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Early English Drama Records and Other Manuscripts from Coventry Destroyed Before and During the Second World War

When Coventry's central library was destroyed in 1940, valuable early guild records were lost. No consensus has emerged regarding which records were lost during the war and which records had been lost earlier. Identifying these losses is important because Coventry's records hold value for the city's history and — since Coventry was a key site for early theatre — for Britain's literary history. As this article shows, fewer historical manuscripts were destroyed in 1940 than was once feared. Moreover, the loss of one of these manuscripts is mitigated somewhat by new evidence presented here, which suggests that some of the manuscript's source material survives.

During the Second World War Britain's libraries and archives took extensive precautions, yet some collections nevertheless lost historical manuscripts. One of Britain's well-known library disasters was the destruction of the Central Reference Library (or Gulson Library) of Coventry. In a series of enemy air raids that targeted Coventry on 14 and 15 November 1940, the city's central library was almost completely destroyed, with only a section of the reference section surviving.¹ Scholars sometimes assume that this destruction led to a significant loss of historical manuscripts, including the loss of several guild records that were witnesses to the town's rich history of early theatre. But no consensus exists regarding what was lost. Estimates have been challenging, in part because the library's documentation system and records were destroyed along with its holdings.²

Identifying these archival losses at Coventry, which is the goal of this article, is important, because Coventry's records hold distinct historical value. Coventry became a major exporter of wool and fabric in the fourteenth century and this rise of mercantile activity led to an outpouring of civic and industrial records, many of which are unique witnesses to aspects of everyday life during the period. Tied to this mercantile activity was the city's powerful guild structure, which blossomed

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in the fourteenth century into a thriving culture of guild-sponsored dramatic performances known as mystery plays.³ Since Coventry's tradition of mystery plays was particularly rich and particularly well documented, Coventry's archival holdings stand as important sources of information about the tradition of early theatre in Britain.⁴ Understanding Coventry's wartime archival losses is therefore important for the exploration of both regional and cross-regional literary history.

The Destruction at Coventry

Although many medieval buildings in Coventry have been lost, those that survive preserve the memory of a city bustling with economic growth, manufacturing power, and mercantile activity. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the town became famous for the production of high-quality fabrics. Most notable were those dyed with woad, which produces the characteristic blue for which the town is famous.⁵ The town's manufacturing power contributed to its growth into a thriving community. Pamela King notes that by the end of the fourteenth century, 'Bristol and Coventry were the largest centres of urban population after London'.⁶ As a result of this economic, social, and mercantile power, Coventry produced an enormous number of records, many of which have survived.⁷

Prior to the war, the majority of the town's older documents and records had been stored in the Muniment Room of St Mary's Guildhall, with its convenient site in the city centre beside the cathedral. When the war broke out, the Guildhall building was deemed too dangerous and most of these records were moved into large storage vaults in the nearby Lloyds Bank. A small number of records, however, were instead placed in the strong room of the central library. At the time, the town clerk believed that this strong room was just as safe as the bank vaults.⁸ Surprisingly, the central library suffered far more damage than the Guildhall building during the war, and, tragically, the manuscripts would have been safer had they been left in the Guildhall.

The worst of the damage occurred when Coventry was hit by heavy aerial bombardment on 14 and 15 November 1940. Among the many buildings that were damaged in these attacks was the city's central library. One witness recounts how 'Everything in the way of book stocks, stock records, catalogues, and equipment was totally destroyed, with the exception of between 20,000 and 30,000 books from the Reference Library stock'.⁹ According to one wartime estimate, 150,000 volumes were destroyed in total. Most of these losses were from the city's 'technical collection' and were modern, although the older records that had been placed in the strong room were also destroyed.¹⁰ Identifying the losses to

these older records, which is the goal at hand, is somewhat challenging since the library's records of its holdings were also lost in the raid.

The same air raid also caused significant damage to the Longford branch of the Coventry Library, although the building was not completely destroyed and did not hold any historical documents of note. In the face of the destruction and ongoing threats of air raids, the Coventry library staff, assisted by volunteers, worked tirelessly to salvage what remained.¹¹ They managed to collect an estimated 25,000 items from the destroyed reference library, which they moved to the county hall's cellar.¹²

The historical documents that had been stored in the Lloyds Bank vaults escaped unscathed, and the city archivist and other officials made regular checks on these throughout the war. Hearing of the loss to some guild and company records, the city's company officials took action to prevent further losses. On 22 January 1944, R.J. Cash, who owned part of the wealthy ribbon manufacturing empire Cash's and who was heavily involved in the city's guild activity, wrote to the mayor on behalf of the Clothiers' Company to check in about the Broadweavers (also known as the Weavers) and Clothiers' historical records and 'to ask whether the City would consider making photographic copies of these ancient documents, more particularly the old Miracle Play, which, it is understood, is the only existing record of the old Coventry Plays'.¹³ The play mentioned by Cash is the Weavers' pageant play (which has since been edited by Craig Hardin); the Clothiers considered this play important since the Clothiers and Weavers considered themselves one operational group with a shared guild history. The mayor confirmed that all the Weavers' and Clothiers' ancient records, which had been stored in Lloyds Bank, had survived, and the city archivist sent the company copies on 7 February 1944.¹⁴

Aside from the historical records stored in the central library and in the bank, there were also some more modern records that had come from Coventry Cathedral and that had been stored in the strong room of the mayor, Joseph Holt, on Hertford Street. During the 1940 air raids, this strong room burst open and water rushed in. These modern cathedral records sat in this damp environment for several days, but they were recovered despite having suffered some water damage.¹⁵ The cathedral itself was hit by heavy bombardment and collapsed, although its outer walls and the tower are still standing. Today, the ruins of the cathedral remain, shards of stained glass still clinging to its gothic archways.

