

Gilds or guilds?

It is the convention for rural fraternities to be described as gilds to distinguish them from the trade or civic guilds usually associated with cities or large towns. During the Middle Ages, gilds were important in the lives of men and women both religiously and socially. They came into being essentially to provide support in adversity for members whilst they were alive, and to remember them in prayer after death. Money was raised by means of a small joining fee paid by members, at church ales and other social events, bequests, and the annual feast. Few gilds had their own chapels or employed their own priests. They generally held their services at particular altars in the parish church and their feasts and celebrations also took place in the church. Towards the end of the 15th century it was decreed that the church building itself was not a suitable place for (quite possibly rather raucous) social events, so some gilds built a gildhall for the latter activity, often on a site close to the church. Evidence for the existence of gilds may be found in contemporary documents and particularly wills, because wealthier members often made bequests to their gild. A national survey of gilds was made in 1389, but it is only fragmentary, and the returns describe gilds in only 13 places in Suffolk, although it is known that many more existed. Likewise, when gilds were suppressed in 1548, those that had already ceased to function or had no property to be seized, remained unrecorded.

Every gild had its patron saint, often the one to which the parish church was dedicated. However, since many parishes had more than one gild, other saints, or the Trinity or the Cross, were venerated. On the feast day, members would attend mass, bells were tolled, the bede-roll naming deceased members was read and then the feast took place, perhaps with musicians to entertain. When the death of a member was announced, the gild gathered at his or her house and processed to the church carrying the gild banner, the cross and lights. After the funeral, alms would be distributed to the poor who were in attendance.

In the Peninsula, within the triangle between Woodbridge, Orford and Bawdsey, there were gilds at the extremities and at Butley in the centre, drawing membership from the surrounding villages. Woodbridge, Orford (which had two gilds) and Bawdsey all had medieval markets, and Butley (also with two gilds), with its large Priory, would also have been a place for economic activity. In this respect, the Peninsula and the southeast of the county were different from much of Suffolk in that, whereas the western half and the northeast had gilds in nearly all parishes, in this area gilds were centrally positioned. Breckland in the northwest contained one or more gilds in nearly every parish, so sparseness of population was not the explanation.

Butley

According to the late Peter Northeast's chapter on parish gilds in *An Historical Atlas of Suffolk*¹, the Butley gilds were centrally placed to serve members in Butley as well as adjoining parishes. Peter kindly provided me with transcripts (and translations) of the pre-1500 wills for Butley, Capel St Andrew, Boyton, Chillesford and Wantisden. They date from 1445. The gilds dedicated to the Holy Trinity and St John the Baptist (the patron saint of Butley church) first appear in Butley wills in 1449, followed by wills dated 1453, 1454, 1459, 1460, 1462, 1465, 1472, 1473 (twice) – ten wills out of a total of 17. Capel wills date from 1445 and the gilds are mentioned in 1453 and 1458. Boyton wills date from 1442, when one of the Butley gilds is mentioned, but none thereafter. Wantisden wills begin in 1445 and the gilds are mentioned in one will dated 1451. There are virtually no wills for Gedgrave and Chillesford before 1500, although one Butley gild was the beneficiary of a 1453 will made by an inhabitant of Gedgrave. An Eyke parishioner, who died in 1450, let money to both Butley gilds, and in 1449 a Tunstall woman bequeathed 6s 8d to Butley's St John's gild. Bequests were usually of money, barley or malt (presumably for making ale and beer), and occasionally an animal such as an ewe.