

## **WANKLYN'S 'LYME LEAFLETS'**

### **The Story of the Town's Court Rolls**

**by Thea Hawksworth**

Born in 1867, Cyril Wanklyn was a Cambridge graduate, who after some time as a prep school master, moved into the City, where he forged a successful business career for himself. Unfortunately in the early 1900s, he contracted an illness which rendered him permanently deaf and forced him into an early retirement.



**Cyril Wanklyn receiving the Freedom of the Borough from the Mayor, Alderman W J Emmett, in Lyme Regis Guildhall on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1938 for saving and cataloguing the Borough archives. A brass plaque in the Guildhall records the town's gratitude to him. In addition he was presented with various historic lists of freemen, burgesses and electors which he gave to the Museum.**

He settled in Lyme, at Timber Hill, calling his house 'Overton', from whence he came. It is now the TreeTops Retirement Home in Overton Close. Anyone who has visited it will know what a lovely feel the house has. Someone who knew it when Wanklyn lived there

remembered seeing stern notices stuck all over the place, one such admonishing, 'put everything back in its place'!

So once this mildly eccentric man had settled in, he looked around for a project with which to occupy himself. He found it close at hand, as he became more and more immersed in the history of the ancient borough of Lyme Regis, and produced 'Lyme Regis: A Retrospect, in 1927.

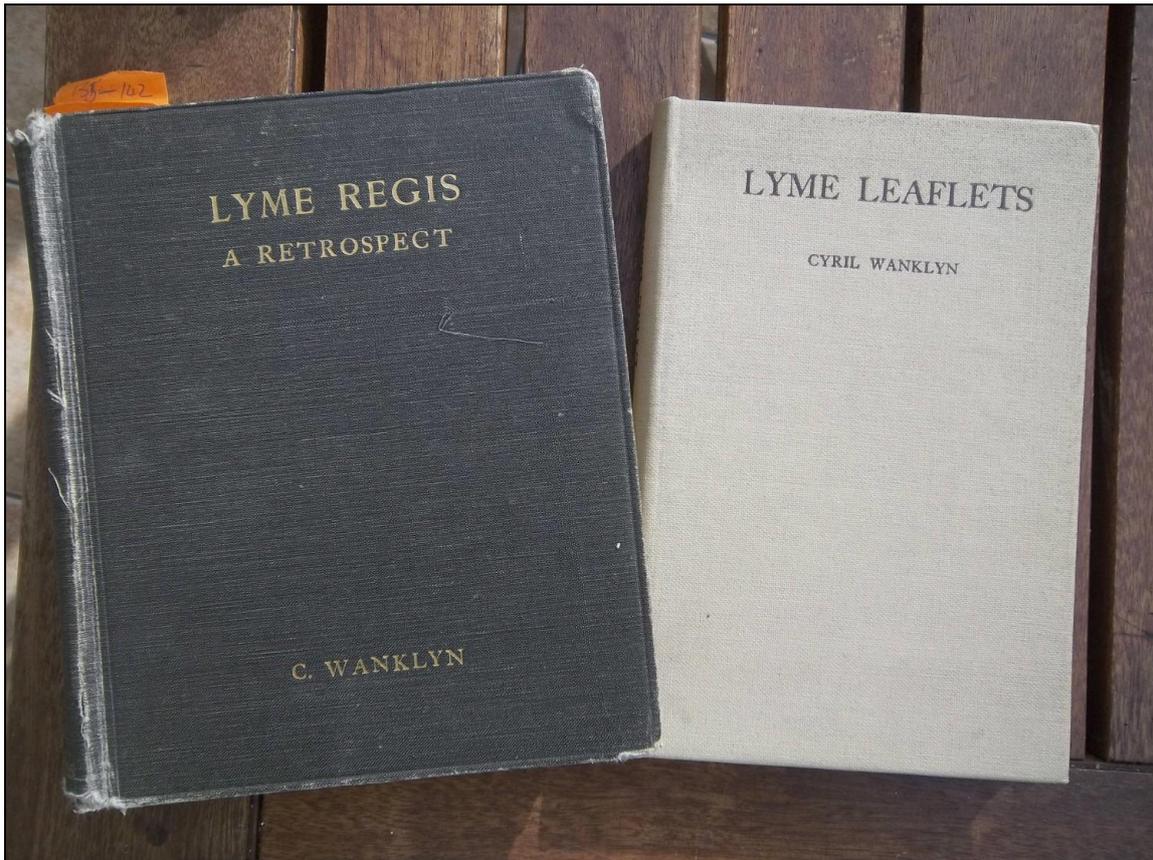
One day, to his delight and amazement, he discovered that in the muniment room of the Town Hall, lay all the Town's documents from the late twelve hundreds to 1835. And so it was that he rescued these infinitely precious documents from oblivion. In that room, lay quantities of parchment rolls including the Town's Court Books. Among them, one which covered the period from 1309, which is most likely to be the earliest MS on paper, as opposed to parchment, and which is now in the British Library. These were all collected and examined by Cyril Wanklyn. Many of them were written in Medieval Latin, and they were transcribed and translated by the Public Records Office in London.

