

**THE CELY PAPERS: SELECTIONS
FROM THE CORRESPONDENCE
AND MEMORANDA OF THE CELY
FAMILY MERCHANTS OF THE
STAPLE, A.D. 1475-1488**

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The Cely Papers: Selections from the Correspondence and Memoranda of the Cely Family
Merchants of the Staple, A.D. 1475-1488 by Henry Elliot Malden

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HENRY ELLIOT MALDEN

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From my son

I write to becomend me to you and to pray you
 graciously to be at Baden the viij of September for my lord my
 be there and I pray you to be sure to paye some costs and to paye
 Flemysche for here to and at Baden necessarye I will tell you
 more in pync to you wryt at Baden the sth of July of
 September To your brother Frschwade only
 I have sende you some selyd tyme byt to his brother norvall for
 the same as before

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THE CELY PAPERS

SELECTIONS FROM THE

CORRESPONDENCE AND MEMORANDA OF THE CELY FAMILY

MERCHANTS OF THE STAPLE

A.D. 1475-1488

EDITED FOR THE ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BY

HENRY ELLIOT MALDEN, M.A.

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INTRODUCTION

THE Cely Papers, from which the following Letters, Bills and Memoranda are a selection, were found some years ago amongst the Chancery Miscellanea preserved in the Public Record Office, together with a portion of the Darrell, Stonor, Johnson and Fanshawe collections. Of these, the Darrell Papers were used by the late Mr. C. Long for the purpose of his articles on Wild Darrell in the 'Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine.' They, with some Stonor and Cely Papers, were preserved at that date in a portfolio amongst the Tower Miscellaneous Rolls (No. 458). As a considerable body of additional Chancery correspondence was brought to light by Sir Henry Maxwell Lyte, the present Deputy Keeper, these scattered papers were placed in their proper position amongst the Mediæval State Papers, where they form the latest portion of the new series of 'Ancient Correspondence.' The Letters and other documents here printed form only a part of the voluminous mass of Cely Papers. Many long and intricate accounts, many small notes of sales, and some letters of no interest have been omitted. Of the letters included, many are trivial, and some of the notes on sales or on exchange are comparatively of little interest. They form, however, a fair sample of the rest. Some of the unprinted documents are badly damaged by damp and time.

It is to be regretted that the series of Letters is not continuous. They extend from 1475 to 1488, but are more frequent in 1480, 1481, and especially in 1482. In 1488 there is the very interesting, but obscure, reference to the revolution which set Richard III.

upon the throne. Otherwise the politics of Flanders are of more interest to the writers than those of England.

The Cely family, the writers of these Letters, were merchants of the Staple doing business in London, in the latter part of the fifteenth century. The family was, perhaps, Cornish in origin, but at this time they owned land in Essex at 'Brytys Place,' later called Bretts, in Alveley, or Aveley parish, Essex. The head of the family was Richard Cely, who died either quite at the end of 1481, or very early in 1482. He was alive and well in November 1481, and his death is referred to in January 1482. His three sons were Richard, Robert and George. Richard was the eldest son. He administered his father's estate after his death, set up his 'twmbe,' and resided at 'Brytys Place.' It is not clear if Robert or George came next. Robert appears as being in London and writing business letters in 1477, when George was at Calais, the usual post of a junior member of the firm. But Robert, as we shall see, was a ne'er-do-well, who dropped out of the business altogether, and was befriended by George with more generosity than wisdom, in Richard's judgment, in a way which rather suggests that George was the elder. We hear of a John Cely, who, writing to George, speaks of my sister, your aunt; whence we should suppose he was old Richard's brother, though George also calls him cousin. Old William Cely is also mentioned—perhaps another brother of the elder generation. After old Richard's death, a William Cely is the agent in Calais, not a brother to Richard and George; he writes to them as his masters. He was presumably a cousin, son to old William or John. One William Maryon is also, apparently, a member of the firm, or at least accustomed to act with them. He was godfather to Richard the younger. He has a nephew,* Robert Eryk, who was George's godson, as we gather from himself. He prays George to be 'my god godfader' in a certain matter, that is, of lending him 40*l.* without security. '*Nil* for the xlth of Robert Erykkes,' notes George.

* See Letters of April 18 and 20, 1482.

The whole family and their connexions were continually passing backwards and forwards between England, Calais and Flanders, except old Richard, who at the date of the Letters confined his journeys to England. It was the business of one junior member to superintend the business in Calais, and to travel thence, with more or less peril in time of war, to the various marts in Flanders. In England there was need of frequent journeys to buy wool and fells, generally down to Gloucestershire. The mention of the family is hardly complete without adding their trusty servant, Joyce Parmenter, whose name suffers peculiar indignities from the cacography of his betters, and becomes Goos sometimes. Parmenter was, no doubt, an Essex man; it is an Eastern Counties name.

