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The relationship between the royal shipwrights and the commercial shipbuilders was at all times very close. Not only did the former engage freely in commercial business, but they joined the latter in attempting to regulate the shipbuilding industry of the country. An undated petition of both classes of shipwrights for incorporation occurs among the State Papers of 1578.¹ No answer seems to have been given to it, but as there is a 'brief' of a patent for shipwrights dated 1592 mentioned in the calendar of Salisbury MSS.,² it is clear that the proposal subsequently received consideration, although the matter did not come to fruition until thirteen years later.

All record of the steps that preceded the grant of the Charter of 1605³ appears to be lost. It is not probable that the aged Nottingham would have moved in the matter without strong pressure from below, and we can only surmise that the officers of the company thereby incorporated were the prime movers in the agitation which led to its being granted.

It will be observed that the petition of 1578 is based upon the alleged need for regulating the pay, discipline, and training of the ordinary shipwrights, now increasing rapidly in number with the increase of the mercantile marine. The arguments for granting the Charter of 1605, as set forth in the preamble, are two: first, that

¹ Appendix II, p. 175.

² *Salisbury MSS. (Hist. MSS.)*, i. 276.

³ Appendix III, p. 176.

all ships, both royal and merchant, were built neither strongly nor well; secondly, that many of the shipwrights were not sufficiently skilful. The remedy proposed for this state of affairs was the formation of a corporation or trade union, of which all persons engaged in shipbuilding in England and Wales were to be compelled to become members. The government of the corporation—and therefore of the whole shipbuilding industry of the country—was placed in the hands of a Master, four Wardens, and twelve Assistants. Baker, as the most noted shipbuilder of the period, was rightly made the Master; the wardenships were divided between the remaining two master-shipwrights and two of the most prominent private shipbuilders; the twelve assistantships were divided as follows: Phineas Pett, Addey, and Apslyn, from the royal dockyards; four shipbuilders of the neighbourhood of London; and one each from Woodbridge, Ipswich, Bristol, Southampton, and Yarmouth. The omission of any representative from Hull or Newcastle is noteworthy.

No record remains to show what effect this charter had; probably very little, if one may judge from the absence of any record of complaints against it, although the documentary remains of the first ten years of James I's reign are so very scanty that no great reliance can be placed upon this argument.

In 1612 another charter¹ was sealed. The necessity for this was based on the ground of the insufficiency of the powers granted by the former charter, and no pains were spared to remedy this, so far as words could do so. The Charter of 1605 extends over five and a half membranes

¹ Appendix IV, p. 179.

of the Patent Roll, each membrane about 30 inches long and containing 90 lines of writing. The Charter of 1612 was a portentous document; its enrolment extends from membrane 16(2) to membrane 37 and contains about 15,600 words. No possible loophole was left for any verbal quibble or evasion on the part of those who might desire to escape from its jurisdiction; the 'all and every person and persons being shipwrights or carpenters using the art or mystery of ship-building and making ships' of the earlier charter—sufficiently explicit, one would have thought—becomes 'all and every person and persons being shipwrights, caulkers or ship-carpenters, or in any sort using, exercising, practising, or professing the art, trade, skill or mystery of building, making, trimming, dressing, graving, launching, winding, drawing, stocking, or repairing of ships, carvels, hoys, pinnaces, crayers, ketches, lighters, boats, barges, wherries, or any other vessel or vessels whatsoever used for navigation, fishing, or transportation,' and to this is added another long clause covering accessories made of wood, from masts downward. The other clauses of the earlier charter are also expanded with the like object, and there are several new ones. Deputies were to be appointed in 'every convenient and needful place' to see that the ordinances of the Corporation were properly carried out, and to collect dues; members might be admitted who were not shipwrights; the admission of apprentices was regulated; dues were to be received on account of all ships built; the secrets of the art were to be kept from foreigners; power was given to punish those who forsook their work or became mutinous; the Corporation was granted the reversion of the post of Surveyor of Tonnage

of new-built ships, and was to examine each new ship to see that it was properly built 'with two orlops at convenient distances, strong to carry ordnance aloft and alow, with her forcastle and half deck close for fight'; provision was to be made for the poor; and finally, no doubt on account of the extended powers granted, the ancient liberties of the Cinque Ports were expressly reserved to them.