Existing Estimates of Wartime Damage to Historical Documents

The stresses of war and the barriers they posed to information transfer severely hindered wartime attempts to document Coventry's archival losses. During the war, a government initiative known as the Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC) was charged with identifying damage to historical documents. The British Records Association initially reported to the HMC that Coventry's 'municipal manuscripts were safe, though unfortunately some of the valuable MSS of the town's guilds have been destroyed'.¹⁶ But the situation soon began to sound much more dire; on 10 February 1941 the HMC secretary, R.L. Atkinson, received an update reporting that at Coventry 'the Guild Archives that suffered were totally destroyed'.¹⁷

Which guild records were these? Certainly, some of the key records of the Coventry guilds have been lost. However, many of these records were lost not during the war, but rather several decades before it, in an 1879 fire at the Birmingham Library.¹⁸ In particular, several records that Thomas Sharp (1771–1841) had used when creating his impressive 1825 volume about the mystery plays of Coventry were lost in this fire. They had passed to the Birmingham Library from the collection of the bibliophile William Staunton, who had received them from Sharp. When the Birmingham Library caught fire, all of these precious documents went up in flames.¹⁹ Thankfully, since Sharp's manuscript collection had served as sources for his study of the Coventry guilds and their theatrical performances, parts of this collection had been transcribed and published by Sharp before they were destroyed. Most notable among these in terms of Sharp's transcription work was the *Shearmen and Tailors' playscript* (or play book), which had also contained the Coventry Carol. Sharp had transcribed the play and its associated songs in full and published them in his volume, so they have not been lost to us entirely.²⁰ Other documents from this lost collection that Sharp had transcribed in part are the *Cartulary of St Mary's*, which mentioned the guild's pageant-house, and the *Trinity Guild Books*. Unfortunately, several other documents from this collection had not been transcribed by Sharp and cannot be recovered this way: the *Guild Book of St Mary's Coventry*, the 1412 register of the guild of St Anne at Knowle, the *Archer Records* (1242–1485), and an inventory of the earl of Leicester's possessions (Kenilworth, 584).²¹

During the war, the losses to Coventry's historical manuscripts were somewhat more limited. Since most of Coventry's older documents had been stored in the vaults of Lloyds Bank, most were preserved. The historical documents stored in the central library strong room were destroyed, but we cannot estimate how many,

since reports in the aftermath of the war vary widely. In 1941, the library issued a report stating that 'Perhaps the most serious loss was incurred in the destruction of the contents of the strong room, which included: the original minute and account books of some of Coventry's medieval Gilds and Trading Companies' as well as more modern documents.²² A report from the same year details a more specific list of older documents that were destroyed, which I have enumerated here to facilitate comparison: 'Irreparable losses among the local material include the Mediaeval Gild Books of the 1. Drapers Company, 2. The Tanners Company and 3. the Whittawers Company'.²³

Surveying the wartime destruction of archival material in 1944, W.C. Berwick Sayers gives a slightly different account of Coventry's losses (enumerated again to aid comparison with the 1941 list): 1. The Drapers' Company (1523–1561) records, 2. The Tanners' Company records (1605), 3. The Whittawers and Glovers, Fell-mongers and Parchment Makers (1675–1826) book, 4. A 1522 document entitled the 'Grande Subsidy collected in the City of Coventry [sic]'.²⁴ In his more recent examination of the losses, which was prepared for his volume on the records of Coventry's early drama, Reginald Ingram found that many of the records thought to have been lost during the war were not. He does, however, list some medieval documents as having been lost during the war:

1. Drapers' Company, Ordinances and Accounts (1523–1764)
2. Tanners' Company, Orders and Minute Book, commencing 1605
5. Collection of Deeds, ranging from the 14th to the early 19th century' (Ingram adds that 'Most of these had been transcribed by M.D. Harris but the transcription was also lost with the original deeds').²⁵

These reports differ considerably and it is worth exploring further to identify which of these five items were destroyed.

Older Items Destroyed During the War

1. The Drapers' Company Ordinances and Accounts (1534–1764)

The item described on the lists above was one volume that contained both the ordinances and the accounts of the Drapers' company.²⁶ The manuscript held value for the history of Coventry's mystery plays, since some of the records it contained pertained to the Drapers' expenditures on their play, 'Doomsday', such as the 16 pence that were 'payd to ij wormes of consyence' in 1562.²⁷ The manuscript was not among those destroyed in the Birmingham Reference Library fire

of 1879; the historian M.D. Harris quotes from the Drapers' accounts directly in 1914. At the time, Harris did not specify where she had access to the accounts. She suggests simply that the Drapers' Company accounts, along with other guild accounts, were at the time stored in private collections such as lawyers' offices.²⁸ By 1925, when Harris published her *History of the Drapers Company of Coventry*, the accounts manuscript was in the hands of the Drapers' Company.²⁹ The next reference to these accounts is from 1934, and it suggests that the manuscript was still in the Drapers' possession.³⁰ It must have been moved to the central library before the war, because although the Drapers' Company Hall was not destroyed during the war, the accounts manuscript was nevertheless lost, apparently when the strong room in the central library was destroyed.³¹

Thankfully, much of the Drapers' account book survives in transcriptions. In the middle of the nineteenth century, it was transcribed in detail by the Coventry antiquarian Thomas Daffern (1795–1869). Daffern's transcription is substantial, covering entries for the years 1534 to 1623 and 1740 to 1778.³² Daffern's transcription was once held by the City Record Office but is now in the city archives at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum.³³ This transcription helps to explain the different start date found in Ingram's account; while the manuscript opened with entries pertaining to 1534, some of the subsequent entries recorded earlier events (at least judging from Daffern's transcription).³⁴

A full description of the lost manuscript is not possible since it was never properly catalogued. Since Daffern's transcription survives, it is possible to describe some of the manuscript's contents, but a detailed description of these is unnecessary here, since it has been given already by Reginald Ingram in his REED volume on Coventry.³⁵ Nevertheless, some notes will help to convey a sense of what was lost. The first folio of the manuscript described the 1534 rules for the payment of the priest of the Drapers' chapel, which was the Lady Chapel in Coventry Cathedral.³⁶ Ingram finds inconsistencies in the order of dated entries in the manuscript (although he acknowledges that some of these inconsistencies may be errors in Daffern's transcription).³⁷ M.D. Harris, who had consulted the original manuscript directly, reports that it was marked by many emendations and corrections.³⁸ The total number of folia is unknown and cannot be determined from the transcription, since it contains no folio numbers. However, the accounts must have been substantial; the ordinances and accounts ranging from 1534 to 1744 cover the first 406 folia and Harris cites from some additional rules of 1570 that occurred on f 493 'back [ie verso]'.³⁹

According to Daffern's transcription, the preliminary leaves of the account book contained some brief notes, including the date 'The 18 of October 1599'.

