstande* (my italics).

Rogers' statement has led to suggestions that Goodman had elaborated an earlier ceremony; possibly that added phrase in ML3 suggests that such a view was more widely held.

An example of substantive information is provided by two entries for 1489/90:

The Assumption of our lady was playd at the high Crosse befor the lord strange (ML 5)

In this yeare the Assumption of our Ladye was plaid in the Bridgestrete of Chester before my Lorde Strange. (ML9)^{xiv}

The High Cross stood in front to Chester's civic building, the Pentice, at the top of Bridge Street. It was the second station of the Whitsun Plays, and special performances of plays for visiting dignitaries took place there, where presumably they could be watched from the windows of the Pentice. On the face of it, ML5 is correct.

But the entry in ML5 for 1498-9 may shed light on the variation. In its original, it reads:

... the Storie of the Assumption of our Ladye was played at the abbey gates and nere to the heigh crosse (ML 5)^{xv}

Randle Holme 2 has cancelled 'nere to' and replaced it by the definitive 'at', but the vaguer phrase suggests that the reference to the Cross may have designated only a general location; the play may have occupied more space, extending into Bridge Street. Perhaps also the different locations reflect the different viewpoints of the annalists, looking from the Pentice or up from Bridge Street.

6. Responding to the Plays

What is or is not included in an annal may reflect the different attitudes and priorities of the annalists. The various annals for 1567/8, a year in which the Whitsun Plays were performed, have particular interest. The mayor in that year was Richard Dutton, who is remembered for his lavish Christmas entertainment, as ML13 indicates:

Richard Dutton Mayor kepte house at the white freeyers. And [with] all the twelve dayes of Christmas kepte open house: for meate and drinke at meale tymes for any that came. All the Christmas tyme was a Lord of Misrule.(ML 13)^{xvi}

While the Lord of Misrule is seen as a manifestation of the Mayor's hospitality, two other lists place the Whitsun Plays alongside Christmas festivities to suggest a wider context of celebration, but make no mention of Dutton:

The Whitson playes went this yere: and also there was at Christmas a Lord of mysrule^{xvii}
This yere the Whitson playes were plaid and Diuers other pastimes (ML 7).^{xviii}

The annalist of List 9 provides a rare example of personal response to the production of the Plays and makes no mention of Christmas celebrations:

In this yere the same Playes were playde & *well set forthe*. (ML 9, my italics)^{xix}

List 5 presents a typical problem. In its original form it is similar to List 13 in focusing on Mayor Dutton, but Randle Holme 2 has made two additions. He has added to the pastimes presented by Dutton "as the witson plays", suggesting that Dutton was responsible for the production. And Holme also provides an additional piece of information which confirms the unusually fine production of the Plays:

& the witson playes well playde vpon the charge of the Cittizens free beneuolence by gathering in the chu<...> & (.) treets.^{xx}

What does the last part of this entry mean? On the face of it, 'gathering', in conjunction with 'free beneuolence' might suggest that the plays were financed by public collections, but such support is nowhere else attested. It could refer to the gatherings of people, but since it seems to refer to gathering in the churches, this seems less likely. The juxtaposition with 'well playde' also seems somehow connected to the 'gathering', as if this unusually fine production was partly explained by special circumstances.

Setting aside the different emphases and information in the se annals, they suggest at least an element in the population that not only enjoyed celebration and drama but also viewed performances with a critical eye. While we do not know the standard by which they judged the performance, they obviously felt it important to record their appreciation.

7.The 1572 and 1575 Performances

By the 1570s performances of the Plays had become politicised. The performances of 1571/2 and 1574/5 brought the mayors into confrontation with the Puritan element within the city and through them the city into confrontation with the national Church and the state. They feature in most annals, and give interesting insights into the perception of the situation by different individuals.