The provision for the armament of the merchant ships is of especial interest when it is remembered that in this year the Royal Navy reached the low water mark of neglect and inefficiency, while piracy in British waters reached a high water mark of efficiency that promised the speedy extinction of the peaceful trader.

But if the general trend of the new charter was the enlargement and consolidation of the powers of the Corporation, there is one significant change that led in the opposite direction: the 'Shipwrights of England' became the 'Shipwrights of Redrith' in the County of Surrey, a step so retrograde that it is difficult to imagine what possible argument could have been adduced to justify such a change: some reason, no doubt, there was, but owing to the loss of the records it has not been possible to discover it.² It will be observed that, although the master under the new charter was a government official, the wardens, reduced to three in number, were all private shipbuilders, and only three of the sixteen assistants were in the service of the State.

In the year following the grant of the enlarged charter, the legal position of the Corporation was

¹ Rotherhithe, where their Hall was situated.

² Probably it was due to the growing resistance of the City Company of Free Shipwrights.

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further strengthened by the issue of an Order in Council authorising the Master and Wardens to apprehend all persons using the art of shipbuilding contrary to the Charter, and all apprentices or journeymen departing unlawfully from their masters;¹ and by an order of the Lord High Admiral directing the apprehension of all persons who refused to conform to the regulations, and their imprisonment until they complied—'they being chiefly poor men and unable to pay a fine.'²

The fact that it was necessary to recapitulate two of the penal clauses of the charter throws light on the uncertain scope—possibly the illegality—of the powers intended to be conferred by it. The active life of the Corporation was one long struggle to enforce its powers and secure its rights, not only against private individuals or rival bodies, but even against the Officers of the Crown, who might well have been expected to respect the provisions of its charter. For the resistance to the Corporation did not come from 'poor men' alone. The other associated bodies of shipwrights that were in being resented interference in their own localities. The most important of these was the London Civic Company, known as the Company or Brotherhood of Free Shipwrights of London, which had been in existence as a 'trade craft' or 'guild' from an early date. It is mentioned among the Civic Companies in 1428,³ and was in 1456 erected into a 'fraternity in the worship

¹ *Cal. S.P. Dom.*, 12 July 1613.

² *Ibid.*, 30 Oct. 1613.

³ See Sharpe, *Short Account of the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights*. This author has made the mistake of assuming that the Charter of 1605 was granted to the City Company.

of St. Simon and St. Jude,' and in 1483 regulations were made by it relating to apprenticeship and use of good material and workmanship.

This company held a very obscure position among the minor companies¹ of the City, and during the period in which its activities concern us it seems to have been in a very low financial condition. This, however, did not deter it from contesting the jurisdiction of the Corporation (or 'foreign' shipwrights, as it termed them, despite the fact that, owing to the growth of London, it had itself long left the boundaries of the City's Liberties, and now had its headquarters near Ratcliff Cross), and the City, not unnaturally jealous of its own special privilèges, supported the opposition.

At first the efforts of the free shipwrights of the City to dispute the authority of the Corporation were unsuccessful. An attempt made in 1632 ended in the submission of the two citizens who had been put up to contest the matter, and their 'promise to be obedient to the Shipwrights of Rotherhithe, saving the freedom of the City of London';² a submission brought about by the fact that they were members of both companies, although they had endeavoured to deny that they were members of the Incorporated Company of Rotherhithe.³

A further attempt in 1637, however, by two other free shipwrights, backed again by the City Corporation, was more successful. The case was

¹ It is not even mentioned in Stowe's list of sixty companies attending the Lord Mayor's Banquet in 1531.

² *Cal. S.P. Dom.*, 4 Feb. 1632.

³ *Ibid.*, 17 June 1631. I am indebted to Mr. E. A. Ebblewhite for drawing my attention to the significance of this fact.

