CHAPTER II

The Grocers’ Company and Sir William Laxton

1180 – 1556

With the dissolution of the Gild of Our Lady of Oundle, the School had lost its parents and its endowment: it is time to turn to the great Livery Company which adopted it and the circumstances in which that adoption occurred. Once again the story begins with a Gild, but this time a Gild in London.

In the reign of Henry II, the Pipe Roll of 1180 records that eighteen gilds in London were fined for being associations formed without a royal licence: among them is the Gilda Pipariorum—the Pepperers’ Gild—the predecessor of the Wardens and Commonalty of the Mistery of Grocers of the City of London. This association was presumably legalised, for between 1231 and 1345 nine Pepperers served as Mayor of London, beginning with the Andrew Bokerel who served for seven years in succession: it is his residence that has given its name to Bucklersbury—he may have been one of the Boccherelli from Pisa. The street names of London show that of old there, as elsewhere, men of the same trade tended to set up their places of business, which were also their homes, in the same street: the Pepperers lived in Sopers Lane, now called Queen Street. Their Gild was formed for mutual protection as well as for the usual religious, benevolent and social purposes. The Pepperers made use of St. Antholin’s Church in Budge Row, and St. Anthony of Coma was their patron saint, as he still is of the Grocers’ Company. (He is known indifferently as Antholin, Antonin or Anthony.) Their trade was not only in pepper but in all manner of spices and condiments: in view of the absence of refrigerators and imported meat and of the lack of proper drains and sanitary conveniences, anything to make bad food palatable and to sweeten the air was in great demand (in later days the Grocers dealt also in tobacco): the substances sold had all to be imported,
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at great risk but also with great profits. The vessels of the Pepperers are thought to have anticipated the voyages of Genoese and Venetian galleys in bringing in oriental spices to British ports.

The Gild was naturally concerned with weighing: and as it grew in importance, the Pepperers with the Ropers and Apothecaries came to nominate the officer to take charge of the King’s Beam, who then received his appointment from the Sheriffs, the King’s officers. This beam, used for heavy merchandise, weighed by the “aver-de-poys” weight or “peso grosso”: it is said that the word Grossarius (or Grocer), which is found used in 1328 of two Pepperers, derives from the use of the beam: but the selling in gross, or in bulk, is implied by the spelling grosser, for wholesaler. Mistery, or mystery, derives through the French from ministerium, meaning service, employment, trade or craft. In Edward II’s time every citizen of London had to belong to some trade or mistery: in other words, a freeman of London must be a member of one or other of the Gilds.

Early in Edward III’s reign the Gild of Pepperers disappears. The financial strain of the war with France brought many to ruin, including the Italian bankers financing the King: and the merchants of London, already called on for supplies, expected further demands. In 1345, that year of insecurity in London, a new fraternity was founded. “The olde blake boke with ye lokke”, which contains its ordinances, remembrances and Warden’s accounts, still survives at Grocers’ Hall. It begins in Norman-French:

To the honour of God and of his gentle Mother and of St. Anthony and of all Saints on the ninth day of May in the year of grace 1345 and the 19th of the Third King Edward after the conquest: a fraternity was founded of Companion Pepperers of Sopers Lane the better to have, maintain and increase love and unity among them. Of that fraternity the originators, founders and benefactors to establish the said fraternity are William de Grantham, John de Stanope . . .

and twenty other names, one of which, as will be seen shortly, was added later.

Twenty of these men met for dinner on 12 June 1345 at the town house of the Abbot of Bury St. Edmunds, wearing a surcoat of one Livery: then they chose two Wardens—Laurence de Haliwelle and Roger Osekyn—and after dinner they agreed to pay a priest to sing mass for them, each member of the fraternity contributing a penny a week (the priest, Sir John Palmere,
began to chant on 3 July 1345 and received fifteen pence a week): they drew up ordinances providing that no one should be a brother of the fraternity unless he were of good condition and of their mistery, that is, Pepperer of Sopers Lane, Canvass-dealer of the Ropery or Spicer of Chepe, or other person of their mistery wherever he might live: on entry he should pay a mark, or its value, and in good love and with loyal heart he should kiss for his obeisance all those then belonging to the fraternity: after mass on St. Anthony’s day, at which each was to offer one penny, all brethren were to assemble at one house, converse and dine together, and after dinner the Wardens, wearing chaplets, were to choose other two Wardens for the ensuing year, and the chaplets were to be placed on their heads: and in presence of two Auditors, elected by the company, the outgoing Wardens were to deliver to the incoming the money, the papers and the property of the fraternity (Haliwelle and Osekyn handed over £6.16.0 in silver and gold, and the chalice with the vestments: the sum increased from year to year): anyone refusing to serve as Warden would have to pay up to £10, and be expelled from the fraternity. The Wardens were to settle disputes between brethren: all were to support a brother if he was wronged, and, if he were himself in the wrong, to do their best to maintain his honour by settling out of court. If any brother died in London, all were to attend his Dirige and his funeral; if outside London, those of the fraternity on the spot: if a brother died bankrupt, the fraternity would bury him honourably. If he became bankrupt by hazard of the sea or by hazard of dear merchandise, or by becoming surety or bail, or by any other misadventure, then the fraternity was to support him from the common fund. This common fund received all fines for breach of ordinances; and brethren were asked to remember it in their wills. Any of the fraternity might take an apprentice, if he paid twenty shillings to the common fund: and the apprentice on leaving his master might join the fraternity on payment of forty shillings, provided he was considered of good condition. Brethren of the fraternity were to wear its own distinctive dress or livery (and that is why the Livery Companies are still called by that name).

At the next meeting, on 21 May 1346, one of the Wardens, as executor
of Geoffrey de Haliwelle, late Pepperer of Sopers Lane, presented a chalice
with paten, a set of vestments and a small missal for the service of the
fraternity, in return for entering on the Register the name of Geoffrey,
who had died nine years before, so that his soul might have the benefit of
the prayers of the fraternity's chaplain.

At the same meeting the Wardens were given power to distrain for non-
payment of fines: and nine new brethren were admitted. In 1348 it was
made obligatory for each brother to bring his wife, or, in her inability to
attend, some other lady, to the annual feast: suitable alteration was made in
the price of the dinner. Wives were to be entered on the books and to
be sisters of the fraternity with an equal claim on its benevolence: on her
husband's death a widow could attend the dinner so long as she remained a
widow: marriage outside the fraternity forfeited all rights. A beadle was
appointed to warn and summon the company whenever desired to do so
by the Wardens: and, in view of the increasing business of the fraternity,
it was ordered that thereafter the Wardens should not adventure over the
seas, neither lend any of the goods of the fraternity except at their own
hazard. In the same year the fraternity got leave to erect a chantry at St.
Anthony's Church in Budge Row; but it was a year of plague and many
died, including Laurence de Haliwelle. The meeting-place for the annual
dinners and elections changed every year, but finally the Cornet's Tower
in Bucklersbury seems to have been the choice.1

1 I am well aware that there is a very different view sometimes taken of the purpose of the Fraternity
of St. Anthony. It is not without interest to consider an extreme case of what seems to me a mistaken
conception. A writer on The English Nouveaux-Riches in the Fourteenth Century in the Transactions of
the Royal Historical Society of 1895 (New Series: Vol. ix), representing the fraternity as angling for the
large banking business formerly done by the Jews and the Templars and recently by some of the
Florentines, says: "As a mere company engaged in risky speculations they would not have presented
that appearance of calm, disinterested security which was necessary to establish their credit; whereas
as a semi-religious foundation they invited public confidence as a trustworthy depository for loans
and bequests." Attention is called to the Pepperers associated with the Royal Mint as early as 1221 and
to the fact that in 1311 and again in 1321 the Warden of the Mint was a Pepperer: "this fact, taken in
connection with their undoubted Italian origin, significantly accounts, I think, for their success and
importance". They "presented a curious blend of characteristic English caution grafted on to their
foreign stock of commercial ability". This view is hardly confirmed by quotation from Ravenhill's
Account of the Grocers' Company, 1682: but the mixing of metaphors is evidence of the fervour with
which it is held.
In 1363 the King was petitioned against the practices of the merchants called Grossers, which appeared to raise prices "by ordinances made among themselves in their own society, which they call the Fraternity and Gild of Merchants". This may have been but a misrepresentation; for the fraternity was never a trading company, its purposes were social and benevolent, expressed in religious observances, common feasts and charitable dealings. An Act of 1363 ordered that "all artificers and people of misteries shall each choose his own mistery before next Candlemass (2 February) and having so chosen it he shall henceforth use no other": but it was not enforced on merchants.

The fraternity continued to grow, attracting some of the leading merchants of the City. (The fines for non-attendance at funerals showed a marked increase during the Black Death, and helped to swell the common fund.) The two wardens of 1369 were Nicholas Brembre and Johan Phelepott—however these names are spelt they call to mind outstanding figures—and in 1373 the brethren numbered 124 and in the same year were first referred to as Grocers.

