

A NEW LOOK AT THE MAIRE OF BRISTOWE IS KALENDAR

BY PETER FLEMING

The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar, begun in 1478/9 by the town clerk, Robert Ricart, contains the first fully developed chronicle to be produced in an English provincial town. The book represents a considerable investment of time, money and intellectual effort. Its conception was unusually ambitious, and it was the product of a prosperous, sophisticated and self-conscious urban community.

The *Kalendar* begins with an invocation to God, Christ, the Virgin and the saints, and a Prologue. Thereafter, it is composed of six parts. The Chronicle is divided between the first three. The last three parts contain a Bristol customal, a collection of charters, and a copy of a London customal. The last three parts – particularly Part Four's account of the duties and installation procedures of the civic officers – are of undoubted interest, but it is the Chronicle that makes the *Kalendar* exceptional: collections of customals and charters had been around for some time before 1478/9; provincial town chronicles had not. Ironically, while the customal in Part Four has been widely used by historians of urban government, the Chronicle has been largely ignored. The reason for this neglect is immediately apparent from even the most cursory reading, since the Chronicle has nothing original to say on national affairs, and its coverage of events in Bristol is extremely patchy before the 1440s. Significantly, Lucy Toulmin Smith omitted most of it from her edition of 1872. However, it becomes much more interesting if read for what it tells us of *mentalité* rather than *événements*. In addition, while the importance of the *Kalendar* as a whole has been widely acknowledged, study of the circumstances of its production has not progressed significantly since Smith's edition. Her introduction and notes display exemplary scholarship by the standards of her time, but 130 years on there is naturally room for reappraisal.

In his Prologue Ricart sets out a plan of the book. He states that the intention behind Part One is to describe the foundation of Bristol and the reigns of all the pre-Conquest kings. The second part will take up the story to the death of King John, and the third will extend from Henry III to Ricart's own day; in fact, later contributors continued the history up to 1698.

The pre-Conquest history is a heavily abbreviated version of an English *Brut*, a genre of chronicle which begins with an account of the mythical foundation of Britain by the Trojan refugee prince, Brutus. *Bruts* were very popular among later medieval readers, and Ricart may have found his copy either in the library of a local manor house or monastery, or in London. In Ricart's version, one of Brutus's descendants, called Brennius, 'first founded and billed this worshipful Towne of Bristut that nowe is Bristowe, and set it vpon a litell hill, that is to say, bitwene Seint Nicholas yate, Seint Johnes yate, Seint Leonardes yate, and the Newe yate'. Immediately after this passage comes the famous depiction of Bristol within its wall pierced by the four gates, the whole dominated by the High Cross. The view is probably intended to represent the town as founded by Brennius, Ricart being as untroubled by the existence in the original, pre-Christian settlement of a 'Newe yate' and other gates named after Christian saints as the artist was by churches and a cross erected to commemorate Bristol's 1373 charter. The story then continues, broadly following the *Brut*, until 1066.

Between Part One and Part Two are three short sections, all in Latin. The first is a series of couplets giving extremely brief summaries of all the English kings up to Henry VI, along with the length of their reigns. The next two sections consist of an account of Joseph of Arimathea's foundation of the church at Glastonbury and a list of *notabilia diversa*.¹⁸

Verses on kings were very common, and it has not proved possible to trace Ricart's original. The Latin account of Joseph of Arimathea appears to have been copied from parchments pasted into a tablet, or wooden display box, set up at Glastonbury Abbey for the instruction of Latinate pilgrims. The inclusion of this account in a chronicle structured around kings and mayors needs some explanation. The legend of Joseph's visit to Britain enjoyed a resurgence of interest in the later fourteenth century, and with it came the widespread acceptance of his association with Glastonbury. The growth of interest in Joseph as the founder of British Christianity was more than simply an attempt to improve Glastonbury's pilgrim potential, or the expression of new fashions in chivalric mysticism: it had a very pragmatic political purpose as well. The Joseph story, dating the establishment of Christianity in Britain to within a few years of the Crucifixion, gave a useful bargaining chip to the abbots of Glastonbury, in their efforts to establish their primacy among English abbots, and to the English delegations to the Church Councils of Pisa, Constance and Basle, for whom it provided proof – at least, as far as they were concerned – that Christianity had been introduced to England before its establishment in France at St Denis, and what is more, by a more exalted personage than the French could muster. While literate Bristolians would have been aware of the legend, there still seems no particular reason why one of them should wish to include it in a civic chronicle. The connection may lie with the diocese of Bath and Wells. The diocese included not only Glastonbury but also the southern part of Bristol: the important suburbs of Redcliffe and Temple Fee which lay beyond the river Avon. The Joseph legend shed glory not only on Glastonbury, but also on the diocese as a whole, linking it – and by extension Bristol - to England's foundation as a Christian nation, just as the Brennius story links Bristol to the nation's secular foundation legend.