In 1571/2 the puritan minister Christopher Goodman complained to the Earl of Huntingdon and the Archbishop of York that John Hankey, the mayor, had determined that the plays should be

performed. The Archbishop sent Hankey an Inhibition to prevent the performance. Hankey said that he received it too late, after the plays had been performed, but Goodman said it had reached him in time. Mayors List 1 places full responsibility on Hankey, in opposition to the citizenry and the Church:

This yere the Maior would needs haue the playes (commonly called Chester playes) to goe forward againste ye willes of ye Bishops of Canterbury Yorke & Chester.^{xxi}

‘would needs’ indicates impatience with Hankey’s obduracy and aligns ‘the willes’ of the Bishop and two Archbishops against him. The annal makes no reference to the allegedly delayed inhibition from York. We have evidence only of the opposition of the Archbishop of York; it is unlikely that Canterbury would be involved. The opposition of the Bishop of Chester is also unsubstantiated; the cathedral, under the control of the Dean, provided a barrel of beer for the players. The phrase “commonly called Chester playes” is a rare recorded instance of this name in this period, “whitson plays” being the usual term.

In contrast, ML 7 does not even mention Hankey and concurs in the view that the inhibition was delayed:

This yere witson playes were plaied. And an Inhibition was sent from the Archbishop to stay them but it came too late.^{xxii}

Though seemingly a neutral statement, the omission of the Mayor and the lack of judgemental language suggests that the writer was broadly sympathetic to the production.

A reader of Mayors List 9 would gain no sense of the high-level political controversy. The annalist focuses instead upon the opposition among the citizens:

In this yere the whole Playes were played thoghe manye of the Cittie were sore against the settinge forthe therof.^{xxiii}

The annal describes opposition that was oth widespread (‘manye’) and deeply felt (‘sore’). The expression “the whole Playes” may suggest that perhaps shortened versions had been played on other occasions, or that the opposition was towards specific plays or content. This complaint may explain the Assembly’s insistence, when authorising the 1574/5 performance, that the mayor take advice on what to include.

In 1575 Sir John Savage, the mayor, gained the authority of the Assembly to have the plays performed over three and a half days at Midsummer, the customary time of the Midsummer Show. While we do not know the reason, some indication may lie in the conjunction of details in ML 20:

This yere the playes went after mydsomer And the plague was in one place of Chester.^{xxiv}

The retreat of the plague from the crofts area was presented by Christopher Goodman as an act of mercy by God, a point picked up by annalists, and, in a letter which he finally decided not to

send, he urged Savage not to provoke the wrath of God. Was there an earlier intent to stage the plays at Whitsun, which was abandoned when plague threatened and rescheduled when it retreated? Whatever the case, the mayor was enjoined to take advice on the text and evidently did so.

As in 1572 the annalists were divided in their attitudes towards the revival. Some were hostile to it. ML 7 states:

The whitsun playes were plaid at Midsomer, and then but some of them leavinge others vnplaid which were thought might not be Iustified for the superstition that was in them. Although the Maior was enjoined not to proceed therein.^{xxv}

The annal confirms that the text had been censored and the term ‘superstition’ indicates clearly where the writer’s religious affiliations lay. ‘Iustified’ implies an awareness in that process that some defence of the production might be required and the following clause suggests that that action might not be enough. The annal points to Savage as the person responsible. It makes no reference to the plague, unlike Mayors List 12, which also contains this information but adds that the injunction came from the Archbishop of York:^{xxvi}

ML 1 provides the most detailed account of events, but with a barely concealed personal agenda:

this year the said Sir Iohn Sauage caused ye popish plaies of Chester to bee playd ye Sunday Munday Tuesday and Wensday after Midsummer day in contempt of and Inhibition and ye primates letters from yorke and from ye Earle of Huntington, for which cause hee was serued by a purseuant from yorke, ye same day yat ye new Maior was elected, as they came out of ye common hall, notwithstanding the said Sir Iohn Savage tooke his way towards London, but how his matter sped is not knowne Also Mr Hanky was serued by the same Purseuant for ye like contempt when he was Maior, diuers others of ye Citizens and players were troubled for ye same matter.^{xxvii}

The annal conveys the sense of one fully informed of the issues and an eye-witness at the events at the Common Hall. It adds new information - that Hankey was also summoned and that the other citizens and those who acted in the production were in some way ‘troubled’ because of their involvement. It provides circumstantial detail of the delivery of the ‘purseuant’ The statement ‘how his matter sped is not knowne’ confirms this sense of a writer actively engaged with an ongoing process. The vocabulary – ‘popish plaies of Chester’, ‘contempt’—leaves no doubt where his sympathies lay. There is perhaps a hint of self-satisfaction at the summons to Savage at the moment when his mayoralty was coming to an end.