The period now reached was marked by struggles between the clothing trades and the victualling trades for the control of the City of London. There was a change made: the members of the Common Council were nominated by the forty-one misteries then existing in London: they, rather than the ward'representatives, elected the corporate officers. The Common Council thus newly formed met on 1 August 1376: it was no mere coincidence that on 20 August the brethren of the Fraternity of St. Anthony adopted a new constitution, calling themselves the Grocers of London. There were to be four meetings a year. A high entrance fee was fixed in order to keep out merchants of other trades, for even then there were the three modes of entry, patrimony (the reappearance of the same family names century after century is a feature of the Grocers' records), servitude and redemption. And for the first time there were to be six members elected to be of assistance and advice to the two Wardens for the ensuing year—from them developed the Court of Assistants.

City affairs had become mixed with politics: John Northampton and the Clothing Trades were supporters of John of Gaunt, but the Victualling
Trades were for the King. The year the Grocers and Fishmongers secured the election of Nicholas Brembre as Mayor with a majority on the Common Council, Edward III died and the young Richard II became King. He was given much support by Brembre and Philipot and their Company, including the raising of a large loan from the City, which led to the grant of a Charter to the City restricting retail trade within it to freemen of the City and prohibiting sales between foreign merchants. Importers like the Grocers were glad to see the blow struck at their foreign rivals from Genoa, Florence and the Hanseatic League. Under the Charter the Mayor ordered the Grocers among others to appoint official searchers to watch foreigners bringing their wares into the City and to see that they sold them within forty days: for all regulation of trade involved the right of search. These restrictions vanished when a Clothing Mayor came in and reappeared with the return of Brembre. On 26 August 1386 the Ordinances were again enlarged in order to place under the control of the Wardens all sellers of spices in London, to enforce the sealing of all weights used by the livery-men after checking against the set from 56 lb. to ¼ oz. in the charge of the Wardens, and to protect the public by making sure that the sellers of unsound goods were punished. When the Duke of Gloucester seized power, Brembre with others of Richard II's friends was executed in 1388.

In 1393, however, the Mayor was a Grocer: a petition in October from the Company to the Mayor and Common Council concerning "the deceit practised by foreign merchants in importing and selling in an unclean state divers merchandise of grocery that is sold by weight"—pepper, ginger, cinnamon and the like—led to an order in January 1393/4 for compulsory garbling, i.e. cleansing by sifting out impurities, and the confiscation of goods offered for sale ungarbled. The bales of drugs, pepper, alum, cloves, rice, dates, ginger, currants, etc., could not be weighed without the garbler's mark: and the Grocers kept the King's Beam and nominated the garbler for appointment by the Aldermen. The weights for the Beam were deposited in the fraternity's house in Bucklersbury, the annual rent of which was 33s. 4d.

By 1397 there were 103 wearing the livery and fifteen the hood belong-
ing to the Grocers: this indicates the beginning of a distinction between the merchants proper and the smaller journeyman retailer. The Grocers were indeed powerful in the counsels of the City, but in two respects they lagged behind four other misteries: they had no Hall and they had received no Royal Charter of Incorporation. After purchasing in 1426 the mansion and garden in Old Jewry belonging to Lord Fitzwalter, the hereditary standard-bearer of the City, and conveying it to individual members of the Company, they decided to build their Hall on the site. Begun on 8 May 1427, it was sufficiently advanced to permit the holding of the first dinner in the parlour on 5 February 1427/8: the Hall itself, paid for by voluntary subscriptions and not out of the common fund, was finished by 1 July 1431 in time for a great feast attended by the Mayor and many other worshipful persons as well as by the whole Company of Grocers. There was a garden with a fair arbour, a bowling green and a tennis court, and with vines and fig-trees: the approach to the Hall was by Coneyhope Lane (now Grocers’ Hall Court) and the property extended to the banks of the Walbrook.

On 16 February 7 Henry VI (1428/9), the Grocers obtained a Charter: Merchant Taylors, Goldsmiths, Mercers and Saddlers already had theirs: nine other great misteries followed suit in the next few years. By this Charter, which permitted the acquisition in mortmain of lands in London and the suburbs to the value of twenty marks a year for supporting poor men of the commonalty and a chaplain to perform divine service daily, the Grocers began their career as owners of property and managers of charitable trusts. The number of Wardens to be elected annually by the newly incorporated commonalty was three: since 1426 it had been the practice to elect an Alderman and Governor in addition to the two Wardens—the precedent for this was a compliment thus paid to Robert Chichele in 1413: and the phrase “Upper Master” gradually came into use, for the correct style of a Warden was “Master Warden”. (The distinction between Master—the phrase “Prime Warden” was first used in 1788—and Wardens comes later.) In many phrases this Charter of 7 Henry VI is echoed in that obtained by Joan Wyatt in 1499. The Latin text appears in the Appendix.

Or “Patent of Capacity”, as it is called in the Black Book.
In 1447, to protect his subjects from deceits that cheated them and also injured their health, the King made the Grocers garblers for the Kingdom (except in the City of London, where the Mayor and Aldermen still appointed the Grocers’ nominee) of all spices, drugs, almonds, grapes, dates, treacle, senna, oils, ointments, etc., entitled to fees for garbling and half the forfeitures of goods offered for sale ungarbled. (It is curious that in modern usage the word has changed its meaning: a “garbled account” is one mutilated to misrepresent the facts; and “ungarbled” implies the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The word appears to be derived from the Arabic for a sieve.) This supervision of trade with the right of search thus conferred on the Grocers in every port was diligently exercised, and did not entirely cease until the time of the Fire of London. The Wardens and Court of Assistants made further ordinances dealing with the conduct of their craft; trading on Sundays or holy days being prohibited and punished with a fine: by 1508 the ordinances numbered forty-five, which had been duly approved by the Royal Chancellor, Treasurer and two Chief Justices on 24 November.

But although the Company was in control of its own trade, it was subject to the City authorities: an Act of 1437 required all fraternities and incorporated Companies to have their Charters registered by the chief magistrates of cities and towns. It was declared in Edward IV’s reign, 1467, that the election of Mayor, Sheriffs and other officers lay with the Common Council, together with the Masters and Wardens of the Companies: in 1475, however, the franchise was restricted to liverymen, for the Masters and Wardens with the honest men of their misteries in their best liveries were summoned to elections. Although the Companies thus elected the Mayor, the Aldermen were created for life by the votes of their wards: and the Mayor and Court of Aldermen held supreme power over the Companies. This fact at times helped the Wardens to enforce their authority on recalcitrant members of their Company: but it also meant that they were bound to submit for approval the ordinances made under their Charter. In 1523, for instance, the Wardens and Company of Grocers, after one such submission, were ordered to make some two or three modi-
fications in their ordinances—mainly in connexion with the allocation of fines paid, to ensure that the City got a share, and with the Freemen of the Company repeating their oath at Guildhall—but also to add an ordinance directing the fining of any Warden who did not do his duty. The Mayor and Court of Aldermen also settled, in Henry VIII's reign, the disputes as to precedence among the Companies: the Grocers were placed second to the Mercers among the Twelve Great Companies.

Such was the Grocers' Company at the beginning of the sixteenth century: ruled by three Wardens and the Court of Assistants, with the Livery as a group superior to the Freemen, who in turn were superior to the apprentices: the leading men of the Company were likewise leading men in the City of London, serving as Mayor or Alderman and also thriving at their individual mercantile concerns. It all seems a long, long way from the little Northamptonshire town of Oundle: the connexion, so strong and vital, arose in this way.

One of the brethren of the Gild of Our Lady of Oundle, named among the executors of Dame Joan Wyatt's will of 1506, was John Laxton. He probably drew his name and origin from the village of Laxton, a few miles north-west of Oundle, and not from the better known Laxton of the open fields. He was a merchant or tradesman, not quite in the class, perhaps, of Robert Wyatt, whose will refers to the settlement of his overseas debts, but certainly doing better than his kinsmen resident in Gretton, a village overlooking the Welland valley, then a purely agricultural community. He had at least two sons, John and William: both of these were apprenticed to members of the Grocers' Company. John appears in the list of those paying quarterage or Brotherhood money, the subscription paid yearly by the Freemen of the Company, from the year 1516/7 to 1520/1: which suggests that he died early. His only daughter, Joan, married Thomas Wanton, an apothecary and a member of the Grocers' Company, who was apprenticed to Thomas Pierson in 1532 and admitted to the Livery in 1543.

A Richard Laxton, apprenticed in May 1517 to John Preste, may have been another brother: as he is not heard of again, he probably died young. There was certainly a sister, who married Edward Catcher, a liveryman
of the Pewterers' Company, and likewise died early: in his will Laxton left a black gown to his "brother Cacher". A genealogy in the British Museum (Harleian MS. 1096 fo. 83) gives Edward Catcher's first wife as "Joane, sister to Sir William Laxton".

