

## 'MEDIEVAL BRIDGWATER, C. 1200-2013: IDENTITY, MEMORY, HISTORY & MANUSCRIPT'

### **1. Identity, Memory, History, & Manuscript**

The speaker is grateful for the opportunity to join in the celebration of the Golden Jubilee of BADAS, especially as a non-archaeologist speaking to an archaeology society. The purpose of the talk is to address the issue of the archaeology of the manuscript and the contribution it may make to understanding personal and collective notions of identity, memory, and history. In particular, to do so in the context of a project inspired by Dr Peter Cattermole and supported by the borough of Bridgwater to restore, conserve, and display its royal charters.

The evidence for this is derived from four years work by the speaker on the Bridgwater archive, on c. 3000 manuscripts. It aims to look at that archive in terms of what it reveals of the significance of the manuscript culture as telling us about the ways in which contemporaries over time constructed and reconstructed their perceptions of themselves and their urban society. And important to this study is understanding the role of clerks in a partially literate culture and their responsibility for the collection and keeping of the written archive and the way it interacts with the changing civic environment.

### **2. Understanding a Discovery, SHC MSS D/B/bw 2386(i), 2386(ii), 1840**

Taking a particular example of a recent discovery in the SHC archives, this discussion demonstrates how a document incorrectly catalogued in a bundle of documents, part of the Bridgwater archive on deposit with the SHC, given a catalogue number the same as another manuscript (but renumbered here), caused it to remain hidden until now. The other document, with the same number, has become part of the sequence of royal charters granted to Bridgwater which are now being restored and conserved for the town by Mervyn Richens, the SHC's Senior Conservator. Both documents were concerned with the same grant from Henry VII, confirming an earlier grant from Edward IV but were of different dates and in different forms. The addition of the newly discovered charter, along with a neglected draft of charter contents, adds a depth and complexity to understanding responses to an economic and demographic crisis in Bridgwater, c.1468-88. Close analysis of the new document also shows a connection in contemporary minds between the events of these decades and the opening year of the reign of Edward VI (1557).

### **3. Thomas Bruce Dilks and Bridgwater's Medieval Manuscripts**

The importance of Dilks' contribution to the knowledge of Bridgwater's medieval manuscripts and the history of the town is widely recognised. His introductions and editions of most of these manuscripts in the Somerset Record Society are invaluable for providing the texts of these documents in their original languages. This account, however, draws attention to the limitations of Dilks' work, in particular his failure to come to terms with the culture of production and consumption of the documents. The charter granted by Edward II, to which he drew special attention, is taken as symptomatic of the problems to which his editions give rise. A thin parchment membrane, recognised from the second half of the 19th century as severely damaged, "in tatters", with no more than a small fragment of a seal remaining, and scarcely legible, it survives today only as the result of remarkable conservation work at the Somerset Record Office. Dilks, however, produced a text for this charter based on what he believed ought to be there, often with little respect for the original script. He

failed, furthermore, to recognise that the charter was probably a copy produced by one of the busy early 14th century clerks involved in the significant developments of borough government at the time.

#### **4. Manuscript Culture and After-Life in Medieval Bridgwater**

These examples introduce wider themes. Using examples from the 13th and 14th centuries, the work of the many clerks producing the documents in and around Bridgwater is explored, with reference to parchments, seals, palaeography, and annotation. Drawing attention to the use of both recto and verso, cataloguing and archive marks are referred to and the clerkly commentary written on the dorse which often reveals the purposes of consultation and use and the processes of interpretation as historical understanding changes over time. The sense of the manuscript as a live source of culture information, frequently added to with use, reveals the special nature of this kind of archaeological evidence. At the same time it is emphasised that the manuscript is a source regarded as precious and worthy of special retention and storage (even though so much is destroyed or lost). The history of this archival process is an important one for the understanding of urban culture. From piecemeal beginnings, when record keeping might be a matter of all kinds of individual and institutional choices, only later achieving concentration in a single urban archive, there emerges in Bridgwater and elsewhere an administrative system of ordering and storing in labelled chests and boxes and bags, and a special sub-literature of lists and catalogues, all providing lawyers and borough officers with what comes to seem to be a vital underpinning for government. The earliest surviving list of this kind seems to be for 1601 and it seems likely that an ordered civic archive bringing together multiple sources and jurisdictional records emerged by the second half of the 16th century.

#### **5. Preservation, Conservation, and Display**

Finally, attention is drawn to the recent work, mentioned earlier, devoted to the preservation, conservation, and display of the borough's royal charters. It is argued that this work is the most recent in a long history of uses of the town's documents, representing an intervention in that history which shifts the emphasis from administration and government to public consumption and display, effectively bringing an end to the living functionality of the documents in favour of a representation of an invented tradition of civic identity which fossilizes Bridgwater's history. Two charters are chosen to illustrate this: first the previously mentioned charter of Edward II and second the charter of queen Mary. Without the major intervention of the conservator the charter of 1318 might well no longer exist but it is far from the document as it was originally produced. As for the charter of Queen Mary, with its decorative grisaille cartoon of the queen seated in state and the decorated letters of her title, it seems to embody attitudes to royalty and royal power seen earlier in Richard II's cult of kingship and more permanently established under the Tudors, attitudes which seem intended to lend a greater symbolic power to the authority of such documents and the royal government which issued them.

Studied in this way Bridgwater's wonderful manuscript archive can enrich our understanding of the cultural identity of the borough. As yet, however, this archaeological investigation has barely begun.

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