

Richard Whittington: the Man behind the Pantomime

St Michael Paternoster Royal, 14 March 2023

How did the London mayor, mercer who died in 1423 (8 years after the Battle of Agincourt), come to be associated with the pantomime cat?

No evidence that RW ever had a cat: he certainly was very wealthy but not result of rat-consuming pussy cat.

Cat legend came to England from Europe in the mid sixteenth century and was attached to RW because he was well known to have been extremely wealthy. But so were other early 15c Londoners but what kept his name in the consciousness of Londoners for 150 years was the nature and extent of his charitable benefactions which I will come on to discuss in a moment.:

And, just for the record, he was never knighted. In fact it was very rare for Londoners to be knighted until the later 15c.

So, who was the ‘real’ RW?

What are the sources available? There are no letters, diaries, personal papers. Not even records of his business transactions (unlike Italian merchants of the time such as the Bardi and the Medici for whom we have copious business records). We have to build up RW’s biography from ‘official’ records, of his company (Mercers) and of his City (London) and the rich national records at The National Archives. There are no medieval records of his parish church of St Michael Paternoster church. (although about 30 of London’s 100 medieval parish churches do have some pre-Reformation records)

So how is it possible to get at a sense of his personality? Necessary to work crabwise, and by inference.

Origins:

He came from Pauntley, a village in Gloucestershire not far from Stroud. Her was the third/fifth son of Sir William Whittington, lord of Pauntley. He certainly had two older brothers, See shield of the Whittington arms on the programmer: there is a ring (anulet) which is the mark of difference of a fifth son

He came to London, and first appears in 1379 contributing to a gift to the king.

RW was a mercer: this was the source of his wealth. Mercers imported silks and fine velvets etc., from Italy (via Flanders). RW supplied fine cloths to the courtiers/friends of King Richard II (Robert de Vere and Simon Burley) and in 1389 he sold two cloths of gold to the king for £11. But his breakthrough came in the years 1392-94 when, as a mercer supplying the royal household, he sold goods to a total value of nearly £3,500 . These goods included

velvets, cloths of gold, damasks, taffetas and gold embroidered velvets (The account roll of the Great Wardrobe which records these purchases will be on display in Mercers' Hall exhibition). The draper John Hende also sold goods worth £4000 to the Great Wardrobe at this time.. Richard had just imposed a fine on the City of £10,000 (for general lawlessness) and, it would seem, the king then indulged in a massive spending spree in the city (so some city merchants benefitted from this royal fine)

There were no sales of mercery on such a scale to the Lancastrian kings who supplanted Richard II in 1399

There was a special relationship between King Richard II and RW:

- When Adam Bamme the mayor died during his term of office 16 June 1397, two days later the king appointed RW to be mayor 'in whose fidelity and circumspection we do repose full confidence'. (RW had only been an alderman since 1393: Broad Street. Moved to Lime Street in 1397). During that summer, RW organised the raising of a further fine paid to the king (£10,000) for the full restoration of the City's liberties which had been taken away in 1392. In October 1397 Londoners had the sense to elect RW as mayor, seeing which way the wind was blowing.
- RW was only Londoner to lend money to the king between Aug. 1397 and Richard's deposition in September 1399
- The poor folk in RW's almshouses (set up after his death) were to pray for RW, his wife Alice, their parents and for the 'souls of the worthy prince king Richard the second king of England and of France ... special lord and promoter of the said RW'

So it was his skill as a mercer which was the foundation of RW's prosperity. He was a good judge of the fine cloths from Italy, and further east, and he was also a good judge of what the king and his court might want to buy.

His signet ring (see illustration in programme): RW's signet (personal) ring was unlike most London merchant seals which have an engraved merchant mark or a heraldic shield. RW chose to use an engraved ancient gem and to set it in a gold signet ring with the inscription S. Ricardi Whytngton. This was distinctive and is an indication of his personal taste. The engraved antique gem may well have come from Italy.

Role in his Company of the Mercers: he was a warden of the Mercers in 1395-6, 1401-02, 1408-09, and he took on nine apprentices but none after 1400. His interests were shifting elsewhere.

Royal Finance: In all, from 1388 until his death in 1423 RW made at least 60 loans to the Crown, sometimes on his own, sometimes with others. He also lent to private individuals. These loans were not usurious in the sense of getting back more than he lent, but he got privileges (eg to export wool without paying the customs dues). In 1421 he acted as a judge in some notorious usury trials in the city of London which suggests that he himself was considered to be above suspicion.

Most of his loans were repaid.

With his loans he bought a public career (cf gifts to political parties today): the company of the great men of the realm and esteem that extended into the aristocracy and elsewhere in England.

Even in his own lifetime he had an impressive reputation for probity (he was involved in very few lawsuits, unlike most of his contemporary merchants). He seems to have been a man of a certain austerity, and probity. He seems to have been (and perhaps could afford to be) concerned for the Common Good.