William Laxton must have been born in Oundle at the very end of the fifteenth century: from the age of seven till that of fourteen he was probably a pupil in that Grammar School maintained by one of the priests of the Gild. There is unfortunately a gap in the Grocers' Register of Apprentices extending from 1504 to 1511: in that interval William Laxton must have gone to London and been bound apprentice to some grocer. A son of William Rest of Peterborough was a Warden of the Company in 1502, Alderman and Upper Master in 1509, 1514 and 1519, Sheriff in 1511 and Mayor of London 1516–17, being knighted by Henry VIII as Sir John Rest: he lived in Crosby Place before Sir Thomas More. He may have been the grocer to whom William Laxton was apprenticed about the time of Henry VIII's accession: his career undoubtedly provided a model for the Oundle boy. As Sir Henry Keeble (or Keybill), in whose vault Laxton was buried, did not acquire Apethorpe until 1515, he can hardly have been Laxton's master, although his possession of a house in Oundle in that year is suggestive. Some seven years passed before an apprentice became a freeman of the Company, able to start trading on his own account. In a modern list at Grocers' Hall, Laxton's freedom has been assigned to 1518/19, but the original record has not been found. William Laxton certainly first paid his Brotherhood money in that year—which suggests that he was two years younger than John Laxton. The following year (19 March, 1519/20), John Braband, a grocer's son, was bound apprentice to William Laxton. With or without help from others of the kind he was able to give in later years, Laxton prospered in his business, got his Livery, was elected to the Court of Assistants and on 16 July 1534 was chosen Junior Warden to John Preste, the Upper Master, and Thomas Bowyer, Warden. The years between his freedom and this election (c. 1518–34) must have seen the foundation of his fortune: and the election showed that he and Thomas Bowyer were regarded as rising men. Bowyer's son has left, on a flyleaf in a manuscript
copy of Wycliffe’s translation of the Scriptures, which came into his family with his mother, the following account of his father, which may throw some light on William Laxton’s own career.

Wylliam Bowyer Clerck of the Sessions was mutch preferred by Morton Byshop of Ely and after Archbyshop of Caunterbury and by two Henryes Earles of Northumberland grandfather and father to hym that solde Petworthie to Kynge Henry the VIII and was their understeward of Petworthie under Edmund Dudley in the tyme of Kynge Henry the VII The said Willm Bowyer placed Thomas Bowyer his eldest sonne with the same Edmund Dudley to be trayned up toward the lawe But the sayd Thomas Bowyer having some lack of the Latyn tongue for his helpe toward the lawe lyked rather to be a marchaunt and bounde hymselfe apprentice to — Curle of London grocer³ and being a freeman and grocer of London beganne with a smalle stock and fyrst maryed one Jone the daughter of Edward Lam and by her had three sonnes which 3 sonnes dyed all before their mother. At the beginning he kept a retayling shoppe and after entered into great trades of marchauntise which God prospered that he grew to great welth and having marryed Joane⁴ his seconde wyfe was grown to that estimation creditt and welth in London that he was in election to be Alderman but by great travell and friendship he avoided the same. After whych time God whoe had before sent hym that welth permytted the same to decay agayne so that in twoe yeres space he lost by sea above £3200 for a punishment as he would often say for refusing of that calling which God had made him able to beare. And therewithall beying somewhat discouraged to continue sutch great occupying as he before used of sutch welth as had left he purchased the manors of Roughton and Northmundham which he left to Thomas Bowyer of the Middle Temple his sonne and heyr with charge to continue the study and profession of the Lawe, whoe for as mutch as God hath gyven him grace with sutch obedience to his father to follow the same and calling to mynde God’s great grace unto hym that he enjoyeth the same Manours which in tymes past were in the possession of the nouryshers of superstition and ignorance⁵ And lyveth in this most happy raigne of Good Queene Elizabeth doth veryly by God’s grace purpose to kepe this boke which in those superstitious tymes was kept in huggre muggre and now in this most happy tyme of the light of God’s truthe so enjoyed by the fulness of God’s grace to leave the same with the same Manours to his heyrs as a perpetuall monument of the blessing of God to him and them.

T.BOWYER.

Like Thomas Bowyer the elder, William Laxton must have started in a small way, but abandoning retail trade, he probably owed his prosperity

³ An error: Thomas Bowyer was an apprentice of Thomas Tychebourne in 1504, and was admitted to the Freedom in 1512.
⁴ Joan Mery, niece of William Mery, a leading Grocer, Upper Master in 1546.
⁵ They had belonged to Bruton Priory, Somerset.
to overseas trading ventures, which led in those days either to immediate ruin or to the rapid amassing of wealth. The fitting-out of a vessel called for courage in view of the risk of total loss, but if the venture was successful the profits were very great. At some date, at present unknown, Laxton married: the lady was the widow of a not very prosperous grocer named Henry Luddington, who had died in 1531, leaving her with seven children and one unborn. She was Joan, the daughter of William Kirkeby, formerly of Rolleston, Leicestershire, and then of the Poultry, and Alice Whetell, his wife. Three of her children survived their early years—infant mortality was terribly high—a son named Nicholas, apprenticed to a grocer but transferred to William Laxton, and two daughters, Joan and Anne. Laxton had no children of his own, but seems to have treated these three as such, which suggests that they were still young at the date of his marriage to their mother.

It is possible now to pass from guesswork to recorded fact. By 1534 Laxton was a Warden of the Grocers’ Company: in 1535 a subsidy was collected from some 144 Aldermen and Commoners of London, Laxton being assessed at £1000, a sufficient indication of his wealth. Unlike Thomas Bowyer, he did not refuse to stand for Alderman when his chance came. Sir Thomas Semer, the Alderman for Aldersgate Ward, had died in December 1535: Laxton began his civic career when he was elected and sworn on 7 March 1535/6 as Alderman for Aldersgate Ward, apparently the first time he stood for election. Aldermen are elected from among members of the Common Council (i.e. Commoners) by their wards to hold office for life, unless they resign or are deprived of their gown. Laxton remained an Alderman till his death, transferring on 29 May 1543 to Langbourn Ward and on 10 September 1545 to Lime Street Ward. (He made five or six unsuccessful attempts to change his ward (in 1537, 1539, 1540, 1544 and 1554), and in 1548, although he had already passed the mayoral chair, he was one of those nominated for Bishopsgate Ward on the occasion when the whole list was rejected on the ground that the Commoners were “insufficient”.

On 18 May 1536 he was elected Upper Master of the Grocers’ Com-
SIR WILLIAM LAXTON: c. 1500-1556

pany for the first time.6 The same year he applied for and received a grant of arms: the blazon entered at the College of Arms (F.12 81b and 82) is as follows:

Argent a chevron engrailed ermine and sable quarterly enterchanged between iij greffons hedds erased gules langued and ered azure charged with iij gutts gold. Upon his helm on a torse argent and gules a tygarse hed cupe gold and vert parted pale langued gules holding in his mouth a columbine azure stalked vert and mantled azure doubled argent.

No motto seems recorded.7

On 18 May 1538 he was again elected Upper Master. At the Mile End muster of the London troops raised Ward by Ward held on 8 May 1539, Laxton might have been seen in white, mounted on a stirring horse richly trapped and covered, with a battle-axe in his hand, and about him four halberdiers.8 In 1540 his civic career advanced a step when he was chosen one of the two Sheriffs of the City of London, entering on his year’s duties on 28 September. An indenture of apprenticeship dated Christmas Day 1540, before William Riche, Mayor, and William Laxton and Martin Bowes, Sheriffs, has survived in the Public Record Office. While still Sheriff, he was again elected Upper Master on 16 May 1541. On 29 June, with his colleague, Martin Bowes, goldsmith, on the other side of the prisoner, he led on foot from the Tower through the City to Tyburn Thomas, Lord Dacres of Hurstmonceaux, “condemned to be strangled, as common murderers are, for the murder of a simple man and an unlawful

6 Before noon on the very next day, Laxton, as one of the junior Aldermen, attended the Mayor to the execution of Anne Boleyn.

7 The grant of arms to the Grocers’ Company was quite recent. “The Armes and Supporters of the Worshipful Company of Grocers were granted by Thomas Bendt Clarenceux Kinge of Armes Anno Domini 1532 the 23rd of Henry VIII. A creast afterwards granted and the same Armes and Supporters confirmed by Willm. Hervey Clarenceux under the seale of his office and the seale of his Armes Anno Domini 1562 the 4th of Q. Elizabeth, and now agayne approved in this Visitation and at this present James Rudierd, Richard Piggott and Reuben Bourne Wardens of the sayd Company having noe Master” (i.e. 1634-5).—Records of College of Arms.

8 The review was held shortly after the alarm of invasion by Charles V. Giving Thomas Lott as his authority, Froude writes: “White was the City uniform. The lord mayor and the aldermen rode in white armour, with light coats of black velvet, and the arms of London embroidered on them. Massive gold chains hung on their breasts. Their caps were of velvet with plumes: and steel battle-axes were slung at their side. Every alderman was attended by a body-guard in white silk, with gilded halberds.”
assembly made in Sussex": his three confederates were hanged at Saint Thomas-a-Watering. On 28 May 1543, Laxton was elected Upper Master for the fourth time. He was about to enjoy the luxury of holding the expensive office of Lord Mayor, as has been said of his stepson-in-law, Thomas Lodge. Laxton had certainly worked hard as an Alderman, for his name appears alongside those of Judde, Gresham and White on almost every page of the repertories of the Lord Mayor’s Court.

But, as Thomas Bowyer had done in April 1540 and so many merchants did, Laxton also acquired a portion of the lands of dissolved religious communities: on 22 August 1544, Henry VIII, for due consideration, granted the Manor of Shepereth, formerly belonging to the dissolved Priory of Chatteris, to William Laxton, Henry Hoblethorn and Thomas White, three citizens and aldermen of London: Hoblethorn and White by a deed dated 17 December 1545 released to Laxton all their rights in the manor.