The book then began with a list of rules, which Daffern transcribes as follows: 'In the yere of oure Lord God AD 1534 be yt hade in mynde of an ordenance made the last daye of December for the welfarre of all the holle felleshyppye and Craft of Drapers'.⁴⁰ Daffern's transcription continues for 191 pages and ends with records of rent payments from 1624, including one 'Received of Thomas Dudley junior for half a yeere rent'.⁴¹

Aside from Daffern's transcription, substantial selections of the Drapers' Company account book survive in pre-war transcriptions printed by Sharp and Harris.⁴² All three transcriptions have their merits since all of the transcribers seem to have worked directly from the account book.⁴³ Sharp's selections from the Drapers' account book are valuable for reconstructing it because they contain many lines and because Sharp resists editorial intervention; he typically transcribes abbreviation marks as they appeared in the manuscript and he avoids standardizing spelling. However, Sharp does not resist all editorial intervention; he groups accounts together by category, such that all references to 'Payments to Performers' or to the play's 'Demons' are grouped together.⁴⁴ As a result, Sharp's transcriptions cannot easily be used to recreate the account book itself. Daffern's transcription is the longest and it preserves the order of the original book but Daffern tends to make more editorial interventions than Sharp (he omits abbreviation marks, for example).⁴⁵ Harris presents fewer selections of the Drapers' account book than do Sharp or Daffern, but her transcriptions are valuable because she knew of Sharp's transcription and occasionally corrects Sharp's readings using the original manuscript.⁴⁶ Since each of these transcriptions preserves different features, each provides valuable insight into the missing manuscript.

Aside from these transcriptions, several other collections of records of the Drapers' Company survived the war; these include two minute books (one ranging from 1670 to 1755, now PA99/4, and one ranging from 1670 to 1777 or 1778, now PA99/5) and a volume of Drapers' ordinances dating back to the seventeenth century and produced about a century later.⁴⁷

2. The Tanners' Company, Orders and Minute Book, Commencing 1605

This book, which contained both the rules (or orders) and minutes of the Tanners, was of significant value since so few historical records of the Coventry Tanners survived into the twentieth century. Before it was destroyed it was, moreover, the only surviving record of the Tanners to mention their mystery play activity.⁴⁸ The minute book had a complicated history. It was in constant use by the Tanners from 1605 (or 1603, according to one account) to 1742. The book then, according to one account, 'disappeared' and was not found again until the Tanners'

Company was re-established in 1860.⁴⁹ As the company tried to re-establish its older customs during the decades that followed, the local historian W.G. Fretton agreed to examine the minute book on behalf of the Tanners. In 1885, he prepared a brief description of it to help them re-establish some of their company's previous customs. Fretton then sent the Tanners back their book, asking if he could have it back again 'after your called meeting' to prepare a 'memorial' of the company for its November meeting. Fretton also expressed his aim to produce a transcript of this minute book, which he must have done at some point after 1885.⁵⁰

In 1937, the town clerk, Frederick Smith, wrote to one Thomas Brooke Peake about the Tanners' Company records. Peake had spoken to the development officer about papers related to the company, including the aforementioned minute book and some accounts. Smith asked Peake if it were possible for Peake to donate these records to the city archives, which at the time were held in the Muniment Room at St Mary's Hall.⁵¹ By 1940, discussion of this donation centered around the minute book. Acting here on behalf of the Tanners' Company, who he had previously been the master of, R.J. Cash stated that, 'At a meeting of the Company held yesterday, it was resolved that the ancient Minute Book be deposited for preservation in the Muniment Room of the City, on the condition that it should be available for the use of the Company at any time, should they require it'. He stated that he would oversee the transfer of the book within a few days.⁵² The town clerk responded that they would be grateful for the book since at the time, the city's archives were eager to acquire 'a fully representative collection of the City's Ancient Records'.⁵³ The town clerk added, however, one note about the wartime protection of the Minute Book: the book could not be stored in the vaults of Lloyds Bank with the other collections there, because there was no room left. Rather, the book would be stored with 'a certain number' of other 'ancient documents' in the strong room of the central library, 'which', the Clerk added, 'I suppose is practically as safe as the Bank vaults'.⁵⁴

Unfortunately, this statement proved false. Writing to Cash after the devastating attacks of November 1940, the town clerk reported that the manuscript had been destroyed. Since his explanation is not printed elsewhere, it is worth reproducing here in full:

Both the librarian and myself had confidence in the strong-room, upon the construction of which a good deal of thought and care had been expended. Unfortunately, and most regrettably, the confidence proved to be misplaced as the strong-room — whether as a result of being hit by a bomb or from some other cause — failed to

withstand the fire and virtually the whole of the contents of the strong-room were destroyed, including the Minute Book of the Tanners' Company.

The clerk added that 'It is regrettable that so many beautiful buildings and ancient documents were destroyed through the enemy attack, though it a consolation to know that so many have survived'.⁵⁵

Thankfully, the Tanners' minute book survives in an early twentieth-century typewritten transcription (likely the one made by Fretton).⁵⁶ Judging from this transcription, the lost manuscript began with some names inscribed on preliminary leaves (these are on page one of the transcription): 'Thomas Benion' and 'William Mabs'. After these names follows a brief inscription: 'July the 5, 1636 [and on a different line] ffrancis neale saide that he toke Edward Smith prentis the 29 September 1635 for seven years'.⁵⁷ The minute book then begins with a description of the orders (or rules) of the Tanners' Company. Many of these rules were copied from earlier documents.⁵⁸ The first folio (page three of the transcription) began: 'This Booke of orders is made and renewed by the whole Consent and agreement of the Companie of Tanners being collected and gathered out of the ancient bookes and writings euer since the xth yeare of Kinge Henrye the 7'. The year 1605 is mentioned, and is apparently the date that these early writings were first recorded.⁵⁹ Fretton notes that these rules, which occupied the first twelve leaves of the volume, were written in a clear, uniform style.

