

Geoffrey Chaucer, J.P. and M.P.

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GEOFFREY CHAUCER, J.P. AND M.P.¹

I. CHAUCER RECORDS, 1384-9

BETWEEN 1384 and 1389 Chaucer wrote the General Prologue and began getting the *Canterbury Tales* under way. From the biographical point of view this period is one of the most interesting in his life; it also happens to be at once the most profusely documented and the least understood. At the beginning of it the poet had been for nine years controller of the customs and subsidy on wool, skins, and leather in the port of London, and for one year controller of the petty customs on wine, candles, etc. The first office he had to attend to personally, the second he could discharge by deputy. Throughout 1384, except for a month's leave ending about Christmas, he worked at the Customs House and had the use of the residence in Aldgate tower. From then onwards the references to him² are briefly as follows:

1385. On 17 February Richard II granted him a permanent deputy in the wool customs. In that month the King was beginning preparations for a military expedition to Scotland which set out in July and returned in September. On 6 April he paid Chaucer £10 on account. On 24 April the poet received a half-yearly payment of his and his wife's pensions. Contrary to custom the money is not said to have been delivered into his own hands. In September he was included in the list of persons who were to be given mourning for the death of the King's mother, Joan, Princess of Wales. On 6 October he failed to appear as required at a meeting of customs officials in London. He was not penalized, but simply distrained (effectively) for 7 December. In the Issue Roll for Michaelmas, beside the entry concerning the payment to him of £10 on 6 April, there is a later note in the same hand ordering the conversion of the payment into a grant. On 12 October the King commissioned him as a justice of the peace for Kent.

1386. On 9 May and 22 June Chaucer called in person at the exchequer for further instalments of his and Philippa's pensions. On 28 June he was again commissioned as a justice of the peace for Kent. In August or September he was elected as one of the knights of the shire. Parliament met on 1 October, and on 28 November an order was issued for the payment of his expenses for 61 days. During this session the King's uncle, Thomas duke of Gloucester, seized the reins of government, dismissed Richard's chief ministers, and instituted an enquiry into the collection of the wool tax. On 5 October Chaucer's rooms in Aldgate were leased by Sir Nicholas Brember, the mayor, to Richard Forster. On 15 October the poet testified in the Scrope-Grosvenor heraldry case then being tried in London. By the middle of December he had lost both his controllerships; on the 4th he was superseded in the wool customs, on the 14th in the petty customs.

¹ The author and the editor desire to make grateful acknowledgement of a grant from the Publication Fund of the University of London which has permitted the publication of this Special Article.

² *Life-Records of Chaucer* (Chaucer Society) and letters from Edith Rickert to the *Times Literary Supplement*, in 1927 on the grants of £10 and of mourning to Chaucer, in 1928 on his debt to John Churchman, in 1932 on his licence to visit Calais and on his distraint.

1387. On 16 May he was commissioned with Sir William Rikhill, a Kentish justice, to investigate a case of abduction at Chislehurst, within the borders of the royal estate of Eltham. Presumably Philippa Chaucer died at some time after 18 June, when her pension and Geoffrey's were paid as usual, and before 7 November, from which date onwards Geoffrey's alone was paid. On 5 July he was granted protection for a year to go to Calais in the retinue of Sir William Beauchamp, captain of the town. On 7 November he was in England, judging by his visit to the exchequer on that date. On 21 December he borrowed an advance of £1 on his pension.

1388. Between 16 April and 4 June three writs were issued for his arrest on account of a debt to John Churchman, builder of the Customs House. The search for him was carried into Kent and Surrey but reported unavailing. On 1 May he surrendered his pensions to one John Scalby 'at his own request'. On 13 May he is said to have received a half-yearly payment at the exchequer 'per manus proprias'.

1389. In May Richard suddenly came into power again and began restoring his friends to office. On 12 July he gave his former controller of the wool customs in London the important post of chief clerk of the king's works, with charge of the buildings at Westminster, Eltham, Sheen and many other royal residences.

The number of these records is a credit to the archive-searchers, but the light they shed on Chaucer's doings is 'a little glooming light, much like a shade'. In silence they abide our question as to when and why the poet first went to Kent to live, and where he lived; what his qualifications were for the justiceship; how long he held it; whether it brought him any income; what kind of work it involved; what else he was doing; who was responsible for his election to parliament; why he gave up his customs controllerships and pensions; what experience he had to fit him for the chief clerkship of the works; and so on. Answers to many of the questions raised by the above records have of course been suggested, notably in Professor Hulbert's monograph on *Chaucer's Official Life*. But that study was published nearly thirty years ago, and several of the records are recent discoveries. No attempt has yet been made to interpret them as a whole.

