

The Chester Civic Sword

By C. BLAIR, B.A.

“Soc longe as Chester huggs its Sworde and Mace,
Soc longe shall Chester never knowe disgrace:
But lett they baubles ffrom her breast be torne,
Then shall that Citie straightly bee forlorne.”

OLD CHESHIRE RHYME.

THE sword (Pl. 4. Fig. 1) which forms the subject of this note is preserved amongst the Corporation regalia in Chester Town Hall, and is carried before the Mayor of that City on all important civic occasions. It is a large weapon (total length 47½ inches), of the type now usually classified as a bastard or hand-and-half sword, i.e. it is midway in size between an ordinary sword for use with one hand and a two-hander. The hilt is of iron covered with thin sheets of silver gilt, and consists of the following: lozenge-shaped pommel with a raised central rib; wooden grip, swelling slightly in the middle, and covered with fish-skin decorated with six thin longitudinal strips of silver, and encircled at each end by a narrow collar of the same metal; long (13 in.), flat, slightly arched quillons, their rounded tips, which turn upwards towards the blade, each being decorated on one side with a lion mask and on the other with a garb, both applied in silver gilt; fluted triangular *écussons* made separate from the quillons; narrow applied strips of silver gilt engraved with a herring-bone pattern mark-off the tips of the quillons and border each side of the *écussons*. The wide, tapering two-edged blade is of flat section and trebly grooved on each face for half its length: the 12 in. nearest to the hilt on both sides are etched and engraved with the following, against a diapered and granulated ground, (starting at at the top with the sword held point upwards): *Obverse*, (i) a shield bearing a version of the old City arms of Chester, a sword erect between two (instead of the usual three) garbs¹: (ii) the blade-smith's mark, an orb and cross partly inlaid in copper; (iii) a shield bearing the arms of the local family of Bostock, a fess couped, quartering those of the Earldom of Chester, three garbs, and surmounted by a helmet with one of the Bostock crests, an antelope passant: (iv) a shield bearing the Bostock arms with the addition of what appears to be a cadency mark, (now indecipherable), and surmounted by a crested helmet as in (iii). *Reverse*, (i) a shield bearing the arms of the Earldom of Chester; (ii) as under (iv) above: (iii) bearded warrior dressed in Classical armour. The engraving at the bottom of the blade is partly covered by the *écussons*.

(1) A similar version of these arms occurs on an impression of the Statute Merchant Seal of Chester attached to a document of 1589 in John Ryland's Library, Manchester (Rylands Ch. 1530).

The sheath is of wood, covered with red velvet trimmed down each side with silver galleon, (probably originally gold), and with silver gilt mounts; these consist of a chape, and four lockets set at intervals, one being at the mouth. They are engraved with the following, (starting at the mouth with the sheath held point upwards): Obverse (i), *Charles Earle of 1668*. Reverse, *Derby Maior 1668*. (ii) *Edward Oulton Esqr, Major (sic) 1687*. (iii) *John Minshull Esqr, Mayor, 1711*. (iv) *John Thomason Esqr, Mayor, Peace Proclaimed May the 12. 1713*²: (v) (*the chape*), *Pattn. Ellames Esqr, Mayor, 1781*, together with a volute of rococo foliage. In addition (ii) and (iii) have their edges cut into a series of fleurs-de-lys and (iv) is surmounted by a pierced crown. Between the lockets are small plates, also of silver gilt, all decorated with piercings except that between the first two which is engraved *Robt. Morry, Wm. Wilson, Treasurers (sic) 1669*; below this last is a silver gilt shield bearing the old arms of the City, (*a sword erect between three garbs*), in relief. On the reverse side of the sheath, near the mouth, is a silver plate engraved *Carried as the Sword of State at Carnarvon Castle, 13 July, 1911, before King George V & Queen Mary at the Investiture of the PRINCE of Wales (Earl of Chester)*. *D. L. Hewitt, Mayor*.