After these first twelve leaves, the book contains memoranda. Fretton notes that these entries are more 'haphazard' and are copied in different hands; it seems likely that the book continued to be updated over the course of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁶⁰ The first section pertains to the appointment of apprentices. The next includes miscellaneous minutes and other notes, and the book ends with a list of admission records of those who had in the early eighteenth century been made the company's 'love brothers' (honorary members who paid fees to the guild).

Perhaps surprisingly, the original sources of some of these admission records have survived. The city archive (now at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum) holds a small booklet of leaves that I have found resemble very closely passages in the transcription of the Tanners' minute book. The booklet contains eleven leaves, all of which date back to the eighteenth century. They are badly damaged, especially around the edges, and were mounted on cardstock and bound together at some point in the twentieth century. The leaves were all folded previously. Some of them are marked with revenue stamps — embossed marks or affixed labels that were used to indicate that taxes had been paid.

The first certificate in the booklet is in an eighteenth-century cursive hand and begins 'Memorandum that Joseph Barker is made a member of the company and fellowship of the of Tanners the fifth day of November 1711' (f 1). This passage corresponds very closely to folio 38r of the Tanners' minute book (judging from the surviving transcription).⁶¹ The certificates that follow (ten in total, with dates in the range of 1711 to 1742) correspond closely to subsequent entries in the Tanner's minute book, with the last certificate (that of 1742) corresponding almost exactly with the last entry of the book (in 1742). The evidence strongly suggests that these certificates were the original sources of the minute book entries (they cannot be leaves from the minute book itself because the foliation of the certificates does not match that of the minute book and could not be made to match it).⁶² This correspondence, which has not to my knowledge been noticed before, is important because it indicates that while the Tanners' minute book was lost, some of the original sources of it survive, and the book has not been lost to us entirely.

3. The Whittawers and Glovers, Fell-mongers, and Parchment Makers Book (1675–1826)

In 1944, Berwick Sayers reported that this book was destroyed during the war. It was part of the central library collections and had been in the strong room of the central library when it was destroyed.⁶³ Unfortunately, the minute book cannot be described in any further detail because no copy survives and it was not described in detail before the war.⁶⁴ Thankfully, other records of these four companies (which merged into one organization in the seventeenth century) survive. These include a set of acts and rules established in 1675 (which survives in the Birmingham Reference Library) and an account book (which survives in the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, along with a nineteenth-century transcript by Daffern).⁶⁵

4. The 1522 Grande Subsidy Collected in the City of Coventry

The 1522 subsidy census of Coventry has been valuable for social and economic historians because it gives rare insight into the demographic distribution of Coventry in the sixteenth century.⁶⁶ Only Berwick Sayers (1944) reports this manuscript missing, and this would appear to be an error arising (very understandably) from wartime cataloguing challenges; the subsidy census of Coventry from 1522 remains in the city's archives.⁶⁷ The census was completed in preparation for Henry VIII's campaign in France. At the time, all towns were expected to submit ward by ward overviews of how much money and military resources were

available. The 1522 census for Coventry (also known as a ‘musters’ certificate’ or ‘military survey’) contains 115 folia. It lists the names of townsfolk of Coventry, including an assessment of their worth, their holdings, and whether they can contribute weapons. These assessments were intended to help the government determine how much money and forces Coventry could provide.⁶⁸

Coventry’s 1522 subsidy census was purchased by the Coventry Corporation (for the Coventry city archives) in 1929 from one Major Charles Gregory-Hood. The manuscript was subsequently sent for repairs at the shop of Alfred Maltby and Son, Oxford.⁶⁹ Why Berwick Sayers thought that the census was destroyed is unclear. Likely it was misplaced among the city’s extensive municipal archival holdings at the time that Berwick Sayers was writing, which was still marked by the chaos of war.⁷⁰ In 1524, another, larger subsidy census was conducted in Coventry known as the ‘lay subsidy’, and this census also survives.⁷¹

5. Deeds

Reginald Ingram writes that some deeds from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries were destroyed in 1940. Although he describes some of the deeds that survived in detail, he does not provide any further details about which deeds in particular were destroyed.⁷² Thankfully, the deeds of Coventry were inventoried extensively in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and it is therefore possible to identify what existed prior to the war. In the late nineteenth century, the HMC completed two surveys of the city archives (known at the time as the holdings of the Coventry Corporation). The initial survey was a cursory examination by one Henry Thomas Riley. The results were published as a three-column description of the records in 1869.⁷³ The second, far more detailed examination, was published in 1899. John Cordy Jeaffreson, who created the report, also described the collection in detail in a 1896 publication.⁷⁴ The records reported in Jeaffreson’s survey for the HMC are significant, comprising an estimated 188 books, eighty-nine charters, letters patents, and similar documents, 6,265 deeds, grants, quitclaims and the like, and many other documents.⁷⁵ The described documents date from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries.⁷⁶

At the time of the report, these documents were all stored in the New Munitment Room of St Mary’s Hall, which had been the headquarters of the medieval Holy Trinity Guild (see fig. 1).⁷⁷

Although part of St Mary’s Hall was damaged in the air raids on Coventry in 1940, the deeds, which had been moved along with other documents to the vault in Lloyds Bank, were safe. In 1941, after Coventry suffered several air raids, the deeds were moved along with other archives to Stratford-upon-Avon for safe



Figure 1: Pre-war postcard of Bayley Lane, Coventry. St Mary's Guildhall is in the background; the cathedral is on the left. Image: 'St Mary's Guildhall', open access licensed; courtesy of the Newberry Postcard Collection.

keeping.⁷⁸ After the war Coventry established an official City Record Office (CRO) and the collections were returned to the Muniment Room in St Mary's Hall. In 1957, the CRO, along with its records, moved to a new location in the basement of a building at 9 Hay Lane.⁷⁹ The records were moved several more times after this, first in 1979 to a temporary storage facility in Broadgate House, then again in 1986 to the newly established Central Library.⁸⁰ Finally in 2009, they were moved to the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, where they remain today.