Wanklyn now had three sets to work with, the originals, the transcriptions and the translations. Over eighty volumes all told, bound in vellum at Wanklyn's own expense. The cost of this amounted to many hundreds of pounds, not the only evidence of his generosity, for he also made many valuable gifts of pictures and engravings to the Museum, of which he was co-curator.

His 'Lyme Regis – A Retrospect' is still consulted by those who seek after aspects of local history. But the book which I have found most useful when researching Lyme's past is 'Lyme Leaflets', which details the fruits of his labours of twenty years of dedicated work with the Court Rolls.

Originally published as a series of articles, in local papers in Dorset, Devon and Somerset, between 1923 and 1943, this book is a compilation of those articles. It had been Wanklyn's intention to gather them together in book form for private distribution, but his untimely and unexpected death in 1943 left this plan unfulfilled. Luckily for posterity, following his death, three of his friends decided to carry out his wishes, and thus in 1944 'Lyme Leaflets' was privately published by Helen Clemens, Cyril Popham and Catherine Ede. There appear to have been about 250 copies printed and they do occasionally pop up in the second hand book shops. Nigel Cozens of Lymelight Books can usually lay his hand on one.





Cyril Wanklyn's main published works – still eagerly sought after by collectors and students of Lyme Regis

To return to the beginning. Just imagine that day when Cyril Wanklyn came upon the collection of documents – for him it must have been like having all his birthdays and Christmases rolled into one. In his own words, 'the documents were kept in chaos and confusion'. Thousands of rolls in neither chronological nor subject order, ranging from 1288 – 1835! So how did he deal with the mammoth task of sorting them out?

Not how you would think. Not logically at all, but in his own inimitable and eccentric way.

The first set of Court Rolls he examined closely were from 1560 – 1584, and as more came to light, he simply worked forwards or backwards from that period of time. He later said that by trying to put them in any sort of order first, would have wasted months of time and effort.

What kind of information did he extract from these rolls?

Firstly, they were the proceedings of the Court Leet. This court met twice a year, just after Easter and just after Michaelmas, when a jury of freemen of the town sat in judgement on everyone's shortcomings towards the community. This included those of the Town Mayor.



Secondly there were the records of the Hustings Court, established by the Charter of 1285. This was held weekly and dealt solely with commercial cases. These Hustings Court records are sadly not complete but if we had a series of Court books which covered 527 years, it would be unique; however, the 370 years which do survive, are exceptional.

Thirdly, there were the records of the Annual Meeting for the election of the Town Mayor, by the freemen of the Town. This took place on the first Monday after August 24<sup>th</sup> (St Bartholomew's Day).

Also included were the records kept on the election of the Members of Parliament. Unfortunately, these were infrequently recorded, even during the times of the General Elections. For example, one volume, which covers the period 1563 – 1571, fails to mention that there were two general elections during those years, and one in 1563, when so important a person as Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup> Spymaster, became MP for Lyme.

Finally, several extra discoveries and supplementary records were tidied up and added to the collection.

And what nuggets of information about Lyme's past were revealed in these wonderful documents? What they show us is that Lyme was not insignificant in the wider history of the nation. In other words 'Those times of fire and flood', as it says on the hand board by the Shambles Bill which hangs in the Museum.

The Siege of Lyme, the Monmouth Landing, the escape of Charles II and the times of the Fanes, those black hearted incomers who ruled and ruined Lyme for nearly 100 years in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, are all aspects of history where Lyme's path follows that of the nation. So much of the never-ending pageant of our history is frequently linked with that of the town, but the "Leaflets" tell us much more of the minutiae of everyday life in Lyme over a period of 600 years.

Let us do what he did and dip in and out at random; starting with the first one he drew out of the hat – so to speak!