The third section, *Notabilia Diversa*, is a list of events in ecclesiastical history, beginning with Joseph of Arimathea's foundation of a chapel in Glastonbury, '*ut superius recitatur*'. What follows are brief notes giving the dates of foundation of religious orders – the Carthusians, Cistercians, Knights Templar, and the Franciscans – and of particular houses. Of these, six out of eleven were located in the West Country: Muchelney, Tavistock, Tintern, Ford, Kingswood, and Bruton. In addition, there are notices of the great fire at Glastonbury Abbey in 1184 and of the unsuccessful attempt by Savaric, bishop of Bath (1192-1205) to move the See to Glastonbury and claim lordship over the abbey. While far from conclusive, the balance of evidence would seem to indicate that the original of this section also derived from Glastonbury, or at least from within the diocese of Bath and Wells. This raises the further possibility that all three sections – the only parts of the Chronicle written in Latin – were copied from the same manuscript.

How a chronicler based in Bristol might come by such a manuscript is suggested by one of the *aide memoire* of the Bristol-born antiquarian William Worcestre. In 1478 he noted that certain chronicles of the bishops of Wells were in the keeping of Richard Vowell (probably the same man who was master of the borough of Wells from 1474 to 1487), and that Vowell had recommended that he consult the chronicles at Glastonbury Abbey. Was Vowell also consulted regarding materials for the *Kalendar*? Or, to push speculation a little further, did Worcestre help Ricart? It is possible that Worcestre at least knew about the compilation of

the *Kalendar*. He made a brief visit to Bristol in 1478, the year in which work on the *Kalendar* may have commenced, and he was back there in August 1480.

Part Two does not fulfil the Prologue's declared intent that it should tell how, 'this worshipfull Toune hathe be enlarged, fraunchised, and corporated, by whate kinges daies, and by whoos sute and coste'; instead, we have a continuation of the chronicle of national events from 1066 to 1216, drawn largely from the *Flores Historiarum* of Matthew Paris. Textual evidence suggests that Part Two had been translated, along with its marginal commentary, from a copy of the *Flores Historiarum* that had been owned and annotated in a religious house, possibly a Dominican friary, and even perhaps the one located in Bristol's suburb of Broadmead.

In addition, there are four short sections which do not appear in the *Flores Historiarum*. The first, coming after the account of William I's reign, is entitled 'Why William conquero[u]r was callid W. Bastard' and gives his descent from Duke Rollo. This is immediately followed by two sections: one deals with the earls of Gloucester and their building of Bristol Castle and foundation of Tewkesbury and Keynsham abbeys and St James's Priory in Bristol; while the second is an account of the Fitzhardings and their foundation of St Augustine's Abbey outside Bristol.

The section on the earls of Gloucester is an English translation of part of the *Chronica de Fundatoribus et de Fundatione Ecclesie Theokusburie*. The *Kalendar* section is a close paraphrase, rather than a literal translation, of the Tewkesbury Chronicle, beginning with Robert Fitzhamon and ending with Earl William (d. 1183). The Tewkesbury Chronicle was written in four hands, all of the latter half of the fifteenth century, and its final entry refers to the year 1476. Ricart may have used it before its continuation to 1476, but if he used the final version, written only a few years before he began his work, then his awareness of the latest products of the abbey's scriptorium is most impressive. Such knowledge may have been gained through contact with St James's Priory, which was a cell of Tewkesbury, or Bristol's St Peter's church, of which the abbey was patron.

The Fitzharding/St Augustine's interpolation is probably derived from a chronicle of the Fitzharding lords of Berkeley and their patronage of St Augustine's Abbey. In 1489/90 Abbot Newland produced another English version of this chronicle - 'Abbot Newland's Roll' - which was continued after his death in 1515. Copies of the Roll may well have been found both at Berkeley Castle and St Augustine's Abbey. The two English versions are not identical, so perhaps Abbot Newland did not know of the *Kalendar*'s text, or perhaps his is a different translation from the same Latin original.

The final addition occurs at the end of Part Two, following the account of King John, and is a summary of the privileges granted by his charter to Bristol as count of Mortain in 1188. The charter was of great significance to Bristol's constitutional development, a fact acknowledged by Ricart, who described John as one 'that moost freest and moost largiest enfranchised this worshipfull Toune'.

