

THE ENGLISH CRAFT GILDS AND THE GOVERNMENT

AN EXAMINATION OF THE ACCEPTED THEORY REGARDING THE
DECAY OF THE ENGLISH CRAFT GILDS

BY

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PREFACE

THE conclusions presented in the following pages were reached as the result of an investigation of the relations commonly supposed to have existed between the English government and mediæval craft guilds, as shown especially in a series of statutes enacted in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, to which a great influence has hitherto been ascribed in the decay of English craft guilds.

The present study had its beginning at the University of Pennsylvania under the direction of Professor Edward P. Cheyney, who held that three factors should be taken into account in considering the decay of those organizations: First, internal divisions in craft guilds; secondly, external changes in the distribution of industry, shown by the rise of the "domestic system" of manufacture; and thirdly, the hostility or intrusion of the national government, indicated by a series of acts from 1436 to the Elizabethan Statute of Apprentices of 1563, by which the guilds were deprived of their administrative, legislative and jurisdictional freedom, as well as superseded in many of their economic functions.

Nor is Professor Cheyney alone in the stress thus laid upon legislative action. Various writers upon craft guilds have emphasized more or less the influence of such government intrusion. Professor Ashley sees as a factor in the weakening of industrial organization in the towns the increased action of the central authority, while Hib-

bert goes so far as to attribute an utter change in craft guilds as a whole, to one of these acts, that of 1563.

Such conceptions of the policy of the English government, however, show an apparent contradiction in its action relative to the gild system. On the one hand the state would seem to have favored the old towns by trying to check the growth of industry outside of their jurisdiction, by passing laws to regulate the processes of manufacture in different industries as they rose, and in some of these acts by giving power to gild officers to enforce state regulation. Yet in others, by the act of 1563 for example, craft authorities were entirely ignored, and thus the old trade organizations were supposedly superseded in the exercise of much of their work. Again, by the series of acts already referred to, freedom of action of the guilds was restricted by the requirement to submit their by-laws to the inspection and endorsement of government officials before they might be put into execution. It is these latter acts which have been held of especial importance in the decay of the gild system.

A detailed study of the relations which existed between the English government and craft organizations has failed to corroborate such views of the influence of any state action upon the gild system, and has led the writer to a view entirely opposed to that which she previously had held in keeping with the theories of Professor Cheyney and others. This has perhaps been but the natural result of a more extended study of the subject and a more complete isolation of the history of craft guilds. On the other hand the results have been made possible only by the thoroughness of training and the excellent methods of work derived from Professor Cheyney, to whom I have been much indebted throughout this investigation.

I wish also to express my thanks to Professor James

H. Robinson, of Columbia University, for much insight into historical perspective; to Professor Edwin R. A. Seligman and Professor Herbert L. Osgood for their encouragement and good counsel, and to Professor Merrick Whitcomb, of the University of Cincinnati, for similar assistance. In the final revision I have been greatly helped by Miss Louise R. Loomis, of Barnard College.

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