Hulbert regards Chaucer's membership of the magistracy and of parliament as meaning that 'he must have held a manor and lands of considerable value [in Kent]. . . either by grant of some great noble or by purchase'.¹ Professor Manly says that he apparently obtained his justiceship 'either because he owned lands in Kent or because he had some knowledge of the law'.² Professor Kuhl supposes that he obtained it 'through somebody's favor (probably the king's)'.³ Mr Cave Brown tentatively attributes his membership of parliament to 'the custody of some lands in Kent. . . with court favour'.⁴ Dr Coulton, noting that Brember and Forster were of Chaucer's circle, says of the leasing of Aldgate to Forster in 1386: 'This may very likely have been a pre-arranged job among the three friends.'⁵ Professor Robinson thinks that

¹ *Chaucer's Official Life* (1912), p. 65.

² *Some New Light on Chaucer* (1926), p. 37.

³ *PMLA*, xxxix (1924), 121.

⁴ *Archaeologia Cantiana*, xxi, 216.

⁵ *Chaucer and His England*, p. 94.

'the hostility of Gloucester and his faction toward the King's appointees' may account for Chaucer's loss of his controllerships.¹ Opinion is divided as to whether he moved to Kent in 1385 or 1386. In view of his receiving mourning for Princess Joan, Dr Rickert questions whether at the time he was, as some scholars have thought, out of touch with the royal household; in view of his permission to go abroad in 1387 she suggests that the common assignment of the General Prologue to that year should perhaps be reconsidered.²

That is as far as detective work on the data has gone. Further progress seems likely to depend on solving the threefold problem of what the poet's qualifications were for the magistracy, for parliament, and for the chief clerkship of the king's works. And when all the records now available are considered in the light of other sources of evidence, such as the legislation concerning justices, the political events of the time, the history of the poet's relations with the royal family, and a couplet in the *Legend of Good Women* which connects him with Richard's and Anne's favourite palaces of Eltham and Sheen, a solution does emerge. It is that from early in 1385 till the middle of 1389 Chaucer was in the service of the king and queen, as an overseer or clerk of the works at Eltham in Kent and Sheen (now called Richmond) in Surrey, and that throughout those years he had a house in Greenwich, midway between Eltham and Sheen, and probably on crown land.

II. JUSTICE OF THE PEACE

Any discussion of justices of the peace in the fourteenth century must inevitably be indebted to the pioneer studies of Dr Bertha Haven Putnam. One of them opens with these words:

There is a strange incongruity between the frequent references to justices of the peace in history and in literature and the serious lack of accurate information on their origin and on their development during the early centuries of their existence. Until the abundant material, most of it in manuscript, has been thoroughly examined, it is useless to attempt a complete account of their powers and their activities for the period before 1500.³

Most of the following account of their work is derived directly from Dr Putnam,⁴ except where, for present purposes, emphasis is laid on the

¹ *Chaucer's Complete Works*, p. xix.

² *TLS*, Oct. 1927 and Dec. 1932.

³ 'Early Treatises on the Practice of the Justices of the Peace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries', *Oxford Studies in Social and Legal History*, ed. Sir Paul Vinogradoff, VII, no. 13.

⁴ Chiefly in the Introduction to 'Kent Keepers of the Peace 1316-1317', *Kent Records*, Kent Archaeological Society, XIII (1933); with some dependence on *Life-Records*, p. xxxiii. I also wish to thank Gladys Thornton, now Mrs J. G. S. Ward, late of Westfield College, for reading my MS. and giving me the benefit of the advice of a specialist in medieval constitutional history.

distinction between the resident or local justices (Chaucer's kind) and the itinerant or professional justices.

In the days of Richard II a resident justice had to see to the enforcement of statutes concerning the regulation of wages, prices, labour and other matters, a task which often involved judicial as well as administrative business. He was also expected, among other things, to see that the inhabitants of his district did not go about armed, practise terrorism, hold unlawful meetings, brawl at inns, or damage property not their own. He was empowered to arrest 'suspects' and to take sureties from anyone who threatened injury to another. His jurisdiction covered 'all manner of felonies and trespasses' short of treason. These headings included murder, arson, abduction, extortion, abuse of weights and measures, coining of false money, and every variety of theft from petty larceny to the misappropriation of land. The punishments justices could impose were loss of life or limb, imprisonment, fines, forfeiture of chattels to the crown and of lands to the lord.

In special commissions, such as Chaucer's at Chislehurst, the usual procedure was for the resident justices to arrest offenders, examine them under oath, and prepare an indictment for the professional justices who were assigned to 'hear' and 'determine' (*oyer et terminer*) the cases. If the offence were trivial, the resident justice probably acted as judge. Quarter sessions were held for about three days at various places in the county, Greenwich being one of the places designated in Kent.¹ They began early in October, early in January, and about mid-March and mid-June, depending on the date of Easter.² Petty or special sessions might be held at any time at which the justices concerned could conveniently meet. All the resident justices of each county were supposed to attend quarter sessions regularly, but some doubtless absented themselves on occasion. Even in notably iniquitous districts their duties did not amount to anything like a full-time job.

