

The gild of Corpus Christi

There is no evidence from wills that there was a Corpus Christi fraternity in Orford. However, a fine Corpus Christi seal matrix, on loan from Ipswich Museum, may be seen in Orford Museum. Two articles were published about it in the 1870s, one saying it was found in the sea at Orford Ness and the other at Southwold.⁵

The *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries* has this description:

‘This seal, which dates from the fourteenth century, may be thus described:-

It is circular, 1¾ inches in diameter. Under a wide three-foiled arch with shafts terminated by crocketed finials is a large shield bearing the instruments of the Passion, viz., the cross between two scourges erect in base, the upper limb ensigned with the crown of thorns, a nail inserted into the end of the transverse and lower limbs, all surmounted by the reed with the sponge, and the lance in saltire. A kneeling figure on either side of the arch.

Legend,

+ S’ COE FRAT’NITATIS [GYLDE?] CORPIS XPI; and over the shield ORFORD’.

A merchant’s gild was founded in 1256 in Orford⁶, and this may have been the precursor of the Corpus Christi gild⁷. At that time the newly-created town around the royal castle was flourishing, and it continued to do so for at least another 150 years. Its prosperity declined thereafter, and it is possible that the gild ceased to function as trade declined and fewer merchants used the port to import and export their wares. Thus this gild was analogous to the trade guilds of Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds, rather than the rural guilds of Butley and Bawdsey. It seems likely that the fraternity ceased to exist early in the 15th century.

A Corpus Christi gildhall?

Evidence that a gildhall possibly existed in Orford comes from the 1531 will of Thomas Hamonde. He left his wife ‘*my tenement in Bridge Street [now Quay Street], lately gild*’, although this might mean simply that the property was a former asset of the gild. In 1589 when Walter Brabye made his will he lived at a house comprising the tenements called Hamondes and Cockerells⁸ (presumably the same property). In 1601 when Norden’s map of Orford was made, John Ball occupied Cockerells (the Hamonde name having been dropped by then) and the property may be seen, opposite the southern end of the old Friary wall, numbered 50. It is roughly where the house called Rose Cottage stands today.



The Instruments of the Passion in Orford church.

Left: A shield on the west side of the arch into the porch. Right: Angel bearing a shield on the bowl of the font
(photos by Richard Quarrell)