There is no trace in the Letters of any connection with Staple Inn in Holborn. The London residence and place of business of the Celys was in Mark Lane. Their wool was weighed for the assessment of custom and subsidy at the Leadenhall. Mark Lane is indifferently spelt Mark, Marke, Martte, Marthe or the Martt. Mark is a corruption, no doubt. 'The Mart' also existed in Calais and at Bruges, and elsewhere in the Netherlands. It is near the river and under the shadow almost of the Tower that we must place the centre of the English wool trade, not in a distant suburb. We can even settle approximately in what part of Mark Lane they lived. The northern half of Mark Lane is, or was, in the parish of All Hallows, Staining; the southernmost quarter, about, in that of All Hallows, Barking. The remainder is in that of St. Olave's, Hart Street; and this was the church to which the Celys gave offerings, though they conceal the fact by writing of it as 'Sent Tolowys scryssche.' They lived, therefore, probably rather south of the middle of Mark Lane.

Richard Cely, jun., who wrote 'Sent Tolowys,' also writes 'Sent Telen' and 'Sent Tanys' for St. Helen and St. Anne's, and buys 'a nox' for sixteen shillings.

Nevertheless, with many eccentricities of spelling, Richard, jun.,

and George write and spell better, and use better English, than their father, Richard, or than most of the casual correspondents whose letters are included. The spelling is usually fairly phonetic, but certain passages of evidently careless writing and omission of words defy any but conjectural emendation. Perhaps the worst writer of all is Sir John Weston, the Prior of the Hospitallers. Only one letter of his is printed. References to him are very numerous. He, *ex-officio* premier baron of England, seems to have usually resided on his Essex estates close to the Celys. To them he is 'My Lord,' though their land was not held of him. It is significant of the state of society that they had coats made of his livery. It extends our view of the evil, against which Henry VII. set himself successfully, to find well-to-do merchants becoming the dependents in that way of a nobleman, and to see a quasi-spiritual peer providing a following, as any Neville or Stafford might have done. Liveried retainers of this stamp were worth a hundred grooms or yeomen, being as times went distinctly rich men.

The Merchants of the Staple, the corporation to which the Celys belonged, were the most notable trade association of England. From the time of Edward I., after an abortive attempt by Edward III. to let trade find its own channels, English Governments successively pursued the policy of establishing Staples for the sale of English produce, forcing export trade into certain centres of distribution. In 1363 the only Staple for the chief English goods was fixed at Calais; 'no wools, skins, worsteds, cheese, butter, lead, tin, coal or grindstones' were to be exported from England, except to Calais. The Staple was removed several times from place to place: it was re-established in England, it was removed to Calais again, then back to England, and finally established at Calais in 1423 (2 Hen. VI. c. 4). By statutes 3 Edw. IV. c. 1, and 4 Edw. IV. c. 3, the Staple at Calais was confirmed. All staple produce, wool, fells, lead, tin, &c. were to pass directly from England to Calais. From the four northern counties, Richmondshire and Northallertonshire, they were to go to

Newcastle, and thence to Calais only. The Merchants of the Staple were practically incorporated by the Ordinance of the Staple, the joint work of the Council in 1353 and the Parliament of 1354, embodied in 27 Edw. III. co. 21 to 28. A mayor and two constables were to be chosen yearly in every staple town, 'having knowledge of the Law-Merchant, to govern the Staple.' Correctors were to be appointed to make and record bargains, two merchants aliens were to be chosen as associates in judgment to the mayor and constables, and six mediators in questions between buyers and sellers. All other town franchises were to give way to those of the Staplers. 'We will, grant and ordain that all the said things be firmly kept and holden, in all points, notwithstanding franchise, custom, privilege, exemption, judgements or other grants made to Cities, Boroughs, Towns, Commonalties, people of the Five Ports, other Ports, or any other singular persons whatsoever. . . . Saving in other things to the Prelates, Dukes, Earls, Barons and other Lords, their Fairs, Markets, Hundreds, Wapentakes, Leets, Jurisdictions, Courts, Franchises, and Privileges, and all other things to them pertaining in the places where the Staples be.'^a

So long as the Staple was occasionally fixed in English towns the rights of lords in fairs might clash with the privileges of the merchants. When, as for a time under Edward III., it was fixed in Flemish cities, local rights could not be overridden. But there were no fairs or franchises in Calais which could interfere with the control of trade there by the Staplers. There was a corporation in Calais apart from them. We learn in the Letter of February 24, 1484, that aldermen of Calais who are also freemen of the Staple have been compelled by the Court of the Staple to give up one position or the other. But the functions of the municipality must have been purely parochial. The royal authority in Calais, apart from trade matters, was vested in the military offices of the Captain of Calais and his Lieutenant. The Court of the Staple drew to itself all civil business in which Staplers were concerned.

^a Ordinance of the Staple.