Justices received no official compensation during Chaucer's known terms of service. Yet many of them grew rich, none more conspicuously than the chief commissioner for Kent, Sir Simon Burley.³ Complaints against their 'mischiefs and oppressions'⁴ were constantly being lodged

¹ Putnam, *Kent Records*, p. xxxiv.

² G. E. Howard, *Development of the King's Peace and of the Local Peace Magistracy*, Nebraska University Studies, no. VIII, p. 53.

³ At his trial in 1387 Burley was 'accused of having raised his income from 20 marks to 3000 in a few years' (*DNB*). By then he had acquired at least 29 manors or other lands in Kent (*Close and Patent Rolls*).

⁴ *Complete Statutes of England, in Continuation of Halsbury's Laws of England*, London (1930), xi, 213, statute of 1361.

in parliament by the commons. One typical statement was that these powerful officials 'by reason of outrageous fines and other grievances, had worked more to the destruction of the king's subjects than to the reformation of abuses'.¹ Among the 'other grievances' were the acceptance of bribes and the extortion of ransom from prisoners.² Large sums of money passed through the justices' hands—between £200 and £300 at a single sitting of quarter sessions.³ Those who wished to help themselves could do so liberally, and even in the fourteenth century the office may have been sought after by men of moderate means and submissive consciences. 'Ambition', as Lambard put it mildly in the sixteenth century, 'multiplied the number of ye Iustices.' At the time Chaucer was appointed, seventeen were regularly commissioned for Kent.

In 1376 the commons had petitioned that the justices should 'be named by the lords and knights of the counties in parliament', and that they should be paid for attending sessions, 'for without wages they have no care to keep their sessions'. The reply had been: 'They shall be named by the king and his continual council, and as to the wages, the king will advise.'⁴ Twelve years later, in 1388, the legislators decided to pay the justices 4s. daily during quarter sessions. At the same time, with an eye to economy, they took the precaution of limiting the number of resident magistrates to six, and insisting 'That no association shall be made to the justices of the peace after their first commission'.

Chaucer's commission of 12 October 1385 begins: 'Association of Geoffrey Chaucer in the commission of the peace and of oyer and terminer in the county of Kent, lately directed to Sir Simon Burley.'⁵ The use of the initial phrase does not mean, however, that the poet was commissioned in 1385 as an 'associate' justice⁶ and did not hold a full commission until his appointment of 28 June 1386. The difference between the two commissions is simply that in October 1385 he was appointed in place of 'Thomam de Shardelowe iam defunctum'. Shardelowe, who was the king's chief steward in Kent, had been appointed, together with Sir Simon Burley and the fifteen others, in May 1385 and had died on or before 21 September. There is no basis, therefore, for Professor Lowes's inference that Chaucer could have qualified as a justice under his first appointment without being bound by any residence requirement. Through this mistaken inference, the date of Chaucer's removal to Kent has been confused.

¹ C. A. Beard, *The Office of Justice of the Peace in England in its Origin and Development*, p. 39.

² *Complete Statutes*, xi, 217.

³ *Patent Rolls*, 1388-92, p. 137.

⁴ Beard, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁵ *PR*, 1385-9, p. 84.

⁶ Professor J. L. Lowes, *PMLA*, xx, 773, n. 1.

The magistracy was regulated during the poet's tenure of office by the statute of 1361, which in the first sentence specifies what manner of men were to be chosen:

In every county of England shall be assigned for the keeping of the peace, one lord, and with him three or four of the most worthy in the county, with some learned in the law.¹

The statute of 1388, the reform measure already mentioned, contains supplementary definitions of the phrase 'learned in the law' and a few other items worth quoting:

It is ordained and agreed, that in every commission of the peace, there shall be assigned but six justices with the justices of assises, and that the said six justices shall keep their sessions every quarter of the year at least, and by three days, if need be. . . and every of the said justices shall take for their wages four shillings the day for the time of their said sessions, and their clerk two shillings (the day), of the fines and amerciaments rising and coming of the same sessions, by the hands of the sheriffs. . . and that no association shall be made to the justices of the peace after their first commission. And it is not the intent of this statute, that the justices of the one bench or of the other, nor the serjeants of the law, in the case that they shall be named in the said commissions, shall be bound by force of this statute to hold the said sessions four times in the year, as the other commissioners, the which be continually dwelling in the country, but that they shall do it when they may best attend it.²