Elected to the mayoralty, he took office on 28 October 1544—and at once found that Henry VIII’s French War added greatly to his expenses. A large subsidy was again demanded from the City of London by the King’s Commissioners headed by the Lord Chancellor, the Duke of Suffolk, who assessed the amount each Alderman should pay as a “benevolence”. One Alderman, Richard Read, refused to pay: he was thereupon conscripted as a common soldier and sent to serve against the Scots: nothing that Laxton could do availed to secure his release: the unfortunate Alderman was taken prisoner, and had to pay a heavy ransom, the money going to the Scots and not to his King. For Laxton the outcome of prompt payment was very different. Charles Wriothesley writes of the year 1545:

The 8th day of February Mr. William Laxton, Mayor, was presented to the Kinges Majestie at Westminster, and the Kinges Majestie gave him and the aldermen great thanks for the benevolence to him by them given, and further desyred them to give thanks to God for the victorie that his Majestie had of his enemies the Frenchmen lying at campe before Bulleine (Boulogne) which was done on Thursday the 5th day of February. After this spoken by the Kinges Majesties owne mouth, he made the mayor a knight.

Of the other events of his mayoralty there are a few details of interest: in his own court Sir William Laxton was concerned with Anne Askew.
He examined her and committed her to the Counter in March: when, after her release by Bonner, she had been re-arrested by order of the Privy Council and on 13 June was arraigned before him as a sacramentarian under the Six Articles, Laxton released her as no evidence was forthcoming. On 18 March "one Hugh Weaver, a fishmonger, was whipped at a cartes arse about London, with a paper set on his head, for misusing the mayor at the stockes and stryking his officer in open market when he was for his misbehaviour commanded to warde: and allso had after that longe prisonment in the Counter for the same". That sounds severe nowadays: perhaps Laxton thought of it when he made his will. Then, on 24 July and again on 4 August, came alarms of French invasion, and London troops were ordered under the Sword-bearer to Portsmouth and Dover: and also fears of fifth-column activities—"This moneth of July were divers billes cast in the streates of London directed to the mayor of the same, declaring in them of certeine preistes and straungers that would fyre the citye in divers places: which billes the mayor shewed to the Kings counsaill." Shades of Catiline! But London went unscathed by war. Meantime Laxton on 8 June was elected for the fifth time Upper Master of the Grocers’ Company: and the Grocers paid "to my lord Maire in reward" twenty-one pounds.

On 13 August Sir John Alleyn, Mayor in 1525 and 1535, died and left to the City his rich collar of gold, the historic collar of SS, "to be worn by the Lord Mayor for the time being and by all succeeding mayors". Laxton was the first to wear it, and he "wore it first on Saint Edwardes daie to the election of the new maire". He wears it in the Chapel Window and on the Cloisters gateway tower. Sir William Laxton’s own chain was left by Lady Laxton in her will (10 August 1576) to her son-in-law Sir Thomas Lodge—"a chayne of gold worth £100 which was the chayne of my late husband, Sir William Laxton". It has been asserted by one authority that in Laxton’s mayoralty the full style of “my Lord Mayor” became current, but this is

*A year later Anne Askew was again charged before Laxton’s successor, convicted on her own confession and burnt. See her own narrative in Foxe’s Acts and Monuments rather than John Louthe’s Reminiscences.*
hardly correct: ten years before Laxton the “Lord” was occasionally used, ten years after him it was still sometimes omitted, but in his year (as can be seen) “Mayor” and “Lord Mayor” could occur in the same sentence.

His year of office ended, Laxton was still an important figure and active as an Alderman: a hint of his activity seems to be recovered whenever a writer reports on his search of the repertories. For example, on 24 April 1550 Laxton and four other Aldermen were appointed to arrange “for the conveying of the waste water of the condite in Lothberrie to seynt Johns in Walbrooke as they shall thynke most metest for the further and better supplying of the Cityeyens of the Cittie.” 10 After the death of Henry VIII on 28 January 1546/7 Laxton was elected Upper Master of his Company for the sixth time, with his future stepson-in-law, Thomas Lodge, as a junior Warden. Twice more he served as Upper Master, being elected on 9 June 1550 and for the eighth and last time on 20 June 1552: shortly after the election of his successor the death of Edward VI was announced on 6 July 1553. Laxton was not one of the signatories of Edward’s Limitation of the Crown: yet Sir John Gresham and Sir Andrew Judde signed among the six Aldermen, and Thomas Lodge and Christopher Dauntey among the Merchants of the Staple or Merchant Adventurers. He probably accepted the accession of Mary as inevitable, and may well have been among the Aldermen in arms rather than among “the ancient men astoyned” when Wyatt approached Deptford. Did Laxton, a few days later when the rising had collapsed, come out of the Guildhall at nine o’clock on the morning of Thursday, 15 February 1553/4, to see the strange sights of the double suns and an inverted rainbow, as Foxe 11 says certain Aldermen did? Following his instructions, he must have conveyed to every householder in his Ward orders to prepare themselves and their households by due confession to attend mass at Easter 1554. Did he go “in his skarlet” with the Lord Mayor to meet the Russian Ambassador on 28 February 1555/6?


11 In Acts and Monuments of the Martyrs (first published in English in 1563 and commonly known as Foxe’s Book of Martyrs) under heading “Things done the first yeare of Q. Mary”. John Foxe is said to have shared a room at Brasenose with Alexander Nowell, afterwards Dean of St. Paul’s.
On 11 June 1556 he was certainly a member of the Court of Aldermen which convicted Francis Verney.

While Laxton's views on the religious changes made by Henry VIII and his children may be beyond recovery, it is clear that he was not an unbending reformer like Thomas Bowyer, but of more pliant metal: he conformed with the times under Edward and also under Mary. Wriothesley records that, at the election of Sir Rowland Hill, on Michaelmas Day 1549 four Aldermen, Sir Henry Amcottes (the Lord Mayor), Sir William Laxton, Sir Martin Bowes (who had been Sheriff with Laxton and had followed him as Lord Mayor) and Mr. Richard Turck (a newly chosen Sheriff) "received the Holy Communion at the Guildhall Chapel, the service being in English according to the Kings Booke, my Lord Mayor's chaplaine executinge at the aulter and ministeringe the Communion in a cope with certaine of the parish clerkes, which songe the service in the quire, which was a goodly ensample for all the citizens to followe". This may well have been the consideration in Laxton's mind, for the following year at the election of Sir Andrew Judde (who had been Sheriff in Laxton's Mayoralty), he was again present, with Hill, Bowes and Sir John Gresham. He must likewise have been included on the many occasions on which the Lord Mayor and Aldermen went to sermons at Paul's Cross under Edward VI and in procession about St. Paul's under Mary. There is one indication of his sympathies, however, to be found in a quotation from Foxe on p. 298 of the Camden Society's Narratives of the Days of the Reformation, drawn largely from Foxe's unpublished MS. material in the Bodleian. The editor writes that in the reign of Mary there were several Aldermen who were supposed to favour the Protestant doctrines and suffered some persecution in consequence, Foxe enumerating their names "as master Lodge, master Hawes, master Machel, master Chester, &c." Two of the four named were the husbands of Lady Laxton's two daughters: the inference may seem justified that Laxton likewise was more inclined to the new than to the old.

To have been an Alderman since 1536, Sheriff and Lord Mayor of London, and eight times Master of his Company, was no small achievement for the son of an Oundle tradesman. He had acquired arms and a knight-
hood, lands in four or five counties as well as property in the City of Lon-
don: but he had not founded a family, his heir-at-law (or "right heir") being his dead brother’s daughter, now Joan Wanton.

His elder stepdaughter, Joan, was married to John Machell, who was Master of the Clothworkers in 1547, became an Alderman in 1553, was elected Sheriff in 1555 and, after Laxton’s death, elected Lord Mayor for 1559–60, but, with the fatality then haunting the Clothworkers, died on 12 August 1559 before entering on office. Alderman Machell was appointed by Laxton as one of the overseers of his will. After his death Joan Machell married Sir Thomas Chamberlayne, who was sent as ambassador to Spain in January 1559/60. Laxton’s younger stepdaughter, Anne, was first married to William Lane,12 grocer (he reached the Livery in 1543), bore him four children, and on his death, became the third wife of Thomas Lodge at the end of 1552. Lodge reached the Livery of the Grocers’ Company in 1539, was Warden in 1548, became an Alderman in 1553, Master of the Company in 1554, Sheriff in 1556, was again Master in 1559, Governor of the Muscovy Company, President of St. Thomas’s Hospital and Lord Mayor in 1562: he was knighted; but his luck then turned, for he was bankrupt in 1563 and out of favour with Elizabeth. He also was an overseer of Laxton’s will. Lady Anne Lodge was the mother of half a dozen more children, one of whom, Thomas Lodge the writer, achieved some sort of fame and is remembered because Shakespeare’s As You Like It was based on his novel Rosalynde.13 Laxton’s stepson, Nicholas Luddington, had first been apprenticed to Robert Colt, grocer, in 1543, but was subsequently apprenticed to Laxton: he reached the Livery in 1546, became Warden in 1561 and was elected Master in 1567: he died in 1595.

