

# RECORDS OF EARLY ENGLISH DRAMA

## Pre-publication Collections

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### **Wootton St Lawrence, Hampshire** **Peter Greenfield**

The church and village of Wootton St Lawrence are located about three miles west of the center of Basingstoke, most of the parish lying to the west of the church. The land in the parish was nearly all owned by the monks of St Swithun's Priory, Winchester, until the Dissolution, when possession passed to the dean and chapter of Winchester Cathedral. The Wither family held the lease of the manor of Wootton, usually known as 'Manydown', at least as early as the fifteenth century and eventually purchased the land from the dean and chapter in 1649. The Kingsmill family of Sydmonton Court in Kingsclere parish, a few miles north of Wootton, leased Fabians manor. Another family of local importance were the Ayliffes, who leased a property called Skeyers Farm from Magdalen College.<sup>1</sup>

The church was entirely rebuilt in the 1860s, except for the tower, which is 14th century.<sup>2</sup> The rector of St Lawrence in the early seventeenth century was Charles Butler (1560-1647), perhaps best known as the author of a book on bees, *The Feminine Monarchie* (1609), as well as works on the logic of Ramus, on music theory, and on the regularizing of English spelling. Butler was the master of Holy Ghost School in Basingstoke for five years before coming to Wootton St Lawrence in 1600 and served there until his death.<sup>3</sup>

Like nearly every Hampshire parish from which pre-1600 churchwardens accounts survive, Wootton St Lawrence held a 'kingale' every few years. Wootton's earliest record of a kingale is from 1565, but this customary festivity likely had a long history, like those at Andover and Bramley, where kingales are recorded in the late fifteenth century. Though no text of a kingale survives, these Hampshire festivities must have resembled what are elsewhere called 'summer games', which involved choosing a mock king or lord to preside over feasting and entertainment. The participants were appropriately costumed as kings, lords and ladies, and minstrels provided music for singing and dancing. The 'ale' element consisted of the selling--and consuming--of ale brewed from donated grain, along with feasting on meat and other food, which is extensively detailed in the churchwardens' accounts.

For many parishes, Wootton St Lawrence included, such ales provided most of the parish's income, funding poor relief and repair to the church fabric. In 1600, for instance, Wootton's kingale made a profit of £12 14s 1 1/2 d, enough to cover several years of expenses. Reforming clergy, however, were not sympathetic to the practice. In 1586, Bishop Thomas Cooper of Winchester issued a diocesan letter attacking the 'straunge perswasion among Christians, that they can not by any other meane of contribution repaire their churches, and set forth the service of God, but they must first do sacrifice to the Devill, with dronkennes and dauncing, and other ungodly wantonnes.'<sup>4</sup> Cooper's opposition may explain why no kingales appear in Wootton's churchwardens' accounts between 1580 and 1600. (Accounts from 1588 to 1593 and from 1598 to 1599 have not survived.) But in 1600, when the custom had become a distant memory in most parishes, Wootton put on perhaps its most elaborate kingale ever, and repeated the festivity in 1603, 1605, 1612, and--after a long break--1629. One is tempted to link the parish's resuming its kingale in 1600 with Butler's arrival as rector in the same year, but the link must remain speculation, as the documents offer no evidence to support it. Indeed, Butler's name does not appear in the churchwardens accounts for that year. On the other hand, the most prominent families of the parish do appear: the churchwardens that year were Richard Wither and Richard Ayliffe, and the receipts for the 'sonnday next after vj Julij' include 12d from 'mistris kingsmill', the wife or perhaps mother of Sir William Kingsmill of Sydmonton.

The 1600 kingale involved festivities spread over three weeks, with feasting and entertainment each Sunday from 15 June to 6 July, as well as on Midsummer Day. The churchwardens recorded receipts from multiple collections each day--eleven on the first Sunday--as well as sums received 'at the tronkes', perhaps open trunks or cases into which the revellers tossed coins. On Midsummer, the churchwardens received 10s 6d 'for the play at Pewter'--probably some form of gambling with pewter utensils rather than a dramatic play. To provide the feasts, the churchwardens purchased calves, lambs, fish, eggs, butter, fruit and spices, as well as grain, malt and hops for making ale. They also paid 8s 6d for costumes for the performers--the 'Ladies Lyueries' and the 'Lords Lyueries'--and nearly 24s for minstrels to provide music. An intriguing payment of 2s 'To Whitburne for his play' probably refers to a minstrel being rewarded for playing his instrument, or perhaps to the chief performer--the 'king'--for leading the 'play' of the other participants (or even to gambling for pewter), rather than for writing a dramatic script.

The kingales of 1603, 1605 and 1612 were similarly elaborate and similarly lucrative. After 1612 the parish instituted a rate as the principal means of financing parish activities. In 1629, however, they once more held a kingale, about which the records tell us only that it was the most expensive ever, costing £19, which left a profit of only two pounds. Whether because the profits were disappointing or because of objections to the kingale itself, the 1629 event was the final kingale at Wootton St Lawrence.

*For further reading:*

Greenfield, Peter H. "Parish Drama in Four Counties Bordering the Thames Watershed," in *English Parish Drama*, eds. Alexandra F. Johnston and W.N.M. Hüskén. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996. 107-118.

Williams, John Foster, ed. *The Early Churchwardens' Accounts of Hampshire*. Winchester, 1913.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Parishes: Wootton St Lawrence', 'Kingsclere', *A History of the County of Hampshire: Volume 4* (1911), pp. 239-242, 249-267. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=56797> Date accessed: 13 January 2014.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>3</sup> A. H. Bullen, 'Butler, Charles (1560–1647)', rev. Karl Showler, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Oct 2009 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4178>, accessed 14 Jan 2014].

<sup>4</sup> Surrey History Centre: Loseley MS Cor 3/377, mb 1d.