

Players for the London Cutlers' company

In the first issue of the REED *Newsletter* for 1981 I showed that the Blacksmiths' Company of London seems to have had a tradition for at least 130 years, in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, of paying for a play to be performed at the company's at first annual and then biennial special winter feast, the cony feast. Blacksmiths' ordinances of 1526 call for such a play; and company records from 1495-7 to 1555 show payments to players accordingly being made. I suggested that other London craft guilds might similarly have been regular employers of working players in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries.¹

The London Cutlers' company possesses an incomplete series of wardens' accounts, in 36 rolls of annual accounts, for the 56-year period from 1442-3 to 1497-8.² Thus, only about two-thirds of the rolls for the 56 years have survived; but fortunately the missing rolls do not cover large blocks of years. The largest group of missing rolls is for the years 1445-9, a space of four years; otherwise, rolls are missing for only one- and two-year periods between surviving rolls.³ The surviving rolls are thus likely to be representative of the entire original series of 56, and an entry appearing consistently in all 36 extant rolls is very likely to have appeared regularly in the 20 non-extant rolls as well.

In all 36 surviving rolls occurs an entry for payment of players at a company dinner. Moreover, as with the Blacksmiths' company, this dinner is apparently an annual cony feast. The first three rolls (1442-5) record payment to players at the cony feast; the next 16 (beginning 1449-50) speak of players at dinner at Christmas;⁴ the next seven (beginning 1473-4) then specify the cony feast 'at' (two rolls) or 'after' (five rolls) Christmas, before the final entries return again to mentioning only the cony feast. The feast is doubtless a cony feast, during the Christmas season, throughout, and appears to be one of two major annual Cutlers' feasts during this period, the other being the election feast shortly after Trinity Sunday. These 'players' might of course be musicians or general entertainers, and not dramatic performers; but one entry (1497-8) in the series does refer to 'the play' and interestingly the players from 1442-3 to 1444-5 are paid 3s 4d, the same amount as that set down in the Blacksmiths' 1426 ordinances for the annual play payment for that company. By 1449 the players have won an increase to 7s, a sum that remains pretty well constant through to 1497-8.⁵ Beginning in 1486-7, however, the players may have received a regular bonus, for from that year with one exception (1489-90) the accounts also contain an entry for the players' dinner.⁶ Perhaps the players were fed before, without an entry being made; but more likely some kind of change has taken place, for earlier accounts scrupulously record the names of various other individuals for whose dinner at the cony feast the company is paying but players are never mentioned.⁷

From the dinner records we can calculate that at least from 1486-7 the company seems regularly to have had four players at the cony feast, for the cost of a dinner for one person is 4d and the players' dinners cost 16d. (If the players were not so well fed as the other guests, however, they could have numbered more than four.) Unfortunately neither the identities of the players nor what they performed is ever mentioned.

Like the Blacksmiths' company, the Cutlers' company is not one of the twelve so-called Great Companies of London but a prosperous and stable minor company. Unhappily its wardens' accounts before 1442-3 and between 1497-8 and 1586 have not survived. By the time of the 1586 accounts no cony feast with players is any longer recorded.

NOTES

- 1 'Plays for the London Blacksmiths' Company,' *REEDN*, 1981:1, 12-14. Work done some 25 years ago on the records of the Great Companies of London, from 1485 only, also showed the Drapers' company to have regularly employed players each year, first (to c 1511) on the Lord Mayor's Day and then (to c 1539) for their own election feasts; see Jean Robertson and D.J. Gordon, 'A Calendar of Dramatic Records in the Books of the Livery Companies of London, 1485-1640,' *Malone Society Collections III* (Oxford, 1954), 132-8.
- 2 The rolls are now in the Guildhall Library (London) as MS 7146.
- 3 Surviving rolls cover the years (from one feast of the Trinity to the next) 1442-5, 1449-51, 1452-4, 1456-7, 1458-60, 1461-3, 1464-6, 1467-72, 1473-81, 1483-7, 1489-90, 1492-3, 1494-5, 1496-8.
- 4 The last two (1470-2) of these 16, however, simply read 'atte Cristmas' without reference to dinner.
- 5 From 1515 the Drapers paid from 13s 4d to 15s 8d for their two annual plays: ie, also around 7s per play. See Robertson and Gordon, 136-8. Before 1515 the Drapers' payment to players is included in a total payment for a number of items rather than being separately recorded.
- 6 Eg, 1492-3: 'Item paid for a messe of mete for the same players xvj d.'
- 7 Tom Girtin, *The Mark of the Sword: A Narrative History of the Cutlers' Company, 1189-1975* (London, 1975), notes (pp 85-6) the new provision of food for the players by 1497. As was not the case with the Blacksmiths' company, the number of entries for players in the Cutlers' records has not previously gone unnoticed, though little detail has been provided. Charles Welch, *History of the Cutlers' Company of London*, 2 vols (London, 1916-23), both refers to players at the company's annual cony feast, with specific mention of the dates 1492-3 and 1497-8 (I, 151 and 177), and reproduces the wardens' accounts of 1442-3 and 1497-8 complete with their players entries (I, 304 and 311). Girtin refers generally to players at the cony feast (77) and also (85) speaks (with slight inaccuracy) of their having performed for over 50 years for a fee of 7s.