There was a numerous family of Laxton relatives in Gretton: fifteen are mentioned in Laxton’s will, and the parish registers of Gretton open in 1557

12 It may be hazarded that he was the “Wylliam Lane, merchante of London”, whose letter to “Mastar Cycyll, one of the Kynges magestes secretaries”, dated 18 January 1550/1 and dealing with the coinage, is reprinted in Tudor Economic Documents, II, pp. 182–6.

with one of them and are full of them for nearly three hundred years (the last was a local farmer, who had been a gentleman's gentleman, and could be recognised to the day of his death by his polished boots); but there were also cousins, such as Robert Catlyn, Reader at the Middle Temple in 1547, Serjeant at Law in 1554, Justice of the Common Pleas in 1558, Chief Justice of the Queen's Bench in 1560 and knighted, and cousin Postell, who had failed to keep his creditors at bay.

But the Laxton circle consisted mainly of City magnates: it will be observed that the group at the head of the Grocers' Company was connected by marriage: there were men of law, also, such as Sir Robert Broke, Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, and John Southcot, one of the under-Sheriffs, Autumn Reader at the Middle Temple 1556 and afterwards Serjeant at Law in 1559, Justice of the Queen's Bench in 1563: there was Sir Thomas White, Alderman, the future founder of St. John's College, Oxford, at the funeral of whose wife Lady Laxton acted as chief mourner. William Toker, grocer, Warden in 1539 and 1547, was a witness to Laxton's will, as was also a Merchant Taylor, Robert Dawbeny, living in the same parish. There were younger men too, such as the Thomas Shelbury, mentioned in the will, who had been apprenticed to Laxton in 1534/5 and had reached the Livery in 1555, to whose son and daughter Lady Laxton stood godmother, William Presgrave, haberdasher, and William Mason, whom Laxton had put apprentice to John Goodwyn, Merchant Taylor, and to whom he left two houses in Aldermary; although Lady Laxton out-lived him, he disposed of them by will to a cousin.

The series of Minute Books of the Court of Assistants begins with the volume started in 1556: the first entries are:

Memorandum that on Sondaie beyng the xiiijth daie of June anno predicto my M'R the Aldermen M'R Wardeyns and tholle Lyverey assemblyd theym selves in their best Lyverey at after nowne on the same daie within their comen house called the Grocers hall and ffrom thens went to their Church called saynt Stevyns Churche in Walbrock within the Citie of London wheare they hadd derige songe, and that beyng ended the said Lyverey retorned to their said hall wheare they dronk accord-yng to their old custome. And after drynkyng was done, the said Aldermen and as manye as hath ben wardeyns went to their Election of the new m'R wardeyns for this present yere now next ensuynge wher was nomynated in the said Election
thies persones followynge that is to saie Edward Rest Thomas Pygett Thomas Wanton and Willm Wyatt/

Memorandum that on Mondaie after beyng the xvth daie of June in the yeres abovesaid the whole Lyverey came to their said hall at ix of ye clock in the mornynge on the same daie in their best Lyverey and from thens went to the said Church of saynt Stevyns where was a sermon preached by mr Christoferson and the masse of Requiem song by note and that done the Company retorned to their hall to dynner where were elected and chosen at the said dynner thies persones vnderwrytten that is to saie S*r John Aylyff Knight and Alderman was elected vpper mr wardeyn and m*r Thomas pygett and m*r Thomas wanton were elected wardeyns for this present yere next ensuyng.14

The Minutes begin with the Court held on 19 June 1556, and Laxton’s name is the first of those present: he was also present at the Courts held on 19 and 22 June and for the last time at the Court of 4 July.

The autumn of 1556 was one of the strange periods of mortality among the Aldermen of the City: Baker’s Chronicle gives a list of the seven Aldermen who (so he says) died of hot, burning agues and other strange diseases between October and December of the fourth year of the reign of Queen Mary, erroneously including Sir William Laxton. The truth is that Laxton fell ill in July, made his will on 17 July, added a codicil on 22 July and died shortly afterwards: Stow apparently quotes from his monument that he died on 29 July, but according to the entry in Henry Machyn’s diary—and he had professional reasons for knowing—it was on 27 July “at night between 8 and 9 in his house in Aldermary”. This house stood in Budge Row in the parish of St. Mary Aldermary: and Lady Laxton continued the tenancy. As Laxton was born before the compulsory registration of baptisms, it is unknown how old he was at death: but it seems reasonable to suppose that he was under sixty, and in full vigour before he was stricken with the disease that caused his death.

It is clear that Sir William Laxton remained in touch with Oundle (he leaves ten pounds to Christian Webster of Oundle, widow, and a gold ring to William Abell), and with Gretton (he knows of an unborn child). He must therefore have realised the effect of Mary’s accession on the fortunes of the Grammar School there—the cessation of the payment of the

14 Sir John Ailiffe was Henry VIII’s surgeon: Mr. Thomas Pigott (or Pickett) married Elizabeth, the sister of Thomas Lodge.
schoolmaster’s salary. He came to the conclusion that without buildings and endowment the future of the School was most uncertain: he laid his plans, therefore, to erect a Free Grammar School, with almshouses attached, to perpetuate his memory and achievement in the place where he was born. It was not merely that the refounding of schools was in the minds of many City magnates of his acquaintance, but the new literary education called for a better scholar than could be had for a chantry priest’s salary, for a schoolhouse more convenient than a Lady Chapel, together with lodgings and maintenance for repairs hitherto provided by the Gild. In 1553, when Sir John Lyon was Master of the Company, Laxton first asked if the Grocers would accept certain freehold house property in London and with the income derived from it erect and maintain a Free Grammar School and almshouses in Oundle. But Sir John Lyon opposed the suggested transfer and the acceptance of the trust on the ground that “the lands were Candell Rentes and therefore would be at the charge of the Company”. Presumably house property deteriorates, the rents gradually wasting away in repairs, unless there is heavy expense in rebuilding. This reason alleged proved remarkably like the truth in 1666, but the vast appreciation of land values within the City of London was not foreseen. Undeterred by this refusal, Laxton raised the matter again from time to time: in 1555, when Richard Grafton was one of the Wardens, the Company actually appointed a committee to view the lands and tenements offered, but still did not accept. During the sickness of Laxton, the matter was talked of again at a Court of Assistants: and the Master, Sir John Ailiffe, Thomas Wanton, Warden and husband of Sir William’s right heir, Thomas Pickett, Warden, and possibly others, waited on the sick man to indicate their willingness to accept: according to Richard Grafton, Laxton answered that he was very evil at ease and desired them therefore not to trouble him with any such matter at that time. One of Laxton’s apprentices, Edward Dawson, remembered, sixteen years later, having heard Thomas Wanton beseech and pray in very earnest manner that Laxton’s good meaning towards the erection of the school might in any wise go forward, just as he recalled Laxton’s anxiety lest some “lack-Latin” might secure the post of schoolmaster. John
Southcot, who had already written the will, signed, sealed and witnessed on 17 July, advised the dying man that a codicil should be appended to that will: and having received his detailed instructions, drew up the codicil, partly in Laxton’s house and partly in his own; in the presence of Lady Joan Laxton, Nicholas Luddington and Thomas Lodge, Alderman, he read it over to Laxton, who not only signified his assent but also added a few legacies forgotten at the making of the will, and, realising that his end was near, a direction as to his place of burial. This codicil is dated five days later than the will.

In view of this evidence of Laxton’s eagerness to endow the School, shown for the last few years of his life, it is obvious that the codicil was no last minute after-thought, no death-bed striving for immortality. The codicil which John Southcot drew is a record of an agreement already reached with the Company, as it says: “It is agreed between me and the Wardens of the Commonalty of the Mistery of the Grocers within the City of London.” The extent of the agreement should be noted: the Grocers would act as governors of the re-endowed School: certain sums should be paid to the schoolmaster and usher, and to seven bedemen, whom the Grocers were to appoint: a certain building, which he knew was obtainable, should be acquired: a local committee should be chosen to advise in Oundle and supervise repairs, for which provision should be made: and certain London property (not specifically mentioned in the will, but set out in the codicil) would suffice to bring in the requisite £38 a year. Yet the codicil ends: “And I will that for lack of convenient time further to explain and set out the erection aforesaid that all other things necessary . . . shall be considered and done in such godly sort as by the good discretion of my executrix and overseers of my last will and testament, or by their learned counsel, shall be thought meet and convenient.” What remained unsettled can only have been the detailed Orders for the School, for the memorandum introducing the Orders quotes this sentence as giving authority to Lady Laxton, with the advice of the overseers and the consent of the Company, to set forth and ordain them.

It is of great importance to interpret the codicil correctly in one or two
particulars. As a Grocer, Laxton knew the Worshipful Company well, and probably agreed with Colet that, while there was no absolute certainty in human affairs, he found less corruption in a body of married laymen like a City Company than in any other order or degree of mankind, and that no better Governing Body for his School could be found than his own Company. But he also knew that such honest management must be recompensed. That is why he gave to the Company the London property, out of the income of which the fixed sums amounting to £38 a year were to be paid: he did not devote the whole income of these estates to the maintenance of the School and the almshouses, but intended the Company to receive any additional revenue as a contribution to its common funds. Failure to realise this intention has led to serious misunderstanding and an unfortunate lawsuit: the condition on which the property was given to the Grocers was that they should pay out of the income arising from it certain definite sums for salaries and repairs. Another mistake sometimes made in later years was to suppose that Laxton sought to benefit Oundle alone by the erection of the Free School: the virtuous, learned schoolmaster was to teach Grammar freely to all such as should come thither to learn: it was the seven poor honest men who had to be dwellers in Oundle.

