

Guernsey's Confraternities

In the course of work for a doctorate at the University of Warwick, I have used confraternity records from a region which has received little attention from historians of the early modern period. The research project concerns the Reformation in Guernsey, an island of some twenty-five square miles in the Bay of Mont S. Michel, a short way off the French coast. Since the thirteenth century Guernsey has been attached politically to the English Crown. Despite this, until the late 1560s its ten parishes were in the Diocese of Coutances (Normandy). The francophone pre-Reformation population was well under ten thousand. Although there was a small town and some commerce went on, life for most natives was largely agricultural and maritime.

It has not proved possible (or necessary) to digest minutely all the data encountered concerning the island's confraternities, but a few indications may be given of the value of the material which has surveyed.

Forty-three confraternities (five in the town parish) existing between 1500 and c.1563 have been discovered, and references to lights probably indicate that there were several others. The existence of confraternities is often attested by documents known as *confessions des rentes*. These deeds, which were certified by the civil authority, set out a confraternity's legal title to revenues which had been pledged by members or purchased in trust by its officers (*collecteurs*, *procurateurs*, or *bâtonniers*). The names of confraternities also occur in

other types of deeds which mention revenues due to them, similarly certified by the civil courts.

Most often confraternity revenues were expressed in annual wheat rents which were owed by donor members or their assigns. Often, men and women joined confraternities with a spouse or other relative, although single people were not debarred from membership. It appears that the usual sum pledged by individuals for membership was one *cabotel* of wheat annually. Married couples (and other family pairs) pledged twice that amount, namely one bushel. This customary donation, and lesser sums which were sometimes paid, placed membership within the reach of all but the poorest people. No trace of sex- or age-specific confraternities has been found.

The roles of the confraternity, in common with English and European tradition, were religious, charitable, and social. Memorial lights, masses, and doles of bread were all funded. The most notable confraternity was that of the *Cherite*, which was founded in 1531 by the island's chief magistrate and fifty other people. Like its Norman namesakes it gave alms, most ostensibly at Easter, when the magistrate handed out cakes (*gaches*) which were divided in four (like the Host) at the door of its chapel, which was also the parish ossuary. Often priests were members of confraternities and, departing from English convention, they sometimes also held office in them. They remained, however, under the direction of the lay brethren.

When the English Edwardian régime made attempts on the island's confraternities, the local administration went to great lengths to protect and conceal their revenues. It was supported in this by the community, so much so that its diversions were largely successful. The confraternities continued to function throughout the reigns of Edward and Mary. It was only in Elizabeth's time that English commissioners, not without with

some difficulty, managed to close them down and confiscate their revenues.

Some conclusions about the island's religious life might be drawn from a close statistical analysis of the contents of the confessions and associated deeds, although a problem arises distinguishing between donated rents and those which were purchased by the confraternities as investments. Of more significance to students of other regions is the sheer number of confraternities to be found in Guernsey's small, mostly rural, area. The forty-three encountered in the island is an impressive number when set alongside, for example, the forty-five which have been identified in the important city of Norwich. Such a high concentration of confraternities is not necessarily an indication of especially profound local piety, but reveals rather the successful survival of records made in accordance with customary legal requirements. Would equivalent areas of parishes with religious traditions resembling those of Guernsey (for example in Normandy) show similar concentrations of confraternities if they too had been obliged to keep rent rolls and title deeds certified by the civil authority? One suspects so.

D.M. Ogier
Guernsey