Brewers: RW had a running battle with the Brewers during his last mayoralty in 1419-20 and he pursued this campaign against the Brewers beyond his mayoralty until his death in 1423. We have a vivid account of the dispute as seen from the point of view of the Brewers written up in the Brewers book (now kept in Guildhall Library) kept by their clerk William Porlond

Ale and beer were essential to the diet of medieval Londoners but in 1406 the mayor and aldermen delegated the responsibility for the oversight of this essential drink to the 'new' craft of Brewers (beer was beginning to be brewed commercially since, with the novel addition of hops, it could be stored for much longer periods). This responsibility covered the quality of the ale/beer, the use of regulated measures in which to sell it, the prevention of the sale of beer or ale on to hucksters who would enhance the price and, of course, the price at which it could be sold (1 1/2d outside the brewhouse and 2d inside). The Brewers were 'nouveau riche' and RW resented their growing prosperity (noting that they were rich enough to serve swans at their feasts) . RW bore down on the brewers, summoning them to Guildhall, refusing to accept their explanations (they argued that the rising price of malt forced them to raise their prices) and fining them. He also refused their proffered bribes. He was concerned to secure reasonably priced ale and beer for the Common Good, for the common man. And then, in a remarkable passage Porlond records that John Carpenter, who was at that time the Common Clerk (Town clerk) of the city of London and a close associate of RW and later, one of RW's chosen executors (John Carpenter was immensely influential: in many ways the leading lay intellectual in early 15c London. He had a large private library of books, many of which he bequeathed to the city's new Common Library set up using RW's wealth)), is recorded as saying to the four masters of the Brewers who were facing a £20 fine and imprisonment, that they should go home assuring them

'that they should no more harm have neither of imprisonment of their bodies nor of loss of £20 for well they knew that all the aforesaid judgement of the mayor and aldermen was only done at that time to please RW for he was the cause of all the aforesaid judgement'

This passing reference provides us with a remarkable insight, both to RW's austere (self-righteous?) character and to his genuine concern to 'control the rising cost of living'. John Carpenter was RW's closest friend and the man to whom he entrusted his fortune to carry out his will, and yet he could see that RW's stance was not reasonable, but yet the mayor and aldermen had to follow his lead, even when he had ceased to be mayor..

How did this rectitude and this concern for the Common Good appear in his philanthropic enterprises. In his lifetime we know that RW gave £400 to build a new library for the house of the Greyfriars (north of St Paul's); he contributed to building Rochester Bridge, he paid for the public longhouse/privy just south of here (64 seats for men and women and almshouses above), to the rebuilding of this church of St Michael PR (1409) where his wife Alice and he were both buried, and he paid for a ward for unmarried mothers in St Thomas's hospital in Southwark (so perhaps he was not so austere?).

In his will, RW instructed his four executors (John Coventry, mercer; William White, priest from St Michael PR and Master of St Bartholomew's Hospital, William Grove, a scrivener and John Carpenter) to sell his great house (lying to the north of St Michael PR) and also the tenements in three other London parishes, and spend the proceeds on good works for his soul. (NB RW unlike most other wealthy and successful medieval London merchants, did not buy up manors in the countryside and become a gentleman: he was already of gentle stock) It seems likely that RW had discussed with his executors how they were to achieve these good works. Carpenter was the key man: RW said all decisions were to be taken by at least three of his executors and JC was always to be one of them (the executors were each rewarded with 20 marks, but Carpenter received forty). Moreover RW stipulated that at least three of the executors must agree on any course of action, and JC was always to be one of the three.

It is likely that RW had discussed with his executors his desire that his new foundations: a College for priests attached to St Michael PR and an almshouse for 13 poor men and women should be run by the Mercers' Company. This was novel: in the past such charitable enterprises would have been entrusted to an ecclesiastical institution (parish church or religious house) but the Mercers' Company was a secular body, recently granted a charter of incorporation. The Mercers received a substantial landed estate in London and the income from this was used to fund the College (until Reformation and Dissolution of chantries in 1547/8) but the estate still funds the Almshouse. The Company moved the almshouses out of the City in 19c to Highgate and then, in the 1950s, when Archway Road was widened, the almshouses were pulled down (but the Whittington Hospital reminds us of their existence) and rebuilt at Felbridge, near East Grinstead .

RW's other Civic 'Good Works'

His executors also spent RW's considerable wealth (£7000 in cash) in rebuilding Newgate prison, rebuilding the south gate of St Bartholomew's Hospital, establishing the public library at Guildhall, and providing water fountains in the churchyard of St Giles Cripplegate and in Bosse Alley near Billingsgate. They also paid for some of the paving and the glazing of the windows in the new Guildhall which was being built at that time.

So, it is not surprising that RW's name remained in the consciousness of Londoners when the folktale of a cat bringing good fortune arrived in England in mid 16c. Whittington's College of Priests had gone but the Almshouses remained and they were known as Whittington's almshouse, not the Mercers' almshouses. Stow in his Survey of London published in 1598 knew about all of works of charity carried out by RW's executors.

It is difficult to know how much of the success of RW's post obit arrangements, and the success of the College and Almshouse, was due to RW himself and how much to the genius and foresight of John Carpenter. But choosing able people to work for you, and encouraging and trusting them, is an important ingredient in commercial success.

In 1436, thirteen years after his death, an anonymous author wrote a poem to encourage 'the Government' to support English mercantile enterprise. It was called *The Libelle of Englyshe Polyce*. RW was singled out for praise:

And in worship nowe think I on the sonne
 Of marchaundy Richarde of Whitingdone,
 That loodes starre and chefe chosen floure.
 Whate hathe by hym our England of honour,
 And whate profite hathe bene of his richesse,
 And yet lasteth daily in worthinesse,
 That penne and papere may not me suffice
 Him to describe, so high he was of prise,
 Above marchaundis to sett him one the beste!
 I can no more, but God have hym in reste.