The funeral took place on 9 August, apparently a Sunday, after long preparations to secure the magnificence desired: as Laxton was an Alderman who had also been Lord Mayor, his obsequies naturally became an occasion of civic display. For the funerals of Aldermen of the City of London there were established rules: his brother Aldermen had to wear their violet gowns, except such as had received black gowns by the dead man's will: if my Lord Mayor received a black gown, then the Sword-bearer must receive one also (or its equivalent to enable him to purchase one) so that he might in black carry the sword before my Lord Mayor. As Laxton was a Grocer, all the other members of his Company were bound to attend his funeral in their livery. The account of Laxton's funeral has in part survived the fire which damaged the Cottonian collection; fortunately Strype had previously quoted the passage: as Machyn was a Merchant Taylor concerned in furnishing the heraldic and other trappings for such
funerals, his account is first-hand evidence and is given here in all the splendour of its phonetic spelling, after replacing what has been lost:

The ixth day of August was buried Sir William Laxton, late lord mayor, in the church of Saint Mary Aldermary... with a goodly hers with v prynsepalles and the maiesty and the valans gyltyd, and viij dosen of penselles and xiiij dosen of skochyons and a half of bokeram: and a standard and iiiij penons and ij baners of ymages: and the howsse, chyrche and the strete hangyd with Blake and armes; and a cott armur and helmett, target and sward, mantylls and crest a teyger-hed with a colymbyn and the sylye. There were ij grett and goodly whyt branches and xxxiiij stayffs torchys and xxxiiij mantyll ffrysse gownes to poure men and a c blacke gownes: Morners Master Loges Altherman cheyff morner and Master Machyl secund morner and Master Wanton iij morner, and dyver odur, the lord mare and Master Whytt and dyvers odur, alle thodor althermen in vyolett; and then cam the women morners, lades and mony althermens wyffes and gentyll-women. And after durge to the plasse to drynke, and the compene of the Grocers, and after prestes and clarkes to the place to drynke, and the harolds and the waxchandlers and the penters to drynke with mony odur. And the morrow iij masses song, ij pryke songe and the iij requiem: at masse did pryche doctur Harpsfell archeydekyn: and after to dener, for ther was a grett dener as I have ever sene at any berehyng ffour ther dynyd mony worshepful men and women.

The hers, or hearse, was a large canopy erected in the church beneath which the body rested until burial in the vault: draped in black and gold, with many wax candles and fluttering little flags bearing the dead man’s arms, the hearse remained in position through the period of mourning. The skochyons, or scutcheons, of buckram were used to diversify the black hangings in the streets. As Laxton was a Knight, there was a standard of his arms and not a banner; the four pennons bore his arms, those of the City of London, those of the Grocers’ Company and those of some other company like the Merchant Adventurers in which he had been interested: the banners of images were religious banners of the Trinity and of the Virgin. The cott armur, or coat armour, was a tabard: the helmet, shield and sword were funeral adjuncts, the work of undertakers, not of armourers. The white branches were clusters of candles to be carried first in the procession. In 1556 the funeral was in accord with the rites of the Church of Rome, and not of the Protestant Church of Edward VI: and Dr. Harpsfield the preacher was the persecuting Archdeacon of London.
THE WYATT PORCH OF ST. PETER'S, OUNDLE

(Drawn by John Johnson, F.S.A., and lithographed by A. Newman)
THE SUPPOSED PORTRAIT OF SIR WILLIAM LAXTON

This was sent to Oundle in 1829 and now hangs in the Dining Hall of School House.
THE SUPPOSED PORTRAIT OF LADY LAXTON

This also was sent to Oundle in 1829 and now hangs in the Dining Hall of School House.
THE FOVRE
books of Flavius Vegetius
Renatus, brieflye contayninge a
plaine forme, and perfect knowledge
of Partiali policie, feats of Chi-
valrie, and whatsoever pert-
ayneth to warre.

Translated out of Latine, into
Ensigne, by John Sadler.

Anno. 1572.

Imprinted at London in
Fleetstreet, neare to Saint
Dunstones Church by Tho-
mas Marsh.
SIR WILLIAM LAXTON: c. 1500-1556

There is a contemporary account of an Alderman's funeral, which, altered to fit Sir William Laxton's, would read as follows:

First two branches of white wax were borne before the priests and clerks in surplices singing. Then a standard of his crest: thereafter certain mourners, then a pennon of his arms and his coat armour borne by the herald: then the corpse borne next after the coat armour by certain clerks and four of the assistants of the Grocers, who went in their livery and hoods about the corpse. There followed the corpse Master Lodge, alderman, as chief mourner alone, and after him Master Machell, alderman, and Master Wanton. Then the sword-bearer and my Lord Mayor in black. Then the aldermen and sheriffs after them, and the whole livery of the Company of Grocers in order. Then the ladies and gentlewomen, as the aldermen's wives and others, which after dirige came home to his house and drank, where they had spice-bread and comfits, wine, ale and beer. On the morrow the mourners went again in order to the church where they had a collation made: after which the herald appointed the chief mourners in order to offer up the target, sword and helmet to the priest: after, they offered in order, and also my Lord Mayor, the aldermen, the livery and others, which offering went to the poor. Then the whole communion was ministered. After which done, the herald again going before, there followed him the standard and pennon-bearers and offered the standard and pennons also: and then, in order, again the mourners, my Lord Mayor and others, returned unto the house, where they dined all, save the livery of the Grocers which dined in Grocers' Hall, by reason Sir William Laxton had given them towards the same £10, which was bestowed by William King and William Smallwood, stewards for the same. And my Lady Laxton of her gentleness sent moreover additional dainties.

In Saint Mary Aldermary the hearse, with its multitude of scutcheons and with all its wax-lights burning, stood to mark the period of mourning. “The xxx day of August was the monyth myn of Sir William Laxtun, Knyght and grocer: and the herse burning with wax: and the morrow masse and a sarmon, and, after, a grett dener, and after dener the herse taken downe”, wrote Machyn. But the helmet and sword remained rusting away, the standard and pennons fading and dropping from their staffs until the Fire of London made away with them and the Laxton monuments.¹⁵

¹⁵ In Miss H. F. M. Prescott's fine novel The Man on a Donkey, p. 677, July Machyn is represented as seeing the funeral of Sir William Laxton at St. Andrew's-in-the-Wardrobe on 15 July 1537. As the name of the deceased Alderman is of no importance to the story, Miss Prescott has undertaken to correct the slip in any new edition.

The lower part of the tower of the present church of St. Mary Aldermary belongs to Keybill's rebuilding of 1511; it was completed in 1626 by a benefactor, Richard Pierson, who insisted that the design adopted more than a century before should be retained. After the Fire another benefactor, Henry Rogers, gave £5000 on condition that Sir Christopher Wren should make the rebuilt church
Sir William Laxton was buried on the north side of the choir of his parish church as he willed, in the vault which Alderman Sir Henry Keybill, four times Master of the Grocers’ Company, had prepared for himself: but his monument had been destroyed in a riot and his tomb rifled. Stow unfairly commented, “but now his bones are unkindly cast out; his monument pulled down: and the body of Sir William Laxton, as also of Sir Thomas Lodge, grocer, Mayor, are laid in place with monuments over them for the time, till another give money for the place, then away with them”. Stow himself has preserved the verses, barely worth preservation, inscribed on Laxton’s tomb: they refer also to Lady Laxton, who outlived her husband by twenty-one years.

Sir William Laxton lyes interr’d within this hollow Vault, 
That by good life had happy death, the end for which he sought. 
Of poore and rich he was belov’d, his dealings they were just, 
God hath his Soul, his body here consuméd is to dust. 
Here lives by fame that lately died, Sir William Laxton’s wife, 
That ever was a doer good and liv’d a vertuous life: 
A mindful Matron of the poore, and to the learned sort 
A true and faithful Citizen, and dyed with good report.

Lady Laxton proved her husband’s will and codicil before Dr. Cooke in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, one of the five making up Doctors’ Commons, on 28 August, and administration was granted her. The Cardinal, Reginald Pole, was the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time: his officer made no difficulty over the absence of a signature from the codicil: both documents were duly transcribed and the originals retained, a copy of both being sealed and returned to Lady Laxton. The notice of probate reads thus:

Probatum fuit testamentum uno cum codicillo coram Magistro Willimo Cooke legum doctore Curie prerogative Reverendissimi in Christo patris et domini Reginaldi Cantuar: Archiepiscopi custode sive commissario vicensimo octavo die mensis Augusti anno domini millensimo quingentensimo quinquagensimo sexto juramento domine Johanne relicte et executricis in huius modi testamento nominate,

—the tower had survived—an exact copy of the old: the result is an interesting example of Wrennian Gothic with fan vaulting in plaster. There appears to be no memorial in the church to Sir William Laxton.
ac approbatum et insinuatum, et commissa fuit administratio omnium bonorum jurium et creditorum domini defuncti prefati juxta tabulas testamentarias ac de bene et fideliter administrando ac de pleno inventario omnium et singulorum bonorum jurium et creditorum conficiendo et exhibendo ad sancta dei evangelia jurate.

