

Alice Claver, silkwoman of London and maker of mantle laces for Richard III and Queen Anne

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ALICE'S MAIDEN NAME is not known nor her place of origin. It can be safely assumed, however, that she was apprenticed at an early age by her parents or guardian to a silkwoman of London, the centre of this craft in England, in the solid conviction that a well-trained girl made a better and more useful wife. Her apprenticeship would have lasted for a term of between seven and fifteen years, depending on her age when she was indentured, and from her later career it is certain that she "graduated" successfully, perhaps brilliantly.

It is probable that she had a good dowry in cash besides her craft for she married well, to a substantial mercer, Richard Claver, as his second wife. Richard had started his own apprenticeship in 1429-30 under Geoffrey Feldyng, mercer and a future alderman, and been admitted to the Mercers' company in 1438, probably in his early twenties. He came from near Derby, his father being buried in the parish church of "Elwaston" and his mother in the church of All Hallows, Derby. By 1446 he was a man of some substance and, as one of the feoffees of Sir William Estfeld, also a mercer and a past alderman, he was involved in conveyances of Estfeld's property in the parishes of St Mary Aldermanbury and St Laurence Jewry, both close to the Guildhall of the City and near where Richard lived himself. His first wife was buried within St Michael Bassishaw, probably their parish church at the time. By her he had no surviving children although he did have a rather grudgingly acknowledged bastard daughter, Jone.¹

When Richard Claver took Alice as his second wife is uncertain but it was probably not many years before his own death in 1456. As a trained silkwoman she was eminently suitable to be a mercer's wife. Mercers dealt particularly in luxury goods and, with the Italian merchants of London, they were the men from whom the silkwomen bought their supplies. They handled both the raw silk imported direct from Italian reelers which the throwsters of the silkwomen's craft converted into yarn and the already thrown Italian silk thread, as well as the silver and gold threads of Lucca, Venice and Cyprus which the silkwoman wove into ribbons, laces and corses [particularly elaborate silk ribbons]. A husband and wife combination of these trades was clearly advantageous and profitable. Alice continued to practice her craft after her marriage and probably did so *sole* with her husband's consent. This meant that she traded in her own right, took her own apprentices and answered for her own debts and transactions as if she were a man and not merely as the chattel of her husband with no legal, separate existence or property of her own, the usual fate of the married woman. This was a privilege open to the women of London and one which they were expected to declare before the mayor and aldermen if they decided to operate in this way. They were expected to observe the usual regulations for trading and for taking apprentices and enroll the latter properly before the chamberlain of the City.²

In October or November 1456 Richard Claver died after a long illness, leaving his wife with a small son, also called Richard. His will, which he wrote out in his own hand, tells how well Alice had managed to fulfil the medieval ideal of useful housewife and business woman, mother and dutiful wife. He chose to be buried under the same stone in the church of St Michael Bassishaw behind Guildhall where his first wife was buried. To his present wife he left all his household goods, "her own goodys"—an indication that she had been trading in her own right—and £200 of his own goods, a considerable sum in the fifteenth century. To Richard, their son, he left 200 marks in money stipulating that if he should die under age Alice should have half of this sum and the other half should be spent on poor householders in need. Richard was also to have the house and land at Uxbridge and if he died without heirs these should then pass to the testator's brother and his children. Jone, his bastard daughter "as hit is said" was to have £10 for her marriage and so was Alison Claver, the daughter of his brother William. Apart from the usual bequests to Austin and Grey Friars, to the London prisons and to "Bedlem" he left torches to the high altar of Bassishaw church, the Brotherhood of St Michael [Bassishaw?], the Penny Brethren of St Laurence [Jewry] and to the Brethren of the Rood.