In contrast ML 13 recognises the benevolence of Savage throughout his mayoralty and suggests that the controversy about the Plays was a result of a few trouble-makers:

The whitsun playes played in this Cittye not withstanding an Inhibition beinge procured by some precise Cittizins from the bisopp of yorke to staye them the said maior kepte great hospitallitye the p<...>e folks daily havinge greate releife at his gates.^{xxviii}

'precise' is a term of contempt which was applied to Puritans. There is no sense here of mayoral defiance or even responsibility and the episode is brushed over in order to emphasise the virtues of Savage.

As with Hankey's 1572 production, we have some hint of a more popular, depoliticised objection to the performance. Mayor List 5 contains another of Randle Holme 2's additions: The plays were:

The whitson playes played in pageantes in this cittyye at midsomer to the great dislike of many because the playe was in on part of the Citty. (ML 5)^{xxix}

The first part of the annal confirms that the plays had been performed 'in pageantes'. The second part, referring to the citizens' 'dislike' because the performance was in 'on' part of the 'Citty' has been added by Randle Holme 2. Its meaning is not altogether clear. Does it imply that the performance was not processional, or that the processional route was reduced.##

The annal suggests a divide between the reception of the performance in the city and the political controversy about its legality. These objectors felt aggrieved by some departure from past practice rather than by the content of the plays, as if in some way they no longer 'owned' the production..

Conclusion

What began as a quasi-factual list of mayors and sheriffs develops into a personalised chronicle of contemporary events. The annals are perhaps as close as we can get to the voice of the individual Cestrian experiencing events as they happen. As such, they complement the stark documents of city and guild officials, but they have to be treated with caution. They were, as we have noted, documents in circulation and their writers wanted not merely to chronicle events but to encourage future generations to regard those events in particular ways. It behoves the reader to be aware of their individual agenda as well as their data, and to read warily.

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ⁱ At the time of writing, *REED:Cheshire* is still at press. Instead of page-references, manuscript references are included in endnotes.. I have taken examples onl from documents transcribed in the volume.

ⁱⁱ See A.T.Thacker, 'Cheshire', in C.R.J.Currie and C.P.Lewis (eds), *English County Histories: A Guide* (Stroud, 1994), pp. 71-4.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Lawrence M. Clopper (ed), *REED:Chester* (Toronto 1979), pp.xxvii-xxxvi, 234-54.

^{iv} Peter Clark, 'Visions of the Urban Community: Antiquarians and the English City before 1800), in Derek Fraser and Anthony Sutcliffe (eds), *The Pursuit of Urban History* (London, 1983) p.110.

^v Clark, p.111

^{vi} *REED:Chester*, pp.232, 235.

^{vii} BL Additional 39725, BL Harley 2125, BL Additional 27779 , Cheshire and Chester Archives and Library Service (hereafter CCALS) ZCR 60/83.

^{viii} BL Harley 2105, f.93: 'In this yere mr holcroft died &mr John Walley was chosyn mayor & the plaies went that same yere'.

^{ix} *REED:Chester*, p.28

^x *REED:Chester*, pp. 3-4. See also pp.xxxvi-xliii.

^{xi} BL Harley 2125m f.91v.

- xii BL Harley 2125, f.3v.
- xiii BL Harley 2057, f.26v.
- xiv BL Harley 2125, f.31v; BL Additional 29777, mb [8].
- xv BL Harley 2125, f.32.
- xvi CCALS ZCR 60/83, f.12v.
- xvii Manchester University John Rylands Library English MS 202, f.56.
- xviii British Library Harley 2133, f.42v.
- xix British Library Additional MS 29777, mb [12].
- xx British Library Harley MS 2125, f 39.
- xxi British Library Harley 1046, f.163v.
- xxii British Library Harley 2133, f.43, as also Mayors List 12, CCALS ZCR 469/542, f.{30v}.
- xxiii British Library Additional MS 29777, mb [12]. The words “to the dislike of many” have been added to the annal in Mayors List 5, British Library Harley 2125, f 39v, by the second Randle Holme.
- xxiv Manchester University John Rylands Library English MS 202, f.56.
- xxv British Library Harley 2133, f.43v/
- xxvi CCALS ZCR 469/542, f.[30v].
- xxvii British Library Harley 1046, f.14v.
- xxviii CCALS ZCR 60/83, f.13.
- xxix *REED:Chester*, p.252.