referred to Sir Henry Marten, the Judge of the Admiralty, who reported to the Admiralty that 'these London Shipwrights, being supported by the countenance of the City, will by no means agree to come under the King's Charter and government, and to that purpose are resolved to oppose themselves by further proceedings at law.'¹ The case was referred back to him by the Admiralty with the remark that 'You have long been acquainted with the said business and know of what importance it is to have the shipwrights kept under government, which was the ground of the grant made to the Company at Rotherhithe.'² Marten finally advised the Admiralty not to grant their request, 'it being a business so much importing the general good of the kingdom that all shipwrights should live under a uniform government, as now regulated by the King's charter,'³ and the two recalcitrants were committed to the Marshalsea, where they made their submission. Nevertheless, in Oct. 1638 the matter was again brought up, coming before the newly appointed Lord High Admiral upon a petition from the City Company, and by an Order in Council of March 1639 that Company was exempted from the jurisdiction of the 'New Corporation of the Suburbs,' although, in view of the fact that 'the said Corporation of shipwrights is of so great importance for the defence of the Kingdom and is dispersed not in the suburbs only but over the whole Kingdom of England,' it was declared 'that this exception ought to be no encouragement to any other Society or Trade or particular persons to withdraw their obedience to the said new Corporation

¹ *Cal. S.P. Dom.*, 30 June 1637.

² *Ibid.*, 10 July 1637.

³ *Ibid.*, 26 July 1637.

or to make suit for the like exemption, which in no sort will be granted.'¹

The City had won; fine words, whether in a Royal Charter or an Order in Council, were of little use without the consistent support of the authorities, and this the unfortunate Corporation never received. The attempt of the Ipswich Shipwrights in 1621 to secure its dissolution failed, but upon the motion of their member against the 'Patent of the Ship-carpenters who impose exceedingly upon builders of ships,' the House of Commons ordered that the Corporation should not demand or receive any more money by virtue of their patent until it had been brought to the Committee of Grievances and further order been taken therein by the House.²

Less drastic attacks on the privileges of the Company frequently succeeded. The exemption from 'land service' was ignored by the Earl Marshal and the Lord Admiral in 1628. In 1631 the King's Bench indirectly curtailed its powers by prohibiting the Lord High Admiral from proceeding in matters relating to freight, wages, and the building of ships; and two years later prohibited the Company from using its powers of arresting ships, thereby preventing the Company from getting 'their suits decided in a speedy way in the Court of Admiralty' and compelling them to 'confend with the master, who, proving poor and litigious, all that the (Company) can get, after long suit, is but the imprisonment of his body.'³ The East Country merchants also opposed its trading privileges, and in 1634 the Company found it necessary to appeal to the Admiralty.

¹ *Council Register*, No. 50.

² *Commons Journal*, i. 563.

³ *Cal. S. P. Dom.* January 21, 1633.

for assistance in carrying out its powers in regard to the search and survey of ships, and the regulation of apprentices. In 1635, when Peter Pett was Master, the difficulties of collecting the dues of the shipwrights and the 'tonnage and poundage' granted for the support of the Corporation and its poor, became more acute than ever. After much argument and reference to Sir Henry Marten, the Master, Wardens and Assistants were told, in 1638, 'to cause their charters to be published and put in execution,' while the 'Vice-Admirals, Mayors and other Officers' were charged to assist them. In 1641 the right of freedom from impressment and from attendance on juries was again in question, and although the decision of the Lord Admiral was then favourable the troubles of the Company still continued, for in January 1642 they were petitioning the Commons for relief.

In March 1645 an Ordinance to protect the Shipwrights from impressment for land service 'on account of the importance of their trade and the decrease of qualified workmen,' was presented to the Lords by Warwick, the Lord High Admiral, and was approved by them and passed on to the Commons for concurrence, but it does not appear to have been read.¹

In August of the following year, Warwick again reported from the Committee of the Admiralty to the Lords a 'Report and Ordinance concerning the better building of ships and granting privileges to the Shipwrights and Caulkers to be freed from Land Service,' elsewhere described as an 'Ordinance for the better regulation of the Mystery and Corporation of Shipwrights.' This

¹ *Lords' Journal*, vii. 286. *Hist. MSS.*, Sixth Report, p. 51.

was agreed to and sent to the Commons, who read it a first time and ordered it to be read a second time 'on Thursday next come Sevensnight,' and then dropped it.

In the meantime the Clerk and other officials of the Company, whose pay was much in arrear, were petitioning the House to take such action with the Company as would force it to meet their claims, while the Master and Wardens were complaining of individual refusals to pay assessments due to the Company.¹ This state of affairs was still in evidence in 1648, when Edward Keling, the Clerk, and the existing and late Beadles of the Company, petitioned the Lords for relief, and asked 'that the public instruments entrusted to Keling may be disposed of and he be indemnified for them.' The statement of the Wardens annexed thereto² explains the situation as follows: The Wardens had

consented to pay the established duties of the Corporation as directed by Order of the House, but Peter Pett and other principal members, and great dealers in that mystery, withhold and refuse to pay the duties for support of the Corporation, and so the Wardens have not the means to pay the salaries of their officers, or their house rent, to relieve the poor, to make their due surveys upon ships, or to pursue an ordinance for settlement of their government which passed the House of Peers eighteen months ago, and now remains in the House of Commons.