His wife Alice, John Burton and John Stockton mercer, future alderman and mayor, were to be his executors and spend the residue of his estate as they thought best "and all waye I praye yowe, tender my wyff well for she hath ben' to me a full luffing woman en my sekeness ther God reward her en hevyn for that sche hath be to me". He left his son and his goods to her ruling until he should be of age, she finding the usual sureties for his estates at Guildhall as London custom demanded; a sufficient tribute to Alice's business capabilities. Only £4 was to be spent on his burying and he concluded with various small bequests including the gilt standing cup "and the note" [a coconut cup] to his son, vestments worth five marks to the church of All Hallows, Derby, and that of Elwaston nearby, with 40s each to the poor there. On 28 November 1456 this will was proved in the Commissary Court of the Bishop of London and Alice was granted the executorship.³

Alice never remarried, although a widow of her trade and wealth must have attracted frequent suitors. Eight years after her husband's death on August 31, 1464, she presented sureties at Guildhall for the payment of the 200 marks due to their son when he came of age, the sureties being Alice herself, John Norlong, William Pratte and Ralph Kempe, all citizens and mercers. The eight years' delay is exceptional and unexplained; it may mean that the formalities of civic custom were not complied with until the boy was of age to be apprenticed. The custom of London was that custody of an orphan [a fatherless child] and his property would be granted by the mayor and aldermen to a suitable person who agreed to look after both until the orphan attained his majority. It was insisted that this guardian give a recognizance to the City chamberlain that the inheritance would be paid at the proper time and find three or four sureties to guarantee the debt. The mayor and his brethren continued to oversee the child's welfare through the chamberlain during the remainder of his minority.⁴

Alice's son did not outlive his mother. It seems that he lived to become a mercer and take the freedom of the City for in June 1470, as citizen and mercer, he made a gift of his goods and chattels to his mother. Such gifts were made for a

variety of reasons, mainly as a form of mortgage to secure a loan on the security of the stock of the donor. Richard may have been borrowing money from his mother to set himself up in business. The gift could also be the basis of a trust for many purposes such as avoiding forfeiture of the goods to a debtor or avoiding the death duties taken by ecclesiastical courts. It is possible Richard was dying and by this means transferred his moveable estate to his mother; he certainly left no will.⁵ The descent of the house and eighteen acres of land at Uxbridge in Middlesex had already been decided by his father in the event of his son dying without issue. It passed to the issue of his uncle William of whom Alison alone remained at her cousin's death.

Before he died Richard had, however, committed the small estate to a feoffee [trustee] called Richard Curtayse to be held to his own use. This was another popular means by which death duties could be avoided. Curtayse continued to hold the property to Alison's use until her death some years later. She had by then married a Henry Hynede and, according to Henry, she had in fact persuaded him to marry her by promising to make Curtayse give him a life interest in the property. She had made her will to the effect that Curtayse should do this not only for her husband's benefit but also so that he might sell the reversion of the property and use the proceeds to fulfill her will. This Curtayse refused to do and was in consequence summoned before the Chancellor of England to answer Hynede's complaint. His answer and the Chancellor's decision unfortunately are not known.⁶ Hynede's petition is important for its details about the end of Richard Claver's immediate family.

Her son's death was a great blow to Alice and she was to choose to be buried near him. There were, however, compensations and distractions in her craft and the reward of promising apprentices, to one of whom she was to leave her business. Very little is known of the silkwomen's organisation in medieval London but some sort of industrial organisation did exist, similar to the male guilds, in this entirely feminine craft. The silkwomen were able to combine and present petitions to Parliament and Alice may well have been active in promoting those of 1455, 1463, 1482, 1484 and 1485. They particularly wanted to prevent the importation of foreign silk especially the twined silk ready for weaving, which put the throwsters of their trade out of work, and any small goods of silk, laces, ribbons or corses already made up. All their petitions to Parliament secured an embargo on such imports for various terms.⁷