As it now exists the sword is composed of elements of various dates, the hilt, minus its decoration, being the only surviving portion of the original weapon. This belongs to a group of swords, all with the same distinctively shaped pommel and quillons, and all apparently made within about fifteen years of each other.³ An example almost identical in size and form to the Chester sword is borne behind King Alexander III of Scotland in an illustration to a manuscript *Scotichronicon* of c.1435-50 in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge⁴ (Pl. 4. Fig. 2), while slightly smaller specimens are shown on the brasses of Roger Elmebrygge Esq. (d. 1437) in Beddington Church, Surrey (Pl. 4. Fig. 3), and of Thomas de Saint Quintin Esq. (d. 1445) in Harpham Church, East Riding (Pl. 4. Fig. 4.). In addition the civic swords of both Newcastle-on-Tyne and Kingston-on-Hull are of the same type, and there can be little doubt that the second of these is the weapon made for the city in 1440, (the year in which Hull was first granted the privilege of having a sword), the account for which still survives.⁵ From the above, therefore, it seems that this group of swords, and with them the hilt of the Chester sword, may reasonably be assigned to the period c. 1435—c. 1450.

(2) This refers to the peace of Utrecht which terminated the War of the Spanish Succession.

(3) This group was first identified by Mr. C. R. Beard, *Connoisseur*, June, 1923.

(4) Abp. Parker's MSS. The manuscript can be dated fairly accurately by the costume shown in the same illustration.

(5) Ll. Jewitt and W. H. St. John Hope: *The Corporation Plate of England and Wales* (London, 1885), vol. 2, p. 517.

The blade originally fitted to the hilt would have been much stouter and heavier than the present one, which is of a type found on 16th and early 17th century swords, e.g. that on an early 17th century bastard sword in the Royal Armoury, Stockholm, signed PETER MUNSTEN, LONDON. The orb and cross mark indicates that it is probably German in origin, large quantities of blades having been imported from that country at this period. When it was substituted for the original, however, is by no means certain; the fact that it does not fit the hilt properly and also that part of the decoration is obscured by the quillons suggests that it was not made specially when a new blade was required, but was simply used because it was a convenient size, possibly being removed from another sword in the process. The coats of arms (which may have been added after the rest of the decoration), give no assistance. According to the *Heralds' Visitation of Chester*⁶ of 1580, Hawise, daughter of Hugh Kyvelioc, Earl of Chester, married Warine de Bostock as her second husband early in the reign of Henry II, and this would account for the quartering of the family arms with those of the Earldom. There appears, however, to have been no official connection between a member of any of the several branches of the Bostock family and the City of Chester at any time during the 16th and 17th centuries, and the presence of their arms on the sword is therefore something of a mystery. It is possible that when a new blade was required by the City (perhaps in 1668 when the sheath and mounts were made), it was presented by one of the Bostocks, but in the absence of further evidence no definite conclusion can be reached.

On the 20th September, 1644, during the siege of Chester, both the civic mace and sword were captured by the Parliamentarians and sent up to London, not being returned until 1647 after the fall of the city. The two objects no doubt suffered in the process and it is probably for this reason that Charles, 8th Earl of Derby (d. 1672), on becoming Mayor in 1668, presented the City with a new mace.⁷ The silver decoration on the sword apparently also belongs to the same period and it seems very probably, therefore, that the Earl, in addition to presenting the mace, had the sword refurbished, decorated (or redecorated), and fitted with a new sheath. In this connection it is significant to notice that the earliest inscription on the sheath commemorates the Earl's mayoralty.

We have seen that the Chester sword consists of a 15th century hilt allied to a 16th or early 17th century blade, and with decoration and sheath almost certainly added in 1668. It remains only to establish the date when the original weapon was first

(6) *Harleian Soc. Publications*, vol. 18, (1882), p. 28. See also G. Ormerod: *History of Cheshire* (Helsby's Edn. of 1882), vol. 3, p. 253.