Prior to the war, the documentation of these 6,265 deeds was relatively limited. John Cordy Jeaffreson, who had undertaken the task at the invitation of the Coventry Corporation, wrote that he 'examine[d] cursorily each document'. He describes the distribution of the collection across the centuries, with 490 undated deeds from the reigns of Henry III and Edward I, 176 dated deeds from the reign of Edward I, and so on. The greatest number of deeds, 1,518 in total, date to the reign of Edward III.⁸¹ Aside from creating an overview of the deeds by date, Jeaffreson selected 232 that 'consist of writings that illustrate the social conditions of their periods, or are remarkable for the names of persons or places, or afford

particulars likely to interest antiquaries or historical enquirers'.⁸² He provides brief descriptions of these deeds. Most record the transfer of land between private individuals — the sort of historical document particularly useful for familial and local history. One, for example, describes a 'Gift of a piece of land in Gosford Street in Covintre, by Reginald de Catisby, burgess of Covintre, to his son Symon and his heirs'.⁸³ A few of the deeds described by Jeaffreson hold relevance for the history of Coventry's early drama; a quitclaim of 1406, for example, pertaining to the land of the son of one Richard Clerke of Coventre which held several homes as well as 'uno Pagenthou' ('a pageant-house') of practitioners of the 'Whittaweres-craft'.⁸⁴

Jeaffreson's 1899 report, and his 1896 *Calendar* of documents, were for a long time the most detailed descriptions of the deeds available. In 1931, the town clerk Frederick Smith began to describe some of the deeds from this collection in more detail; his notes are now available in the Coventry archives.⁸⁵ Further work on the arrangement and cataloguing of the deeds has been carried out in stages during the past century, with the current arrangement of the collection reflecting the work of Michael Hinman, the assistant archivist in the early 1980s. At present, the deeds have been classified into broad categories but the enormous task of describing the contents of the deeds is ongoing.⁸⁶

If the deeds of the city archives survived the war, which ones was Ingram referring to? Other collections of records in Coventry existed prior to the war, but these were limited. In her wide-ranging history of Coventry (1898), Harris includes an appendix that describes the records that she used. Most of these were from the collection of St Mary's Hall already mentioned. The only other location of records that Harris mentions is the British Museum (now the British Library); while Harris consulted relatively few records from their collection, she mentions having consulted Humphrey Wanley's *Diary* (Harley MS 6466) and two charters: Additional MSS Ch. 11205 and 28657 (two forged charters recording the gifts of Leofric and Godgifu to a religious house in Coventry).⁸⁷ Harris, does, however, note that some deeds were among the papers of Sharp that were lost in the Birmingham Reference Library fire of 1879. She notes that prior to their destruction, these deeds had been transcribed by Humphrey Burton, and that Burton's transcriptions were in the Coventry Free Library (the central library) at the time. Burton's transcriptions were therefore very likely destroyed when the library was struck in 1940.⁸⁸ No evidence exists of any original deeds of Coventry having been held in the central library in 1940. Considering the evidence presented here, the deeds that Ingram refers to as having been destroyed likely were instead destroyed in the Birmingham Reference Library fire of 1879 and not

during the war, and that the war itself claimed the transcription of these deeds that had been made by Humphrey Burton.

Other Documents of Historical Interest Destroyed During the War

Aside from these older documents and records, Coventry's Central Library also lost some more modern documents in the war. These include the local *Coventry Mercury* newspaper archive (1743–1836), which had not been placed in the strong room (as far as I have been able to determine). The strong room itself had held many pamphlets, prints, and drawings, and three collections of notes about the history of Coventry. The first of these, the Mander Collection, was a group of notes about the city's history. The second, the Fretton manuscripts, was a series of handwritten notes by W.G. Fretton, who had worked and published on the local history of Coventry, including its mystery plays. The last of these, the Reader collection, was an extensive range of handwritten notes about the history of the city drawn from various primary sources. Some of these had been used by local historians, including Harris. Thankfully, many of the Reader notes had been published in extracts in the local newspaper (from 1926 to 1929), so they have not been lost to us entirely. These printed extracts include descriptions of medieval guild activity that are, much like the older manuscripts described here, of great interest for local history and the exploration Coventry's mystery plays.⁸⁹

Summary of Findings

Destroyed in the Birmingham Reference Library Fire

(many of these items were used by Thomas Sharp; see above)

- Shearmen and Taylors' playscript
- Cartulary of St Mary's
- Guild Book of St Mary's Coventry
- Trinity Guild Books
- 1412 register of the guild of St Anne at Knowle
- Archer Records (1242 to 1485)
- Inventory of the earl of Leicester's possessions (Kenilworth, 1584)
- Deeds used by Thomas Sharp and transcribed by Burton

Destroyed in the 1940 Air Raid

- The Drapers' Company Ordinances and Account Book (1534–1764)
— survives in a nineteenth-century transcription (unpublished); extracts survive in pre-war transcriptions printed by Thomas Sharp and M.D. Harris
- The Tanners' Company, Orders and Minute Book, Commencing 1605
— survives in a twentieth-century transcription (unpublished); eleven certificates that were sources for the minute book entries also survive
- The Whittawers and Glovers, Fell-mongers, and Parchment Makers Book (1675–1826)

And the following more modern records:

- Transcriptions made by Humphrey Burton of deeds that were used by Sharp
- *Coventry Mercury* newspaper archive (1743–1836)
- The Mander Collection
- The Fretton manuscripts
- The Reader manuscripts (published in extracts)
- Modern pamphlets, prints, and drawings

Surviving

- The 'Grande Subsidy collected in the City of Coventrey' (1522)
- The City Archives (which had been stored in the Muniment Room at St Mary's Hall prior to the war)
- Many deeds, both from this archive and the British Museum collection

Coventry's archival losses, then, were not as great as was feared in the immediate aftermath of the wartime destruction. And they are mitigated somewhat by the transcriptions that survive thanks to the careful work of pre-war historians who took an interest in the town's history. In the case of the Tanners' minute book, the loss is also mitigated by the survival of some of the book's newly identified source material. The local records in Coventry are vast and continue to be catalogued,

and we can hope that more of the original source material for these lost records might resurface in the future.