Apart from her involvement in the politics of her craft, which can only be assumed, a few indications can be found of Alice's relations with individual silkwomen. In the will of Beatrice Fyler of August 1479, she was designated an executrix with Beatrice's eldest daughter, Johanna, wife of John Marchall, mercer, who was probably a silkwoman too. For her pains she was to receive "a bolyon ryng" of gold [ring with a knob of the metal as ornament]. Beatrice was a woman with a considerable business leaving as much as £50 to her eldest son and £30 to her unmarried daughters, besides plate. Alice probably also knew Elizabeth Stokton well, the wife of the John who had been an executor of her husband's will and who had progressed to the mayoralty of London in 1470-71. He was dead by 1473 and his wealthy, energetic widow remarried Gerard Caniziani, merchant of Florence, factor of the Medici and naturalised Englishman. Elizabeth was a silkwoman and trader in her own right, exporting cloth to Italy.⁸

Alice Claver's business was carried on in the parish of St Laurence Jewry, catching the trade of the rich civic official, the lawyers and wealthy merchants who had to have recourse to the Guildhall and the administration of the City. She was a part of the parish community as well, being a member of the Penny Brethren of her church, like her dead husband, and also of the fraternity of the Founders' Company in the same church to which she left 40s in her will. The Founders' Company also received from her during her life "a fyne table cloth diapre" of ten yards and a "towell diapre" containing twenty-five and a quarter yards. This gift may indicate that she dealt in fine worked linen as well as silk goods and possibly also embroidered goods and even haberdashery wares such as gloves. Her workshop must have been a substantial one and was certainly one of those where both throwing and weaving of silk went on for she sold sewing silk as well as fringe, ribbons, tassels and laces.⁹

By 1480 Alice was a supplier of goods to Edward IV via the Great Wardrobe. In this year she sold the department sewing silk, silk corses, "streyste" ribbon, single and double laces, as well as a mantle lace of blue silk with buttons for the Garter robe of the Duke of Ferrara. She also made sixteen laces, tassels and buttons of blue silk and gold for garnishing various books of Edward IV.¹⁰ In 1483 she was supplying much larger quantities of silk and gold fringe, sewing silk and ribbon, the last costing 14d the ounce if made from silk thrown in England and 2s the ounce if made from Venetian thrown silk. She made twelve tufts of silk and gold used to decorate the coronation gloves of Richard III and the great laces of purple silk and gold thread of Venice with their tassels and silk buttons for the purple velvet coronation mantles of him and his Queen for 63s 2d each. For the white silk and gold lace for the Queen's vigil mantle she was paid 60s 7d. Her own work on each of the three laces cost 2s.¹¹ The prestige of working for the King and Queen would undoubtedly have increased her business, there always being citizens and their wives eager to patronise those who supplied the royal court. She continued to supply a few goods to the Great Wardrobe in the next reign, providing a mere six ounces of red silk ribbon for Henry VII's coronation and, between 1486-88, points and fringe made of silk and Venetian gold thread.¹²

In 1489 she died. In her will, dictated on June 27, she requested burial in her parish church of St Laurence Jewry in the chapel of Our Lady beside Richard Claver, her son, and that both her funeral and month mind be kept without "pompe or pryde". Poor men were to carry the torches and these were bequeathed to the high altar, the lesser altars and the Penny Brotherhood of the same church, and to the poor of the parish of St Mary Staining. She left the usual bequests to the various prisons of London and the four houses of Friars and 40s to the poor householders of St Laurence Jewry and towards the marriages of poor maidens. More personal bequests included ten marks to Elizabeth Bertram, her servant [probably an apprentice] and the "cosen" of her late husband, so that she might pray for her; 53s 4d to her servant, Elizabeth Atkynson [probably an apprentice] and £6 13s 4d to Thomas Porter, her servant, on top of his wages, with the added request that he gather in debts owing to her. She had been a woman of active charity in life for she refers to Alice her maid "that was gevyn me to find of almes" to whom she leaves 40s and to Edward whom "I finde in almes for Goddis sake called my childe" also recipient of 40s.