[This will with one codicil was proved before Master William Cooke, Doctor of Laws, the Keeper or Commissary of the Prerogative Court of the Right Reverend Father in Christ, Reginald, Lord Archbishop of Canterbury on the 28th day of August in the year of our Lord 1556, on the oath of the Lady Joan, widow and the executrix named in the will set out above: it was approved and entered, and the administration of all the goods of the aforementioned deceased was granted to the said executrix, sworn on the Gospels faithfully to carry out the said will and to complete and return a full inventory.]

It is not easy to answer the natural question as to the size of Laxton’s estate. The will disposes of goods and of lands, besides making arrangements for the funeral. The money payments ordered are well over £3000: the sixty-eight black gowns cost from 30s. to 40s. each: Charity receives just over £250, the Laxtons of Gretton rather less, £240: the Wantons receive £2400 in money, a silver bason and ewer, a fourth share of the goods and are residuary legatees. Nicholas Luddington receives a silver bason and ewer, a fourth share of the goods and the reversion of the manor of Rosehall in Sarratt, Hertfordshire: Joan Machell and her husband receive a silver bason and ewer, a fourth share of the goods: Anne Lodge and her husband receive a silver bason and ewer, a fourth share of the goods and the reversion of the lands in Stoke Nayland. Lady Laxton has a life interest in all the landed estates; besides those mentioned, it is known that these included Shepereth and lands in the Romney Marshes. The property in London devised to the Grocers in the codicil probably brought in £40 in 1556 (it produced about £50 in 1574), and its value at twenty years’ purchase would be £800 in 1556. It is useless to attempt to ascertain the value of a sum of money then by multiplying to bring it up to present-day values: but an attempt may be made along the following lines.

Laxton left the maidservants £20 each: the maximum wage for maidservants of the best kind had been fixed at 44s. a year: the legacy, then, was equivalent to nine years’ wages. He left £20 to each male Laxton of the Gretton family: a Northamptonshire inventory and valuation of a parson’s
goods and chattels, which included twenty sheep, four cows and other livestock, the household furniture, linen and utensils of all kinds, amounted to £8.3.2. So even the girls with £10 apiece were provided with an adequate dowry, and the men had more than enough to set them up in their station in life. The large sums to the London-dwellers must be seen against such facts as these: a well-to-do grocer’s town house contained goods valued at £32; a great messuage could be rented in London for £8 per annum. The £10 given the Grocers for their dinner, even in those days of vast meals, must have sufficed for one of the greatest: William Lane had left them only £5. A full commentary on the will could become a Social History of England in 1556: two points can be made: “poor maidens” received 10s. for a dowry from a charitable fund, and the poor prisoners in Ludgate were debtors who were freemen of the City of London. These charitable bequests are usual in Aldermen’s wills, but their frequent occurrence should not conceal the horrible facts—“bestowed in bread” lets the cat out of the bag.

On 23 December 1829 the Grocers sent to Oundle, on loan to the School, the supposed portraits of Sir William and Lady Joan Laxton: they hang in the dining-hall of the present School House (see Plates 2 and 3). They appear to represent a cavalier and his lady, of the century after Laxton’s death. All that is known for certain of Laxton’s appearance is that he was clean shaven and wore the four-cornered hat of the period. The Stow MS. states: “Sir Thomas Lodge, beynge Mayr of London ware a beard and was ye fyrst that beynge Mayr of London evar ware eny: ye whiche was thought to many people very straynge to leve ye cumly aunsyent custom of shavynge theyr beards: nevartheless he ware ye comly auncient bonet with iiij corners as all others his predysesowrs had done before hym.” And his successor, Sir John White, went further, wore a long beard and took to an unseemly and insignificant round cap.

There appears to be no personal relic of Sir William Laxton yet in existence.
John Laxton of Oundle

William Kirkby

Alice Whetell

John Laxton

Joan Laxton

Edward Catcher

John Laxton

Joan Laxton

Norton of Co. Northants

Sir William Laxton

d. 1556

Joan Kirkeby

d. 1576

(2) ||

William Lunden

d. 1595

Nicholas Luddington

Henry Luddington

d. 1531

Son

Sir Thos. Chamberlayne

John Machell

d. 1559

John Machell

Joan Machell

Joan Kirkeby

Avice Rowe

William Lodge

Anne Luddington

d. 1579

Sir Thos. Lodge

d. 1584

William Loder

d. 1595

Thomas Wanton

d. 1571

John Wanton

Thomas (M.D.)
d. 1592

Martha Wanton

William Leyer

d. 1595

John Wanton

2 sons

-2 daughters

-2 daughters

-3 sons

-1 daughter

-3 sons

-1 daughter

Gamaliel Woodford

Warden, 1591

A dagger (†) = Member of the Grocers’ Company

An asterisk (*) = Master of the Grocers’ Company
A HISTORY OF THE OUNDLE SCHOOLS

THE WILL

In the name of God Amen. The 17th day of July in the year of our Lord God 1556 and in the second and fourth years of the reigns of our Sovereign Lord and Lady King Philip and Queen Mary. I, Sir William Laxton, Knight, Citizen and Alderman of London, being at this present sick in body and yet—laud and praise be given to Almighty God—whoe and perfect of memory, do ordain and make this my present testament and last will. Touching the disposition as well of all my manors, lands, tenements and hereditaments as of all my goods, chattels and debts in manner and form following: first and principally I give and bequeath my soul to Almighty God and to my Maker and Redeemer Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son and to all the Holy Company of Heaven, and my body to be buried in holy grave where it shall please God to call me out of this present life. Item, I give to the poor within the Hospitals of Saint Bartholomew in West Smithfield in London and Christ's Hospital two hundred pounds to be paid within one year after my decease. Item, I give and bequeath to the poor prisoners within Ludgate twenty shillings. Item, to the poor prisoners in Newgate forty shillings. Item, to the poor within every of the Counters twenty shillings. Item, to the poor prisoners within the King's Bench forty shillings, and to the poor prisoners within the Marshalsea forty shillings. And I will the several sums before given to the poor prisoners shall be bestowed in bread. Item, I give to the Company of the Grocers to make them a dinner at my burial ten pounds. Item, I give and bequeath to every one of my cousin Joan Wanton's children two hundred pounds apiece. Item, I give to William Mason whom I put apprentice to John Goodwyn, Merchant Taylor, five hundred pounds. Item I give to John Ryvers, George Cassyn, Richard Thornhill and Michael Agas sometime my servants to every of them a black gown. Item, I give to the poor householders within my Ward five pounds. Item, I give to my brother Cacher, Thomas Bromesgrove, Edward Gunne grocer and to my deputy in my Ward to every of them a black gown. Item, I give to William Laxton of Gretton, middle son of Thomas Laxton twenty pounds; Item, to Thomas Laxton his other son twenty pounds; item, to Alice and Agnes Laxton their sisters to every of them ten pounds; Item, I give to Thomas Laxton the son of Robert Laxton of Gretton twenty pounds; Item, to Robert his brother twenty pounds, to Henry Laxton his brother twenty pounds; Item, to William Laxton brother to the said Thomas Laxton of Gretton aforesaid twenty pounds; Item, to Richard Laxton his brother twenty pounds; Item, to Edward Laxton his brother twenty pounds; Item, I give to Agnes, Elizabeth, Briswith and Margery their sisters to every of them ten pounds; Item, my will and mind is that if the said Thomas Laxton son of the said Robert Laxton of Gretton have any other child now at the making hereof lawfully born, if the same child be a man-child that then the said child shall have twenty pounds, and if it be a woman-child that then the same woman-child shall have ten pounds. Item, I give to Christian Webster of Oundle widow ten pounds; Item, to William Abell a ring of gold price forty shillings. Item, to William Presgrave of London, haberdasher, forty pounds; Item, to Arthur Devonshire and to his wife to each of them a gold ring price forty shillings. Item, I
LAXTON’S WILL AND CODICIL 1556

give to poor maidens’ marriages forty pounds. Item, I give to my cousin Joan Wanton one bason and an ewer of silver of mine own; Item, more to my said cousin Joan Wanton one thousand pounds in money. Item, I give to Agnes the younger, my maidservant, twenty pounds; Item, to Elizabeth my maidservant other twenty pounds. Item, I give to my cousin Robert Catlyn, Serjeant at Law, one black gown and to his wife another black gown; Item, to my Lord Mayor of London one black gown and to the Sword Bearer a black gown; Item, to Sir Thomas White, Knight, Alderman, and to my lady his wife to each of them a black gown; Item, to Mr. Robert Dawbeny, Merchant Taylor, and to his wife, each of them, a black gown; Item, to Thomas Shelbury a black gown and fifty pounds in money.

Item, my mind and will is that my Lord Mayor and Aldermen at the day of my burial shall be required by my executrix to dine at my house. Item, I will that forty black gowns shall be given to forty poor men against the day of my burial. Item, I give to my friend John Southcot and to his wife, to each of them a black gown; Item, I give to Mr. Recorder of London a black gown; Item, I give to Nicho1as Luddington my wife’s son a bason and ewer of silver; Item, to Joan Machell, wife of John Machell, Alderman, my wife’s daughter, a bason and an ewer of silver; Item, to Anne Lodge, wife unto Thomas Lodge, Alderman, another of my wife’s daughters, another bason and ewer of silver. Item, the residue of my part and portion of my goods to me due by the custom of the City of London that shall remain over and above my legacies aforesaid I will shall be divided into four equal parts, whereof I bequeath one equal part to Mr. John Machell, Alderman, and to Joan his wife, another part thereof to Mr. Thomas Lodge, Alderman, and Anne his wife, and the third part thereof to Nicholas Luddington, and the fourth part to my cousin Thomas Wanton and Joan his wife.