Notes

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the archivists and staff at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum (which holds the Coventry City archives) who kindly granted me access to historical documents and manuscripts that proved essential for the exploration of Coventry's lost manuscripts presented here. I would also like to thank the archivists and staff of The National Archives (TNA) in Kew, who also very kindly granted me access to their collections and enabled some of the findings presented here. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for *Early Theatre* who provided valuable feedback on this article.

- 1 E. Austin Hinton, 'Coventry', in 'Libraries in Bombed Centres: Some Further Reports', *Library Review* 8.2 (1941), 3–10, 5, <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb012898>.
- 2 Libraries and Museum Committee, *The Coventry Libraries: Report of the Committee on the Work of the Libraries for the Period 1st April 1940 to 31 March 1942* (Coventry, 1942), 1.
- 3 For the importance of the wool trade in Coventry, the city's role as a major urban centre, and the rise of the mystery plays in the fourteenth century, see Reginald W. Ingram, ed., *Records of Early English Drama: Coventry* (Toronto, 1981), xv.
- 4 Multiple studies of Coventry's mystery plays have been published; one of the earliest of these, and the most relevant to the present investigation, is Thomas Sharp's *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries Anciently Performed at Coventry* (Coventry, 1825).
- 5 Pamela King, *Coventry Mystery Plays* (Coventry, 1997), 6.
- 6 Ibid, 5. On economic growth in medieval Coventry, see also *The Early Records of Medieval Coventry*, ed. Peter R. Cross (London, 1986), xxx.
- 7 See, for example, the deeds cited in sources referenced at n 75 below.
- 8 'Town Clerk to [R.J.] Cash', 19 April 1940, Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, CCB/1/14/123; the full quotation is given below, p 40.
- 9 Hinton, 'Coventry', 5; the passage is summarized in Donald Yazgoor, 'A Survey of the Effects of World War II on English Libraries' (PhD thesis, Southern Connecticut State University, 1961), 27.
- 10 Libraries and Museum Committee, *Coventry*, 1; Frank Hickman, 'Books in the Battle', *New Library World*, 43.8 (1941), 129–44, 135.
- 11 On the loss of the library's records and the aftermath of the destruction, see Libraries and Museum Committee, *Coventry*, 1.

- 12 Ibid, 2–3.
- 13 ‘R.J. Cash to the Mayor of Coventry’, 22 January 1944, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, CCB/1/14/123.
- 14 ‘City Archivist to R.J. Cash’, 7 February 1944, Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, CCB/1/14/123. The Weavers’ play is edited under the title *Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays: 1. The Shearmen and Tailors’ Pageant, Re-edited from the Edition of Thomas Sharp, 1825; and 2. The Weavers’ Pageant, Re-edited from the Manuscript of Robert Croo, 1534; with a Plan of Coventry, and Appendixes Containing the Chief Records of the Coventry Plays*, ed. Hardin Craig, 2nd edn, Early English Text Society (EETS), ES 87 (London, 1967). For further details about this play, see n 21 below.
- 15 ‘Letter of 1948/41’, 1948, Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, CCB1/14/55.
- 16 The Commission wrote to many archives to check in but did not write to Coventry since information was reported to them by the British Records Association. ‘Air Raid Damage—Municipal Archives’, 8 February 1941, TNA, HMC1/189.
- 17 ‘Dear Atkinson’, 10 February 1941, TNA, HMC1/189.
- 18 ‘Birmingham Reference Library’, *The Old Cross: A Warwickshire Quarterly Magazine*, ed. W.G. Fretton (Coventry, 1879), 314.
- 19 Samuel Timmins, *A History of Warwickshire* (London, 1889), 126–7.
- 20 Sharp prints the Shearmen and Taylors’ pageant from their playbook, which he had at the time. He describes the play in *Dissertation*, 82, prints it in *Dissertation*, 83–112, and prints songs from the playbook in *Dissertation*, 113–18. Sharp describes his transcription as faithful and non-interventionist, while noting that he has added some accentual marks (83). On the destruction of this book, see Pamela King and Clifford Davidson, *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays* (Kalamazoo, 2000), 2. Scholars once believed that the Weavers’ play was also lost in the 1879 fire, but it was found among the possessions of the Coventry Weavers’ Company; see Alice Lynes, *Coventry’s Miracle Plays: A Short Account* (Coventry, 1959), np.
- 21 ‘Birmingham’, 314. Mary Dormer Harris also notes that the Trinity Guild books were destroyed in the fire; see *Life in an Old English Town: A History of Coventry from the Earliest Times* (London, 1898), 378. On other guild records listed here, see Timmins, *History*, 127. On the Cartulary of St Mary’s see Craig Hardin, *Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays* (London, 1902), 98. Sharp prints a short extract from the Cartulary of St Mary’s (a 1392 reference to the Drapers’ pageant house) (*Dissertation*, 8 and 132). Sharp also prints extracts from the Trinity Guild Books on 77 (a reference to the mercers’ pageant house), 160–1 (a longer extract about the procession on Corpus Christi Day), and 179 (a passage about decorating doors with birch boughs on the eve before the days of St John the Baptist and St Peters).
- 22 Libraries and Museum Committee, *Coventry*, 1.