#### The Court Book of 1560 – 1574

In these volumes, Wanklyn found recorded, many cases of debt, and disputes over ownership, which interestingly covered a wide area, Honiton, Crewkerne, Chard, Ilminster, even as far afield as Exeter and Bristol, showing how far the area of jurisdiction had been acquired by Lyme's Hustings Court.



Also contained in these portfolios are the records of the twice-yearly Court Leet, and these give us a clear picture of the Lyme of over 400 years ago. In Wanklyn's words, it was a 'very busy, very litigious, very dirty little place'. The Cottages with their thatched roofs, were all hugger-mugger, and as we can imagine, fire was a source of constant anxiety, with numerous references to defective mantles and chimneys.

Parked horses on weekly market days caused much trouble.

There was a cattle market and therefore Lyme had a flourishing trade in skins, with of course, the attendant glove and shoemakers. There is a report of the Corporation Inspector of Hides checking all, to make sure that they were not unduly gashed. Two reports from the Piepowder Court (which settled cases during fairs and markets), follow a Lymeite v. a 'foreigner' (probably someone from Bridport). The 'foreigner' won both cases. Also recorded is a severe reprimand for the people of Lyme who apparently preferred playing bowls to practising archery at the butts in Mill Green.

### 1340 – 1712

This collection was a prize.

It contained among other things, an index of all the mayors, vicars, ships, places, and subjects for the period.

Also included in this portfolio (for 1577), was a census of the inhabitants and following this, a note that a few years later, these same inhabitants were assessed for subsidies for a ship, a supply of gunpowder and wages (or settling) for the soldiers of Garnezey (or Guernsey)

In 1579 fear of the arrival of the Armada, called for an estimate for the amount of corn each household would need in case of war.

The Court Roll of 1571 tells us that it was compulsory to wear a cap of English wool on Sundays and on Holy Days. This was to encourage the English wool trade. Informers were appointed to report on any transgression by their neighbours. In court were six people who had been fined 3s 4d for the offence.

Beer was 3 pints for 1 penny.

### 1309 – 1328

Amazing!

Together with a fragment of 1301 (Edward 1) and a small portion of 1328 (Edward 111), this volume embraces the reigns of the three Edwards. It is also the one mentioned earlier, the earliest roll on paper, as opposed to parchment. Such a rarity, the principal librarian of the



British Museum thought that the paper had been imported from Spain or Bordeaux over sixty years earlier. Historians had not known of its existence.

This roll lists the six mayors who held office between 1310 and 1318. How wonderful to have these early Lyme names, also 14 MPs of the town.

The roll is full of conveyancing of properties, granting of freedoms and the particulars of wills. Such a wealth of information for historians.

### 1437

This is a roll from the fifteenth century. This one contained the earliest court records of Lyme in the original parchment. These are genuine originals, not compiled for any special purpose at a later date. They contain so much valuable information, that it must have filled Wanklyn with great joy. There are lists of freeholders, names of Lyme bridges and streets long forgotten.

Also a report of Court Leet proceedings against the people of Lyme for washing their dirty linen in the pot water (channels which ran down Broad Street to the bottom, and Church Street from the other side). [Origin of the phrase 'don't wash your dirty linen in public'?]. This water was always used for drinking and sometimes for cooking, but the townsfolk had begun to use it for the manufacture of wool and linen which required the dunking of cotton stuff etc in the pot water.

Also reported in this roll, was the story of a stray horse which came into town. It was kept for a year and a day, and then confiscated. Unfortunately it is not made clear whose property it then became – the finders or the boroughs, or perhaps it was sold to defray the expense of keeping it.

### 1609

Nearly two hundred years later, in 1609, in folio 79, the Court is still fining the town's inhabitants for using the pot water for the washing of their dirty linen in public! So the pot water is not being used exclusively, as it should be, for drinking water and for cooking, and therefore the miscreants were fined 6s.8d.

### 1288

Finally, the earliest document found was the proceedings of the Lyme Assizes of 1288, only four years after Lyme's earliest Charter was granted. This document mentions the Hustings Court, and the town's earliest Mayor, one Geoffrey Charlemagne. This is the only occasion that a High Court Assizes was held in Lyme though James 1 in his Charter granted the town



the right to hold Quarter Sessions, and this certainly increased the prestige of Lyme over the surrounding area.

It is fascinating to read of the two prisoners who in 1288 escaped from the Cockmoil (prison) and sought sanctuary in the church. This is the only time this happened in the town according to the records. The two robbers confessed their guilt and abjured the realm (i.e. they were sent into exile across the sea).