(7) T. Hughes: *The Corporate Maces etc. of Cheshire* (Chester, 1872), p. 16.

acquired. The earliest of the municipal charters to mention a sword is that given by Henry VII in 1506 which provides that "the mayor of the said city, and his successors for the time being may have their sword which we gave them, or any other as may please them borne before them . . ." This clause has led to the belief that the existing sword is that referred to as having been presented by the King.⁸ Henry VII was renowned for his parsimony, but it seems unlikely that even he would give a sword that was over fifty years old to an important city. That Chester was in possession of a sword as early as 1458-59 is shown by a payment of eleven shillings made in that year by the City Treasurer to one Hugh Dutton, "sword-bearer" (*gladifero*).⁹ There can be little doubt, in view of its date, that the sword of which the present hilt formed part was that carried by Dutton, and from this it follows that it was probably obtained by the city at the time of its manufacture, i.e. between c.1435 and c.1450.¹⁰ The citizens of Chester presumably preferred their old sword to that presented by Henry, the fate of which is unknown, unless it is the one dating from c.1500 (now in the British Museum), which bears on its blade a spurious inscription attributing it to Hugh Lupus, the first Norman Earl of Chester.

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GLOSSARY OF TECHNICAL TERMS USED.

CADENCY MARK, any one of a number of small devices placed on a coat of arms to distinguish different members or collateral branches of the same family.

CHAPE, metal terminal, usually pointed, of a sheath.

ECUSSONS, small shield-shaped projections in the centre of the quillons of a sword.

FESS, an heraldic term for a broad band extending horizontally across the centre of a shield. A **FESS COUPED** has a short piece cut off at each end.

(8) Jewitt and Hope, vol. 1, p. 60.

(9) *Eighth Report of the Royal Commission on Historic Mss.* (1881), Appendix, Pt. I, Section II, p. 367b. For other references to Dutton see Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 13, where mention is also made of a city sword carried before Henry VII when he visited Chester in 1494.

(10) There is a tradition, unsupported by any evidence, that a sword was presented to Chester by Richard II in 1394 (*Ormerod*, vol. 1., p. 232); if so, it was presumably replaced by the present one. It is not impossible, however, that some confusion has arisen between this date and that of Henry VII's visit in 1494 referred to in the previous footnote.

GARB, an heraldic term for a wheatsheaf.

LOCKET, a metal band encircling a sheath, including that at the mouth.

PASSANT, an heraldic term describing an animal walking with its head in profile.

POMMEL, the termination of the hilt of a sword or dagger serving to counter-balance the blade.

QUILLONS, the guard in the form of a cross-bar on a sword-hilt.

“Cheshire Village Memories”

THIS is the title of an attractive and well-bound book of 128 pages, just published by The Cheshire Federation of Women's Institutes. It consists of alphabetically arranged accounts of seventy-four Cheshire Villages and is a representative selection from the “Village Scrap Books” that were produced by the Federation to commemorate the Festival of Britain in 1951.

Its contents will have a wide appeal for it tells about Cheshire folk of the past, particularly those of the 18th and 19th centuries. The many references to old customs and folk lore make it easy for the reader to re-live the past and to realise what a loss this sophisticated age has sustained by its “progress.” All Cheshire folk should read it and find out how many treasures the County still possesses. May the book stay the hand of the despoiler and arouse a greater veneration of our old buildings.

Twenty-three beautiful plates, three sketches and a handsome map that serves as end papers, add to the attractiveness of the contents. It is unfortunate that a punctuation error in the title scroll of the map mars so excellent a piece of cartography.

It is a book about Cheshire folk, the eccentric, the simple, the generous, the shrewd, the industrious, the high, the low, the rich and the poor. It brings the countryside to your fireside; Cheshire meadows, fields, lanes and buildings are spread before you. You may walk down Pig Nellie's Lane, or attend service at Buttermilk Church, meet Button Hall or Cradle Jimmy, find a railway engine stuck in the mud, purchase a “nail” and a “cabbage” of cloth, and feel the need for a draught of “dragon's blood” after the chilling passage of Cheshire's many ghosts.

Miss Clive may have found “that there were thirteen good reasons why she should not marry” the Rev. Sir Thomas Broughton, but she would have been unable to find one why she should not read this book.

The publishers are to be congratulated upon a splendid achievement. The price is only 7/6d.

A. O.