- 23 Hickman, 'Books', 135. The other documents listed are all modern ones.
- 24 W.C. Berwick Sayers, 'Britain's Libraries and the War', *The Library Quarterly* 14.2 (1944), 95–99, 97, <https://doi.org/10.1086/616735>.
- 25 Ingram, *Coventry*, lxvi–lxvii. I have added the numbers.
- 26 Mary Dormer Harris describes the rules and accounts as co-existing in one book, which she typically refers to as the 'Drapers' Accounts' in her *History of the Drapers' Company* (Coventry, 1926), 7.
- 27 Transcribed in Sharp, *Dissertation*, 68.
- 28 M.D. Harris, 'The Manuscripts of Coventry', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 37 (1914), 187–93, 191, 192. I trust that Harris quotes directly from the manuscript because her transcription differs from that of Ingram, which is based on the nineteenth-century transcript.
- 29 Harris, *History of the Drapers'*, i, states: 'The material for this short history of the Coventry Drapers has been taken from the MS. Accounts belonging to the Company and the Reader MSS. in the Coventry Free Library'. Harris adds that 'The ancient MS. title deeds of property belonging to the Company now in a chest in the Drapers' Hall have yet to be explored. I was not aware of their age and value until this history was already in print' (i). The deeds Harris mentions seem to have survived the war; many of the Drapers' deeds are now in Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA1573.
- 30 According to one account, 'The Archivist at Coventry has secured the restoration by the Coventry Drapers' Company of an important volume of early Accounts'; see The British Records Association, *Reprints of Papers by Members of the Association from Various Sources: The Work of the British Records Association for The Preservation of Local and Private Records* (London, 1934), 21.
- 31 I cannot find any evidence of the accounts having been transferred to the strong room prior to the war but given that the library's records were destroyed in 1940, this is perhaps not surprising. The accounts are not among the other surviving guild records today and no existing evidence contradicts the claims made in the immediate aftermath of the war that these accounts had been in the central library strong room when it was destroyed.
- 32 The catalogue description suggests that the first transcription (Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA154/2) ends with the accounts of 1625, and that the latter transcription (PA154/1) dates from 1670 to 1778. Based on my examination of the transcription, the first date that appears is 1740. The accounts are recorded in a haphazard manner, which may explain the discrepancy.

- 33 'On blue "exercise paper"; 192 leaves, 345mm x 215 mm'; see Ingram, *Coventry*, lxvi. The second transcription (PA154/2) contains the earlier accounts; the first (PA154/1) starts in 1740. Ingram, *Coventry*, 455, notes that the transcript is by Daffern.
- 34 The transcription, which begins in 1534, must correspond with the beginning of the original Drapers' MS accounts; writing of the original manuscript of the accounts in 1925, Harris states that 'In 1534 ... the first rules and accounts that we have belonging to the Drapers' Company begin' (*History of the Drapers'*, 25–36). Ingram, who prints selections from the nineteenth-century transcription in his REED volume for Coventry, suggests that some records in this account book were clearly earlier than 1534; he writes that 'the first fifty-five folios of the transcript contain the accounts from 1524 to 1568 and various miscellaneous agreements', but he notes that some of the inconsistencies in the dates in the account book may have been transcription errors on the part of Daffern; *Coventry*, quoted at lxvi, 455–6.
- 35 Ingram, *Coventry*, 455–7.
- 36 Harris, *History of the Drapers'*, 8.
- 37 Ingram, *Coventry*, 455–6.
- 38 Harris, *History of the Drapers'*, 8.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 8, 36.
- 40 Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA154/2; both quotations appear on p 1.
- 41 PA154/2, p 191. There is also a second transcription by Daffern, which begins in 1670 and ends in 1778 (according to the catalogue description), in PA154/1. The first page opens with a 1740 note beginning 'the late M. J. Crichton receiving of M. Nathaniel Lawton'; PA154/1, p 1. Both transcriptions were copied onto microfilm; the rolls are now Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA1044/9.
- 42 See Sharp, *Dissertation*, 66–77 (reprinted in Harden, *Two*, 98–102) and Harris, *History of the Drapers'*, 8, 14, 16, 25–36.
- 43 See above, n 35.
- 44 See Sharp, *Dissertation*, 66–77.
- 45 Many selections of Daffern's transcript appear in Ingram's REED volume for Coventry; as Ingram's notes make clear, it is at times difficult to know whose transcription is the least interventionalist, since the original has been lost. For example, Ingram notes that f 41 of the Drapers' account book records the sum 'payd for xx gonnes & a slagberd & ij lockes' in Daffern's transcription but '15 guns and a flagbearer and 2 "lakes"' in Harris's transcription; Ingram, *Coventry*, xlvi, quoting Harris, *History of the Drapers'*, 27. 'Lockes' would seem to make the most sense in this passage but it may reflect an editorial emendation rather than a manuscript reading so it provides few clues about which version is the least interventionalist. The foliation also differs between Daffern's transcription and Harris's.

- 46 See for example Harris, *History of the Drapers*, 16, n 1.
- 47 Ingram gives the following description of the Drapers' ordinances; 'Coventry, City Record Office, Acc 99/6/1; 18th c; English; paper; 32 leaves; 205mm x 145mm; (written area variable); collation impossible; modern foliation; no decoration; unbound paper booklet; paper deteriorating through dampness' (*Coventry*, xlvii). The ordinances are now in Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA99. PA99/4 and PA99/5 of this file both survive in microfilm copies (now PA1044/9). Other records of the Drapers' company are also in Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA99. Harris also quotes from a minute book of the Drapers with entries ranging from 1779 to 1924; *History of the Drapers*, 36–8.
- 48 See the selection of the transcript printed by Ingram in *Coventry*, 87.
- 49 'The only property possessed by the Tanners Company is a minute book of the proceedings of the company from 1603 to 1742, when it seems to have disappeared, but was found in the year 1860 when the "Company" was "revived"; 'Albert S. Tomson (Mayor), application to Income Tax office', 1888, Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA 31/3. The book is sometimes described as the Tanners' Orders and Minute Book, since the first part of the book describes the orders of the Tanners and the latter part contains minutes, but I refer to it here as the 'Minute Book' to avoid confusion or the suggestion that this one volume is in fact two.
- 50 'W.G. Fretton to the Master of the Tanners', May 16, 1885, Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA 31/2.
- 51 'The Town Clerk Frederick Smith to T. Brooke Peake', December 13 1937, Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, CCB1/14/55.
- 52 'R.J. Cash to the City Librarian', 13 April 1940, Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, CCB/1/14/123.
- 53 'Town Clerk to R.J. Cash', 19 April 1940, Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, CCB/1/14/123.
- 54 'On the outbreak of war, practically the whole of the ancient documents from the Muniment Room were, for safety, taken to Lloyds Bank where they are deposited in vaults; though a certain number, for which there was no room at the Bank have been placed in the strong-room at the Gulson Library which I suppose is practically as safe as the Bank vaults'; *ibid*.
- 55 'Town Clerk to Brigadier [R.J.] Cash', 30 December 1940, Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, CCB/1/14/123.
- 56 Ingram describes the transcript as follows: 'Coventry, City Record Office, Acc 241; early 20th c transcript of 1605–1742 ordinances; English; typed transcript on onion skin; 40 leaves; 253mm x 184mm; modern pagination, original foliation noted; kept in purple cloth-covered board binder' (*Coventry*, xlviii). Ingram prints selections