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There are many questions raised in 'Lyme Leaflets' and many that Wanklyn, despite his meticulous research, had to leave unanswered. For example: - Where was the Cobb Hall? And Our Lady's House? Why is the Horn Bridge so called?

But in extracts from the Pulman's Weekly News, April 6<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 1943, we read the following:-

"The methodical inspection, arrangement and interpretation of Lyme's wonderful collection of Municipal documents, which was begun over twenty- one years ago is now complete. Everything that was worth doing has been done ... what was dark is now made plain.

...the Court Book volumes are an exceptional, possibly unrivalled series.....and this is a series possibly unequalled by any other old English borough".

Ref: Wanklyn - from Borough Charters etc and Fugitive Pieces 1288-1859 reprinted in Pullmans and included in 'Lyme Leaflets'

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And then in December 1943, he died. But what a legacy to leave.

Under the Museum's agreement with the Dorset Heritage Centre, the bound volumes of his work are all in Dorchester, together with the original rolls, apart from the 1309 -1328 Court Roll on paper which is at the British Library in London, although Dorchester has a copy. Unfortunately, after all his labours in the history of the town, we only have a copy of the bound calendar (index and summary) for 1672-1724 in the Museum in Lyme for researchers to consult. See appendix for a list.

But nevertheless, through the endeavours of his friends, who published the book after his death, we have a picture of a man who loved Lyme, and snapshots of the town through the centuries, gleaned from the pages of his 'Leaflets', a fascinating and invaluable resource for all, who like Wanklyn, love Lyme.

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## **Appendix: The current location of the ancient borough records of Lyme Regis: A note by Richard Bull, Lyme Regis Museum.**

In "Lyme Letters" Wanklyn explains that he collected an almost complete set of Lyme Regis Borough records and Court Books from 1309 to 1835, with sundry other items which he called "fugitive pieces". One missing Court Book he purchased from a London book dealer and added to the set. The Public Record Office (now The National Archives at Kew) transcribed these documents into English and made calendars (ie, summaries and indexes in English). The transcriptions were bound, as were the calendars and those original documents which were not rolls. In the late 1930s Wanklyn put the documents into safe keeping in Lyme Regis Museum. One more Court Book was already in the British Museum Library: a copy of this was obtained, transcribed, calendared and bound and also placed in the Museum. The Museum Minute Book records some of these acquisitions, but Wanklyn resigned as co-curator due to ill health in 1940. No complete museum list of them survives.

Subsequently the burden of keeping these ancient documents dry and safe in the then crumbling Museum became too great and under an agreement with the Dorset Heritage Centre (DHC, formerly Dorset Record Office) they were deposited there, whilst remaining the property of the Museum, where they joined all but one of the town's many royal charters. **Researchers should make initial enquiries at the Dorset Heritage Centre, as the Museum only retains a copy of the Court Book Calendars for 1672-1724.** A search of the DHC website <http://archives.dorsetforyou.com/adlibwebapp/> using terms such as Lyme Regis Museum, D/LR, D/LRM and Lyme Regis Court Rolls will reveal the items. All except one of the Lyme Regis charters and the borough archives after 1835 are also at the DHC, search under "Lyme Regis Borough".

The list of works transcribed and deposited is:

- **Fugitive Pieces 1496-1696, 1288-1859 and 1340-1712.** There are hundreds of individual items. These are in files D/LR and Uncatalogued Accession 6786 at the DHC.
- **Court Books and Calendars 1309-1328** in the British Library, copy in DHC D/LR
- **Court Books and Calendars 1437-1508, 1560-1575, 1578-1584, 1592-1602, 1604-1608, 1613-1627, 1647-1670, 1672-1724, 1724-1765, 1766-1835** in DHC D/LR.
- **Sundry Mayors' Accounts 1573-1685** in DHC D/LR
- **Mayors' Vouchers 1587-1838**
- **Lyme Regis Quarter Sessions Book 1578-1856** in DHC
- **Borough Finances 1544-1699** in DHC D/LR
- **Misdemeanour Book 1681-1751**
- **Order Books to 1835.**

In addition in "Lyme Leaflets" Wanklyn discusses other items formerly in the Museum and now in the DHC:

- **Accounts of Lyme Regis & Crewkerne Turnpike Trust**
- **Burgess Rolls 1835-1891.**

