

Conserving the Oldest Minute Book of the Wenlock Borough.

The first Wenlock Borough minute book records its earliest written history. The Borough, which survived until 1966, comprised land associated with Wenlock Priory. Included within its boundaries were the current Parishes of Much Wenlock, Barrow, Broseley, Madeley, the Gorge, Little Wenlock and several smaller communities. The Minute Book is a unique record of their local history and now needs to be conserved so that our heritage can survive for another 500 years. An appeal is, therefore, being launched seeking support from the public and particularly from local Parish Councils.

The origins of the book -

Its earliest records date from 1496, during the reign of Henry VII, our first Tudor Monarch. After defeating Richard III at Bosworth, Henry seized the throne, ending the Wars of the Roses. This period has been better remembered since the discovery of the body of Richard III in a car park in Leicester and his reburial in the Cathedral. It may be that the restoration of peace in the land following the end of the wars aided the renewal and expansion of local government. Whatever the reason, the Burgesses of Wenlock Borough took it upon themselves to buy a book, probably in 1495, to record their minutes. This may at first sight seem a minor event. However, the minute book is made of paper, which was still a remarkably new and scarce material.

The paper -

It was only during 1495 that the very first paper was produced in England. This paper, experimental as it was, would not have been available to the Burgesses of Wenlock. Any earlier records of the Borough would have been recorded on vellum, made from calf skin, or parchment, made of sheep skin. One problem with these two materials was that they did not always easily absorb ink. Forgery could be relatively easy. To deceive you could, with luck, scratch out some words and replace them with others.

Being scarce and foreign, paper was very expensive but it did prevent forgery, for the ink readily sank into the paper. This, for the first time, ensured accurate records for generations. This may have been a motivating factor for the burgesses in deciding to buy paper. Some indication of the relative wealth of the Wenlock Borough and the confidence of its Burgesses may be gained from considering what they purchased. The Burgesses did not buy just enough pages for a few decades but a massive book of 800 pages. This must have been a huge investment. It proved sufficient to record the Borough minutes from 1496 through until 1658, a period of over 150 years.

Examination of the paper and its watermarks suggests that it was produced as far away as Italy, probably in Milan. This was a city state at the centre of the great expansion of horizons now known as the Renaissance. At the time this book must have been produced, no less a genius than Leonardo da Vinci was at the height of his powers and working in Milan. Influenced by knowledge from the east all kinds of innovative industries were developing there, including paper making.

Historical context -

How such valuable sheaves of paper were transported from Italy to Much Wenlock will remain a matter of speculation. One could easily imagine they came by sea though the Mediterranean. However, in 1495 this would have been a perilous route. The Spanish coast was being disputed between the Muslim Moors and the Christian Spaniards as the Muslim occupation of Spain was finally coming to an end. Meanwhile, far across the Atlantic, Christopher Columbus was sailing the Caribbean sea on his second voyage of exploration, still believing he was in the East Indies.

Entries in the Minute Book -

Back in Much Wenlock the Burgesses, having acquired a new minute book, began to have the minutes of their meetings recorded. This was a time when only a very small proportion of the public were literate. Those who became literate almost always did so under the tutelage of a priest or monk. Literacy was associated with access to the Bible. This was a book still written in Latin, the language of the Church, still concentrated in all its administration upon Rome and the Pope of the day.

It is no surprise, therefore, to find that the earliest entries in the minute book are all in Latin. Nor is it a surprise to find that new a page may occasionally begin with a highly decorated word, much like the first word of any illuminated manuscript, produced by monks. In all likelihood the first clerks to the Borough were monks in the neighbouring Priory. Latin continued in use through to the Reformation and the English Civil War. What is most surprising about the minute book is its survival intact over so many centuries. In part this can be attributed to its strong vellum binding, complete with what is probably the original iron buckle, sewn on to the binding, and which, through the centuries, kept the book secure when closed.

The ink -

Entries in the minute book were in black ink using a quill. The quill would usually have been cut from a goose feather whose shaft was capable of holding a reservoir of ink. The ink was usually made using the crushed gall from an oak tree and iron filings as the main ingredients. The gall results after a gall wasp lays eggs to produce a nut instead of the normal healthy bud on an oak. When mature, this nut was collected, crushed and mixed with chemicals to produce a stable ink to stand the test of time.

The best ink was sometimes imported to England from countries such as Spain where the galls were common and suitable chemicals were readily available. Over the decades the skills and writing styles of those making the entries varied, as did the quality of the ink. Some records have faded but most are still clear. Some clerks seemed to find it easy to write horizontally across the blank page but others tended to wander at strange angles. Though the styles of writing did vary there was an almost universal adoption of what are best described as elaborate curls in the lettering.

What is also clear in examining the minutes of most clerks is the relative absence of either corrected mistakes or even smudges. This suggests skill and care but also that some means was in use to dry the ink before any smudging took place. In the days before blotting paper was in use various techniques were used, including scattering fine sand or chalk dust across writing to absorb surplus ink before turning the page.

The need for conservation -

For over 500 years the minute book has survived largely intact. Damp conditions have, however, stained and weakened the paper and the vellum cover has shrunk. The text block has also been eroded at the edges. The conservation effort will remove much of the water staining and strengthen the paper. Lost paper will be replaced with similar, hand-made paper. The book will be rebound with new vellum in the same style as the original. The old binding will also be retained for its historical value.

Our generation is now challenged to share the sense of vision of those who originally bought this precious book in 1495.