And as touching the disposition of my manors, lands and tenements, I will the same in manner and form following: that is to say, I give, will and bequeath after the decease of Dame Joan my wife all my manor called Rosehall in Sarratt with all and singular the members and appurtenances in the County of Hertford and all other my lands, tenements and hereditaments in Sarratt in the said County to the aforesaid Nicholas Luddington and to his heirs and assigns for ever. Item, I give and bequeath to the said Anne Lodge, wife unto Thomas Lodge, Alderman, aforesaid, after the decease of the said Dame Joan, my wife, all my lands, tenements, rents, reversions, services and hereditaments with the appurtenances set, lying and being in Stoke and Nayland in the Counties of Suffolk and Essex and all other my lands, tenements and hereditaments with the appurtenances in the said Counties of Suffolk and Essex or either of them, to have and to hold all the said lands, tenements, rents, reversions, services and hereditaments with the appurtenances in the said Counties of Suffolk and Essex to the said Anne Lodge her heirs and assigns for ever. Item, I will, give and bequeath to the aforesaid William Mason and to his heirs for ever all those my two tenements with the appurtenances set lying and being in the parish of Aldermary within the City of London and now in the several tenures and occupa-
tions of Edward Ley, Merchant Taylor, and Thomas Bellingham, Merchant Taylor. The residue of all my manors, lands, tenements and hereditaments with the appurtenances I leave to descend after the decease of the said Dame Joan, my wife, to my cousin Joan Wanton, my right heir, and to her heirs for ever, according to the order of the King and Queen’s Majesties’ laws.

Item, I do ordain, make and constitute the said Dame Joan, my wife, my sole executors of this my last will and testament, requiring her to see the same truly performed in every behalf according to the special trust and confidence I have put in her as she will answer before God at the Day of Judgment: and I ordain and make overseers of this my last will and testament the aforesaid John Machell, Alderman, Thomas Lodge, Alderman, Nicholas Luddington and John Southcot, gentlemen, most earnestly requiring them and every of them to be aiding and assistant to my said wife in all her business and affairs touching this my last will and to see the same truly justly and fully performed as my special trust is in them that they will so do: and I give unto the said John Southcot for his pains to be taken in and about the premisses and to the intent he shall be always assistant and helping as well to my said wife as other my heirs and kinsfolks, twenty pounds.

In witness of this my last Will and Testament, I, the said Sir William Laxton, have set my seal and subscribed my name, per me William Laxton.

Witnesses unto the same those whose names be hereafter written, John Southcot, one of the Undersheriffs of London: by me Robert Dawbeny, Merchant Taylor of London: by me William Toker, Grocer: by me Nicholas Luddington, Grocer.

THE CODICIL

A Codicil to be added unto the last Will and Testament of Sir William Laxton, Knight, Alderman, of London, made by me the same Sir William the 22nd day of July in the second and fourth years of the reigns of our Sovereign Lord and Lady, King Philip and Queen Mary and in the year of our Lord God 1556, whereas I the said Sir William Laxton am fully minded to erect and found a free Grammar School at Oundle in the County of Northampton to have continuance for ever and the said free Grammar School to be kept in the messuage or house of late called the Guild or Fraternity House of Oundle aforesaid which free School I will shall be called the free Grammar School of me the said William Laxton, Knight, Alderman of London. And whereas my mind will and intent is that the schoolmaster of the said free School for the time being shall have for his stipend and wages yearly eighteen pounds, and the usher of the said School yearly six pounds thirteen shillings and fourpence. And whereas also my whole mind and intent is to have seven poor men perpetually to be found at Oundle aforesaid and to have each of them eight-pence weekly towards their maintenance and relief and also convenient lodging and free house-room and dwelling in the said messuage or tenement of late called the Guild or Fraternity House of Oundle. And whereas for the said godly intents and purpose I have taken order and it is agreed between me and the Wardens of the Commonalty of the Mistery of the Grocers within the City of London, and have
set out unto them in particulars certain of my lands and tenements within the City of London as well for the payment of the stipends aforesaid appointed to the said Schoolmaster and Usher and for the poor men as also for the reparations and maintenance of the said messuage or tenement of late called the Fraternity or Guild House of Oundle. And I now minding the accomplishment of all the premisses and to have the same take effect according to my full mind and intent do will devise give and bequeath unto the Wardens and Commonalty of the Mistery of Grocers within the City of London and to their successors for ever all and singular my messages, lands, tenements, rents, reversions, services and hereditaments with their appurtenances set lying and being in the parish of Saint Swithin at London Stone and in Sherborne Lane, Saint Nicholas Lane, Abchurch Lane, Candlewick Street and East Cheap or elsewhere within the City of London which I late bought and purchased of Mr. [Edward] Weldon Esquire to have and to hold the said messages, lands, tenements, rents, reversions, services and hereditaments with their appurtenances to the said Wardens and Commonalty of the said Mistery of Grocers and to their successors forever, upon this condition and intent hereafter expressed and declared, that is to say, I will that the said Wardens and Commonalty within as convenient time as they may or can shall make suit with my executrix to the King and Queen’s Majesties to obtain at their Highnesses’ hands the said messuage or tenement of late called the Guild or Fraternity House of Oundle aforesaid: and, the same messuage or tenement being obtained, I will the same to be employed or used for the Schoolhouse aforesaid and for the habitation of the said seven poor men and to be called the free Schoolhouse of me the said Sir William Laxton, Knight, in Oundle aforesaid. And also I will that the Wardens and the Commonalty of the said Mistery of Grocers and their successors from time to time for evermore shall provide an honest, virtuous and well learned schoolmaster being a Master of Arts to teach Grammar freely within the said Schoolhouse to all such as shall come thither to learn, and also shall provide continually for evermore one honest learned person to be Usher of the said School and to teach and instruct the scholars of the same under the said schoolmaster. And I will that the said Wardens and Commonalty of the said Mistery of Grocers for the time being shall pay unto the Schoolmaster of the said free School for the time being out of the issues, rents and revenues of the messages, lands and tenements aforesaid to them bequeathed for his stipend and wages yearly eighteen pounds at the four feasts or terms in the year usual within the City of London by even portions or within convenient time after every of the said feasts or terms, and shall likewise pay out of the revenues and issues aforesaid to the usher of the said School for the time being six pounds thirteen shillings and fourence at the feasts and terms aforesaid by even portions or within convenient time after every of the said feasts or terms. And also I will that the said Wardens and Commonalty of Grocers aforesaid for the time being shall for evermore, with the advice and consent of the Vicar, Churchwardens and four of the best and honest parishioners of Oundle aforesaid for the time being, provide and appoint seven poor honest men dwellers in Oundle aforesaid to be bedemen for me in the said messuage or house called the Free Grammar Schoolhouse of me the said Sir William Laxton,
Knight, and to have their convenient lodging and dwelling therein freely, and that the said Wardens and Commonalty of Grocers aforesaid for the time being shall yearly pay out of the issues and revenues of the said lands and tenements to every one of the said poor men thirty four shillings and eightpence, which amounteth weekly at the rate of eightpence apiece and the said payments to be made quarterly as is afore appointed to the said schoolmaster and usher. And further I will that the said Wardens and Commonalty for the time being shall yearly pay and deliver, or cause to be paid and delivered, unto the Vicar and Churchwardens and to four of the most ancient, substantial and honest persons, parishioners of Oundle aforesaid for the time being twenty four shillings yearly to the intent that the said Vicar, Churchwardens and parishioners, or some of them, shall employ and bestow the same upon the reparations and maintenance of the aforesaid messuage or tenement called the Free School of me the said Sir William Laxton, Knight, in Oundle aforesaid from time to time, when and as often as need shall require. And further I will that the said Free School shall be perpetually named and called the Free Grammar School of Sir William Laxton, Knight, Alderman of the City of London, in Oundle; and the Schoolmaster and Usher of the same to be named and called the Schoolmaster and Usher of the Free Grammar School of Sir William Laxton, Knight, Alderman of the City of London, in Oundle; and the said seven poor bedemen to be perpetually named and called the poor Bedemen of Sir William Laxton, Knight, Alderman of the City of London, in Oundle. And I will that for lack of convenient time further to explain and set out the erection aforesaid that all other things necessary touching the erection and continuance of the said Free School and other the premisses shall be considered and done in such godly sort as by the good discretion of my executrix and overseers of my last Will and Testament or by their learned counsel shall be thought meet and convenient.

Further I give and bequeath to my Cousin Postell ten pounds upon condition that his creditors will take it among them and so clear him of his debts. Item, I give to each of my menservants a black gown and forty shillings in money. Item, to Edmund Style a black gown: Item, to goodman Herte a black gown: Item, to goodwife Turk a black gown.

Item, I will my body to be buried in my parish church of Aldermary, and I will that a tomb be made over my grave after a laudable manner.