- from the transcript; 87. It is now Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA 241/1. There is also a microfilm copy of this transcript, now Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA1044/10.
- 57 The passages quoted here are from the transcription in Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA 241/1.
- 58 Describing the book in 1885, Fretton writes that it begins with a transcription of older documents (ff 1–12) and then contains what he terms ‘haphazard entries’; ‘W.G. Fretton to the Master of the Tanners’, May 16, 1885, Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA 31/2, p 10.
- 59 The passages quoted here are from the transcription in Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA 241/1.
- 60 Fretton’s notes on the Tanners’ Company minute book are in ‘W.G. Fretton’, PA 31/2, p 10. On the updates to the book, see below.
- 61 The only exception worthy of note is that ‘fifth’ on the certificate is written as ‘5’ in the transcription; see the transcription in Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA 241/1, p 75/new p 78.
- 62 For example, the certificates on ff 3, 4, and 5 in the booklet (Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA 31/1) all appear on a single folio (38v) in the minute book (based on the foliation recorded in the transcription, Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA 241/1, p 76/new p 77).
- 63 A book published in 1939 states that the library holds ‘the minute book of the local Fellowship of Whittawers, Glovers, Fellmongers and Parchment Makers, for the period 1675–1826’; Aley Lyell Reade, *Johnsonian Gleanings*, vol. ix (London, 1939), 76.
- 64 Aside from the one given above, I can find no references to the minute book from prior to the war.
- 65 The 1675 orders in Birmingham are described in the catalogue as ‘Acts, Rules, Orders, etc., agreed upon by the Masters, Wardens and Fellowship of Whittawers, Glovers, Fellmongers and Parchment makers in the City of Coventry at a Common Hall’ (date July 7 1675); see ‘MS 3069/4/181’, Library of Birmingham, <http://calm-view.birmingham.gov.uk/CalmView/default.aspx>. The account book is Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA17/24. Daffern’s transcript of this account book is now PA251/4.
- 66 See, for example, Hoskins’s work below, n 72.
- 67 Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA24/1.
- 68 Ibid. A detailed description is available at ‘Certificate of musters: assessment to provide money and men for the government’, *Coventry Collections*, <https://www.coventrycollections.org/search/details/archive/110122322/>.

- 69 Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, CCA/3/1/4225.
- 70 There is a small chance that the Coventry Corporation had had two different versions of the 1522 census and that one of these was lost, but I can find no pre-war record of any other 1522 census for Coventry.
- 71 The different surveys are described by W.G. Hoskins in *Provincial England: Essays in Social and Economic History* (London, 1963), 83 and R.W. Hoyle in 'Taxation and the Mid-Tudor Crisis', *Economic History Review* 51.4 (1998), 649–75, 661. The 1524 survey is in the National Archives, E179/192/124 and 125. A copy of the 1524 survey is also in the collections of Coventry's Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA479. The transcript of the 1522 survey is now Coventry, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, PA219/17/1.
- 72 Ingram, *Coventry*, lxvi–lxvii.
- 73 The Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, *First Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts* (London, 1870), 100–2.
- 74 John Cordy Jeaffreson, *A Calendar of the Books, Charters, Letters Patent, Deeds, Rolls, Writs and Other Writings in the Cases and Drawers of the New Muniment-Room of St. Mary's Hall* (Coventry, 1896). The deeds are also described in *Early*, ed. Cross, 63–5.
- 75 The Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, *The Manuscripts of Shrewsbury and Coventry Corporations* (London, 1899), 102–3.
- 76 *Ibid*, 128.
- 77 Other historical documents, dating to the seventeenth century and beyond, were held in the Town clerk's office at the time; Royal Commission, *Manuscripts* (1899), 129.
- 78 David Rimmer, 'Coventry City Record Office', *Archives* 19.84 (1990), 199–212, 201; 'Levi Fox', *The Times* (12 September 2006), <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/levi-fox-m66r0wffq805/>.
- 79 Rimmer, 'Coventry', 201–2.
- 80 *Ibid*, 203.
- 81 Royal Commission, *Manuscripts* (1899), 128.
- 82 *Ibid*. The descriptions of the deeds are on 128–58.
- 83 *Ibid*, 132.
- 84 *Ibid*, 143. Another deed also mentions a pageant-house; a 1393 deed describes a message of land situated between John Cros's pageant-house and a portion of land that had belonged to one Geoffrey Cochebache; see 'BA/B/16/14/5', *Coventry Collections*, <https://www.coventrycollections.org/search/details/archive/110293979>. For other references to pageant-houses, see the same file, sections fg and fh.
- 85 These notes are now sub-collection BA/J; see 'Coventry Borough Archive', *Coventry Collections*, <https://www.coventrycollections.org/search/details/archive/110177816>.

86 'Coventry Borough Archive'.

87 See Harris, *Life*, 379. On the charters, see 'Add. Ch. 28657', *Digitised Manuscripts*, http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_Ch_28657.

88 The record was Corp. MS A. 34; Harris, *Life*, 377–8.

89 Libraries and Museum Committee, *Coventry*, 1; Hickman, 'Books', 135. Harris quotes from vol. 16 of the Reader collection for her *History of the Drapers*, 22, 23.