In Part Three the Chronicle is organised by mayoral rather than regnal years, with the names of civic officers - *prepositi*, stewards, sheriffs and bailiffs - joining that of the mayor at the head of each year's entry. As such, it takes on the appearance of the London chronicles, which provided most of the source material for this part. Entries are sporadic in this part of the Chronicle. Among those with a local connection, for the first year, 1216/7, we are given

an account of Henry III's coronation at Gloucester and how 'he came to Bristowe and hilde there his grete Counseile in maner of a Parlement'. In 1232/3 the death of the abbot of Keynsham is noted, but more significant, in 1239/40, is the account of the building of the new channel for the river Frome. A massive effort, giving Bristol one of the best harbours in thirteenth-century Europe, it was only accomplished through royal pressure on the township of Redcliffe to co-operate in its building. This is noted, along with the grant by St Augustine's Abbey of land for the new channel. This, and Henry III's mandate to the men of Redcliffe, Ricart would have found readily enough among the civic archives.

There is little else of local interest, and long stretches of blank mayoral years, until the Chronicle reaches the fifteenth century. Surprisingly, the charters of 1373, which incorporated Bristol as England's first provincial urban county, are not mentioned. Only from the 1440s, when memory could supplement written record, does the Chronicle pick up a steady rhythm of both local and national events. Royal entries into Bristol are noted, along with some of the battles and executions of the Wars of the Roses. Locally, bad weather, grain prices, the deaths of mayors in office and the loss of ships have their place, as does the occasional bit of gossip: 'This yere [1466/7] the saide William Canynges Maire shulde haue be maried, by the kyng our souerain lordes commaundement as it was saide. Wherefore the said Canynges gave vp the worlde, and in al haste toke ordirs vpon hym ...'.

Ricart's Plan of Bristol C. 1479,

(reproduced courtesy of Redcliffe Press Ltd.)



The medieval section of the *Kalendar* is illustrated by eighteen drawings and miniatures, mostly probably executed by London artists. Thirteen of these depict kings, mostly shown in half-page drawings, and placed at the beginning of the Chronicle's account of that king's reign, or of the first mayoral year of the reign. The others depict the plan of Bristol at its foundation, the mayor-making ceremony, Bristol's first sheriff, and the Annunciation and the Adoration of the Holy Infant. This last appears immediately above the invocation at the beginning of the text. The plan shows the town contained within its walls, dominated by the central High Cross which commemorates the 1373 charter, from which radiate the four principle roads. The street pattern therefore forms a cross, and the symbolism is probably deliberate: despite being depicted as imagined at the time of its foundation,

centuries before the Incarnation, Bristol is a Christian town. The town walls also have their symbolic importance, suggesting that Bristol is self-contained and independent of outside

authority. This message may also have been conveyed by what was left out. While the containment of the town within its walls helps to create a strong and compact visual image, it also excludes certain features with which contemporary Bristolians would have been very familiar. These include the abbey of St Augustine's, to the northwest of the town walls, and the suburb of Redcliffe and Temple, south of the Avon. Both of these, at various times, represented separate – sometimes rival – jurisdictions to that exercised by the mayor and common council of Bristol. Another feature that would have dominated the topography of fifteenth-century Bristol was the castle, to the east. This is perhaps suggested in the plan by some towers at the far side of town, but the real thing would have been much more obvious. The castle was largely deserted and in disrepair by the late 1470s, but doubtless still impressive. More to the point, perhaps, it represented an earlier phase in Bristol's history, before the granting of the 1373 Charter, when the town's lack of autonomy was symbolised every September as the new mayor appeared at the castle gate to swear his oath of office. The depictions of the mayor-making ceremony, where the new mayor swears his oath not to the castle constable but to the outgoing mayor (immediately preceding Part Four's textual representation of the same event), and that of John Vyell, the first Bristol sheriff (placed under the year 1373 in the Chronicle, and marking the grant of the charter which created Bristol's shrievalty), impress upon us that Bristol is now enjoying its new dispensation as an incorporated, independent county-borough.

Turning from the book to its author: in his Prologue Ricart draws a distinction between conception and execution. The idea for the *Kalendar* came from Mayor William Spencer; Ricart's role was to 'devise, ordeigne, and make' the book. A third party must be added: the scribe, or rather scribes, since a comparison of the hands in the *Kalendar* with Ricart's signed contributions to *The Great Red Book* shows that they are not identical.

Of Robert Ricart's life we know very little. He ceased to be town clerk by 1497. He may have been a merchant, active in the 1450s, and associated with members of Bristol's governing class. Mayor William Spencer's biography is a much easier proposition. A prominent Bristol merchant, he was a member of the common council from at least 1450, sheriff in 1461/2, after having been nominated for the previous six years, constable of the staple in Bristol from 1479 to 1483, mayor of Bristol in 1465/6, 1473/4, and 1478/9, and MP in 1467/8. He also sat on numerous commissions in Bristol and Somerset. He was a considerable benefactor to the local poor and the church, and died in 1494.