In June 1650 the difficulties of the Company were evidently still unrelieved, for a petition from them, together with their Charter, was referred by the Council of State to the Committee

¹ *Lords' Journals*, viii. 232, 286; x. 403.

² *Hist. MSS.*, Seventh Report, p. 40.

of the Admiralty, who were to advise with the Admiralty Judges on the matter. The result of this does not appear, but it seems probable that the Corporation shortly after ceased to exercise its functions, for a petition to the Navy Commissioners in 1672 (which shows the same old difficulties still unremedied) refers to 'the discontinuance of the exercise of this Charter in the late troublesome times.'¹

During the earlier years of its activity the Corporation played a part of some importance in the administration of the Navy. It surveyed and reported upon the workmanship and tonnage of ships built in the royal yards, and gave advice concerning their defects—thus acting to some extent as a check upon the master shipwrights—and notices of the sale of unserviceable ships were given out at Shipwrights' Hall as well as on the Exchange. In one instance² it was called upon to submit a scheme 'for the mould of a ship like to prove swiftest of sail and every way best fashioned for a ship of war,' but this attempt to erect it into a board of design seems to have failed completely.

In 1683 the Corporation attempted to set its affairs on a more satisfactory basis by obtaining a new charter, surrendering the charter of 1612 in October 1684³ and obtaining in January 1686 a warrant from James II. to renew it with additions. This was opposed by its old enemies, and nothing seems to have come of it, although the matter was under discussion until 1688, and the Masters of Trinity House in 1687, in a report

¹ *Cal. S.P. Dom.*, 25 July 1672.

² By the Commissioners for inquiring into the State of the Navy. *Cal. S.P. Dom.*, 22 Feb. 1627.

³ Bodleian, *Rawlinson MSS.* A 177.

to Pepys, had recommended that there should be but one Company of Shipwrights, and that all of that trade in England should be under their rule and government. The Corporation appears then to have become practically extinct, for in a report by the Navy Office, in 1690, on the method of measuring ships reference is made to the 'measurement and calculations . . . formerly taken and made by the Corporation of shipwrights (when there was such a company).'¹

In 1691² and 1704 the remnants of the Corporation made a final attempt at reconstruction, backed by the Admiralty, Navy Board, and Trinity House. A petition to this end came before the House of Commons in January 1705, and is recorded in the Journal³ of the House in the following terms :

A Petition of the Master Shipwrights (who signed the same) in behalf of themselves and others, Master Shipwrights of England, was presented to the House and read : setting forth that the petitioners' predecessors were incorporated by charter in 1605, and were thereby empowered to rectify the disorders and abuses of the Shipwrights' Trade, and to furnish the Crown and Merchants with able workmen, and to bind and enrol their apprentices ; but the breed of able workmen is almost lost, and for want of sufficient power to execute the good intent of their charter, the petitioners have not been in a regular method many years past to rectify the disorders amongst the shipwrights and to improve their trade ; yet a Proposal of some additional heads to effect the same has been approved, and reported by the Commissioners of the Admiralty, Commissioners of the Navy, Corporation of Trinity House ; and also his Royal Highness,⁴

¹ *Cal. S.P. Dom.*, 21 Aug. 1690.

² See Sutherland, *Britain's Glory, or Shipbuilding Unvail'd*, p. 70.

³ Vol. xiv. p. 482.

⁴ Prince George of Denmark, then Lord High Admiral.

the 7th Nov. 1704, declares his opinion that it will be much for the public service to have the shipwrights incorporated by Charter, as desired by them; but in the said proposal there are some necessary clauses which cannot be made practicable and effectual without an Act of Parliament: and praying that leave be given to bring in a Bill, of regulating clauses, to be inserted in a new charter for the better breeding of Shipwrights and for the more firm and well building of ships and other vessels.

The motion to refer it to a Committee was lost, and thus went out the last spark of life of a Corporation that had struggled in vain for a hundred years to carry out the intentions of its founders.