Her large household is rounded out by two other boys, a John Benet whom

she had apprenticed to Master Byllyston, possibly Robert Billesdon, mayor 1483-4, and a Robert whom she had apprenticed to Master Bukland, a founder. She carefully remembered the Master of St Thomas of Acon, the church closely associated with the Mercers' Company, with 40s and ordered prayers for her husband, her son and herself in St Laurence Jewry over a period of two years. Finally she left the residue of her goods to Katherine Champyon, her sole executrix, and "my servant". This Katherine is undoubtedly the Katherine Claver who sold a little ribbon and thread to the Great Wardrobe in 1483 and 1485, the practice of apprentices using the name of their master being not uncommon.¹³

Alice comes over as an impressive and likeable character. She had the forcefulness to make a career of her own and accept over thirty years of widowhood in a society that expected widows to remarry rapidly. She brought up a son on her own and appears to have channelled considerable affection and energy into a large household of apprentices and at least two children taken in for charity. A very successful business as silkwoman supported them all, her talent as a craftswoman being patronised by two Kings and a Queen of England.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For the role of women in late medieval London, S. L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Ann Arbor 1948), pp.169-174. Mercers' Company: biographical index cards and the *List of Members of the Mercers' Company from 1347*. Corporation of London Records Office: Hustings Roll 179(12). All other details came from Richard's will, see below note 3.
2. Thrupp *op.cit.* and M. K. Dale, London silkwomen of the Fifteenth Century, *Economic History Review* 1933, pp.328-9.
3. Guildhall Library: Commissary Court, MS. 9171/5, f.234. In 1461 a pardon of outlawry was granted to a William Kyngton late of Uxbridge, Middx. for not answering a debt charge brought by Richard Claver, citizen and mercer, presumably over four years before and connected with his land there, *Calendar Patent Rolls 1461-7*, p.5.
4. R. R. Sharpe (ed.), *Calendar of the Letter Books of the City of London, L.* (London 1911), pp.54-55. Charles Carlton, *The Court of Orphans*, (Leicester University Press 1974), pp.13-14, 20-1.
5. There does not appear to be any reason to doubt that the donor was her son, *Calendar of Close Rolls 1468-76*, no. 550. Discussion of such gifts in P. E. Jones, *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls 1437-57* (Cambridge 1954), pp.xxii-vi.
6. Public Record Office: Early Chancery Proceedings C1/58/183, case dateable to either 1475-80 or 1483-5. The petition calls her Alice but she is clearly the Alison of her uncle Richard's will. She may be the "Agnes" Claver who died early in 1485 in the parish of St Margaret Westminster. There appears to have been a family of Clavers there at this date who may have been connected to that in the City: both a Joan and a John Claver died there in 1488/9, a John in 1489-90 and a Christian in 1496-7. Westminster City Library: Churchwardens' Accounts of St Margaret Westminster 1460-1510, pp.224, 227, 244, 252 and 320.
7. M. K. Dale *op.cit.* and see also her unpublished M.A. thesis for the University of London 1928, *Women in the Textile Industries and Trade of Fifteenth Century England*, pp.37-46, 93.
8. Guildhall Library: Commissary Court MS. 9171/6, f.280b. Beatrice made her will by permission of her husband. Referred to in M. K. Dale, thesis, p.57. For Elizabeth Stokton, Thrupp, pp.170, 368.
9. See her will, note 13. G. Parsloe (ed.), *The Wardens' Accounts of the Founders' Company 1497-1681* (Athlone Press 1964), p.413. M. K. Dale, thesis, p.99.
10. British Library: Harleian MS. 4780, ff.9b-10, 21-21b.
11. Public Record Office: Lord Chamberlain's Records, LC9/50, ff.36b-38b, 39b, 40b-41, 63.
12. L. W. Legg, *English Coronation Records* (Westminster 1911) p.208 where her name is mistranscribed as Clance. W. Campbell, *Materials for a History of the reign of Henry VII*, vol. II (Rolls Series 1877), p.491 where her name is mistranscribed as Claverer.
13. Prerogative Court of Canterbury 24 Milles. LC9/50, ff.36b, 40b and Legg *op.cit.*, p.207.