While Ricart is undoubtedly an obscure figure next to Mayor Spencer, he was no lightweight. Assuming that he did the work of identifying, collecting and ordering, even if not actually transcribing, the material for the *Kalendar*, he must have possessed a good working knowledge of Latin and French. As well as exploring Bristol's civic archive, he had access to chronicles or related materials from the abbeys of Glastonbury, Tewkesbury, and possibly St Augustine's (if not here, then Berkeley Castle), along with a *Brut*, at least one London chronicle, and a copy of *Flores Historiarum*. These last three could all have come from London, along with the customal copied into Part Six. The use of London artists for the illustrations might also have necessitated trips to the metropolis. Spencer could have been of assistance here, since he was no stranger to the city. He was associated with London merchants, while his friendship with William Canynges, witnessed above all by his activities as executor to Canynges's will, may have extended to William's brother Thomas, a London grocer and alderman.

To what end was all this effort expended? Ricart gives us one answer. He explains how Mayor Spencer had commissioned the work, 'in maynteyng of the said franchises hereafter more duely and freely to be executed and exercised, and the perfaitter had in remembraunce'. In other words, this is most certainly not a work inspired merely by antiquarian interest in the past. Rather, it is a practical guide by which civic officers might more effectively defend their town's liberties in the future. For Ricart – and Spencer – the future defence of interests depended on an awareness and understanding of the past. The *Kalendar* continued to serve as a register of events until 1698, when the last Chronicle entry was made. Its continuing utility to generations of Bristol's governing elite is also shown by the marginal annotations and '*Index contentorum in hoc libro*', probably added by Robert Saxcy, mayor in 1556/7.

Such uses of history were common in later medieval and early modern towns. In 1478/9 however, there may have been more particular reasons why Mayor Spencer wanted to have his version of history established as definitive. In 1471 Bristol had found itself on the wrong side in the Wars of the Roses, after having given substantial assistance, with both money, supplies, artillery and men, to Margaret of Anjou's army on its way to defeat at Tewkesbury in May. For this miscalculation, Bristol had to buy a pardon, which was granted eight days after the battle. Some leading Bristolians were exempted, presumably because they had been leaders of Bristol's Lancastrian faction. Among them was the former recorder, Nicholas Hervey, who seems to have led the Bristol contingent to Tewkesbury, where he was slain.

The record of these tumultuous events in the *Kalendar* is terse in the extreme: 'And the same time londid in Devon Quene Marget with Edward hir son, geding grete people came to Bristowe, and met with kyng Edward at Teuxbury, where the Kyng had the fiede'. There are no further entries until 1474/5. Bristol's part in the politics of 1471 is afforded as minimal a treatment as possible without breaking the bounds of credibility, given the notoriety of these events.

Bristol's governing elite had every right to be sensitive about their actions. None more so, perhaps, than William Spencer. He was among those exempted from the pardon of 1471. Spencer was bound in £100 to appear before the king and council, and while he was pardoned in December 1471, the events of that year would continue to haunt him. On 12 March 1479 Thomas Norton, royal customer of Bristol, entered the mayor's court and accused William Spencer to his face of having been a traitor to Edward IV. The precise nature of Norton's accusation is not recorded, but it is very likely to have been connected with his actions in 1471. Spencer, we are told, responded to Norton's accusation by standing down from his office and presenting himself to the sheriff to be held in the town gaol until the case could be tried before the king. This was done, the king found in Spencer's favour, and the mayor resumed his office. The recorder was ordered to punish Norton as he saw fit.

Spencer was a man naturally concerned with his reputation, particularly in view of his – to Yorkist eyes – shady political record. When Thomas Norton marched into his courthouse in March 1479 he was made to appreciate the dangers of a past unexorcised. If Spencer was unaware of the political dangers and possibilities of history when he commissioned the *Kalendar* in the winter of 1478/9, he very soon would be. The *Kalendar* was begun at least eight days before Norton's accusation was made, so there is no way in which the accusation can be said to have prompted Spencer's commissioning of the work. But the researching, compilation and transcription of the *Kalendar* must have taken several months, and by the time of writing the Chronicle entries for the fifteenth century the Norton affair may well

have been a recent and painful memory. Whether or not we can read these sections of the Chronicle as reflecting one man's personal anxieties, there is little doubt that they are not an innocent, impartial record.

An extended version of this article will appear in a collection of papers given at the 2001 University of Illinois Conference on Fifteenth-Century England, edited by Sharon Michalove. The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar, ed. L. T. Smith, was published by the Camden Society in 1872. The original manuscript is held by the Bristol Record Office, to whom I am grateful for their help and permission to reproduce illustrations from the book. I also wish to acknowledge help and advice from Dr David Smith, Dr Clive Burgess, Mr James Lee, and the staff of the Bodleian Library, Oxford.