

**Research Note (June 2014) about the York Butchers' Guild History, by Tony Wright.**

*Jeremy Selman writes - Tony Wright has been continuing his very interesting research into the archives and other historical records referring to York Butchers, in order to put the source information into some sort of order, and also to enable discussion about the interpretation and meaning of some of this historical information today. Comments welcome.*

The Use of the Title 'Master'.

The first 'Master' of the Company was John Blackburn in 1878. Although the Town Clerk wrote to the Company on 28th February 1876, addressing William Routledge as 'Master', the Company accounts show that Mr Routledge was actually a Searcher. Robert Fawcett signed the accounts as 'Chairman' in 1875 but the title seems to have survived for only a couple of years. John Blackburn was referred to as 'Chairman' in early 1878 but later as 'Master'. After that, as far as I can tell, there was a Master through until John Munford in 1902, then no more, although Richard Jewitt claimed to be Master in 1928-9, when the Hall was sold. The Town Clerk examined the legal position in exhaustive detail and the proceeds were eventually paid to Messrs Munford and Houlgate, the surviving Members. Disregarding Richard Jewitt, this gives 24 more Masters making, for example, Jeremy Selman the 95th.

I can find no references to Masters of our Guild before the 19th Century and the first in any Guild is the Taylors in the early 17th Century. Possibly, the reason for this is that any craftsman, once he took apprentices, became a Master. The Guilds had Searchers (except for the Merchants, who had a Governor), who ran the Guild and had a Civic role as well, and a Clerk for the day to day work. In early times, the Guild probably had an Alderman (see below). I will continue to research this and let Members know.

The Beginnings of the York Guild.

The first reference to the Butchers as a corporate body was in 1282. Most of the Guilds claim that it is in 1272 which is the first year in the Freeman's Register, but this does not show that a Guild existed then – only that men became Freeman, and some stated a craft when gaining the franchise. Indeed, the Companies were not called Guilds, except in Latin. The words 'company', 'fellowship' (good for you), 'craft', 'occupation', 'mystery' (rarely) and latterly 'brotherhood' were used. However, the first use of 'Guild' by the Butchers was in 1702, and then oddly as 'The Ancient Guild of the Butchers Company' on the cover of the account book. Even this was probably added when it was rebound in the 19th Century.

Although it is clear that there was some kind of organisation before 1282, in that year the butchers were allowed a longer period to pay a fine for allowing some border hostages to escape and they were referred to as a 'commonalty' (see note). It is almost certain that the butchers had some input to the Guild Merchant, which ran York from the 12th Century (and probably before the Conquest as well), possibly in the way that the London Company elected an Alderman to serve.

The first named butchers in York for which we have found a record were Walter and his son, Benedict, who witnessed a Charter sometime between 1212 and 1225. I am fairly certain that they had premises in Skeldergate and Fetter Lane. The Shambles (flesh) is first recorded in 1370 in its present place. Before that it is clear that there was a Shambles area across the river in St John Parish and a meat sellers' street where St. Andrewgate is now (first called

‘Chetmangerergata’ in 1175). The present Shambles was probably a connecting road between the City gate (where Kings Square is now) and the dock area beyond Coppergate. The plaque saying that the Shambles was recorded in the Domesday Book is simply wrong. Sometime before 1370 it was called ‘Haymangerergata’, probably a reference to the house beside a hedge there.

### *The Role of Butchers as Executioners and Gaolers*

I cannot find out why people believe that butchers were also executioners. Dictionary definitions of the word ‘carnifex’ do include ‘torturer’ and ‘executioner’; but in ancient Latin it means literally ‘meat worker’. I suspect that the use of the word to mean ‘torturer’ was graphic and probably pejorative even in Classical times. Although some dictionaries quote the use of the word with reference to a particular notorious torturer, I think that they were saying ‘butcher’ in the same way that ‘chemical Ali’ was also the ‘Butcher of Baghdad’. Whilst I am in favour of colour in language, I feel that the simile does no favour to the trade.

In the same way, no favour is done to the trade when the word ‘Shambles’ is used to indicate a mess, coupled with the habit amongst popular historians of assuming that a mediaeval Shambles was a foul and dirty place to be. Most of the slaughtering was done away from the street and strict laws forbade the streets of York being dirty.

More specifically, I have found no records at all that butchers were ever City Executioners, but I have found plenty of names of people who definitely were not. The most famous example of a butcher being asked to execute someone – Mary Queen of Scots – was a disaster. A man used to paring off meat joints is no more likely to be good at severing heads than anyone else and the techniques of slaughtering were finely taught and not applicable to execution. At no time in history have butchers been regular slaughterers anyway and they were forbidden to do so in York unless a Pennyman was not available. *{A Pennyman was a butcher who was devoted entirely to the killing, skinning and dressing of the animal}*.

Similarly, the idea that butchers were the City gaolers seems to come from a misreading of the records. There are several writers who state that the York butchers had charge of one of the gaols in the City, but the evidence I have seen does not bear out the story, which seems to refer to the escape of some hostages who may or may not have been in a gaol. The 1282 record below (see note) was cited in the Victoria County History (which is in ‘British History Online’, City of York) but makes no reference to gaol at all. Mind you I haven’t yet found all the records. Another cited in the Victoria County History may be accurate and, if so, will push back the recorded existence of our commonalty to the 12th Century.

### **Note**

#### **Calendar of the Fine Rolls, PRO. (1911) Vol 1, Edw. I, 1272-1307**

1282 Membrane 13

p161 April 13 Devizes

Order to the treasurer and barons of the Exchequer to cause enrollment to be made pursuant to the King's grant to the commonalty of the butchers of York that of the 24 L wherein they are held to the king for the escape of Richard son of Kenard, Walter son of Adam de Chidesdale and William son of William de Skippington, indicted of larceny and in the keeping of the said commonalty, they pay 6 L a year. *{where L means livre = pound}*

## **An Interesting Painting Found By Nigel Wright**

**JAN VICTORS (1619 – 1679) - THE BUTCHER'S SHOP (1651)**  
Oil on Canvas - York Museums Trust (York City Art Gallery)

*Jan Victors was a Dutch Golden Age painter who usually focused on subjects from the Bible. Victors was born in Amsterdam. He was known in Haarlem on a taxation catalogue in 1722 as a student of Rembrandt van Rijn.*

*Like many painters in Amsterdam after the rampjaar of 1672, he fell onto bad times and took a position as ziekentrooster, a combi-job as professional nurse and cleric, with the Dutch East India Company in 1676. He died soon after arrival in Indonesia, then the Dutch East Indies.*

*The preparation of food was a favourite theme for artists like Victors. While the butcher prepares the hanging pig's carcass, an old woman is bent over a barrel preparing the pig's glistening sweetmeats.*