Not until 1414 was it required in so many words that the justices who were neither 'lords' nor 'of the assises' should be appointed from residents.³ But, as so often happens in the evolution of English laws, this was merely a matter of making explicit what had previously been customary. The statute of 1361 refers to the class of justices in question as 'the most worthy *in the county*'; that of 1388 refers to them as the 'commissioners, the which be *continually dwelling in the country*'. When these phrases were first used, residence was undoubtedly an understood qualification for the men so designated, and the fact is that every one of the justices named in Chaucer's commissions who was not a 'lord' or 'of the assises' lived in Kent. It is also significant to observe that although important chief stewards were normally given magisterial powers in the area of their appointment,⁴ and Shardelowe had been on every commission of the peace for Kent since 1380,⁵ the two men who in turn succeeded him as 'steward of all the king's lands in Kent' (Edmund Brudenell on 21 September and Thomas Illeston on 8 November),⁶ but who lived in other counties, did *not* become Kentish justices. The dividing of Sharde-

¹ *Complete Statutes*, xi, 212.

² *Id.*, p. 214.

³ *Id.*, p. 219.

⁴ *Id.*, p. 218.

⁵ *PR.*

⁶ *PR*, 1385-9, pp. 25 and 47. Brudenell was appointed as a J.P. for Buckinghamshire on 18 September 1385 (*id.*, p. 81). In *PR*, 1374-81 Illeston is referred to as 'escheator in the county of Kent', 'steward of Byfleet and Kennington manors', and 'steward of the king in the Isle of Wight'; in *PR*, 1381-5, as 'escheator in cos. Hants and Wilts' and 'in the commission of the peace, etc. for Hants'. In Oct. 1390 Brudenell was commissioned 'to enquire what felons assaulted and robbed Geoffrey Chaucer, at Hatcham [co. Surrey] of a horse worth 10*l.*, goods worth 100*s.*, and 20*l.*, 6*s.* and 8*d.* in money' (*Life-Records*, p. 339).

lowe's allied offices of steward and justice between Brudenell and Chaucer would be fully accounted for by the non-residence of Brudenell combined with a responsible resident stewardship of some kind held by Chaucer. But in any case the legislators clearly had residents in mind when they spoke of 'the most worthy *in the county*' and Chaucer, as will presently appear, qualified for the magistracy under that heading. We may safely take it that like all the rest of 'the most worthy' among his fellow-commissioners he lived 'in the county'.

Each commission was composed, as we have seen, of 'one lord', several of 'the most worthy' and 'some learned in the law'. By comparing these abstract terms with the actual personnel of one county magistracy, that of Kent in 1385 and 1386 (there were a few changes in the list for the second year), we should have a reliable basis of inference concerning Chaucer's qualifications. Such a comparison has never been made with the necessary thoroughness. Moreover, Thomas Shardelowe esquire, a justice who is of prime importance in relation to Chaucer, has been persistently confused with a knight of the same name. Partly as a consequence of this error there has been a failure to realize that the justices divide into two distinct classes: (*a*) knights of the greater or lesser nobility who were eminent lawyers or eminent landowners, and (*b*) esquires who may have been lawyers, or landowners, or both, but were not eminent in either capacity, and were appointed as justices essentially because they represented great nobles of the realm. The nobles invariably possessed vast estates, and the esquires represented them *qua* landowners.

The 'lord' of the Kentish commissions in the late fourteenth century was generally the constable of Dover Castle and warden of the Cinque Ports. In January 1383 Richard had given that position for life to his beloved tutor Sir Simon Burley, as one reward for his help in arranging Richard's marriage to Anne of Bohemia. The young king and queen went down to Dover Castle for the ceremony of handing over the keys to the new constable, and stayed there for ten days.¹ In the months which followed Burley was so constantly 'at the king's side' that several of his offices had to be performed by deputy.² From February 1385 or earlier till February 1386 or later Hugh Fastolf esquire acted as deputy constable at Dover;³ hence the appearance of his name on the list of Kentish justices in 1385.

¹ *DNB*.

² *PR*, 1381-5, p. 534.

³ Fastolf is named among the Kentish commissioners of the peace on 29 Feb. 1385 (*PR*, 1381-5, p. 503) and is said to be supplying the place of Burley on 26 Feb. 1386 (*PR*, 1385-9, p. 173). On 30 May 1386 Burley's deputy was Roger Wigmore, an official of the Cinque Ports (*id.*, p. 178).

Fastolf came of the Norfolk family which produced the celebrated Sir John of the *Paston Letters*. A 'fishmonger' himself,¹ he belonged to the group of wealthy merchants (Sir Nicholas Brember, Sir John Philpot and others) who supported Richard against his uncles. He had been co-admiral with Philpot of the northern fleet² and was one of the sheriffs of London in 1387—the year in which Chaucer was being pursued for debt and the sheriffs either could not or would not find him. Fastolf must have known the poet personally, having been a customs collector in London in 1382.³ A few months after his report on Chaucer's disappearance he had to guarantee under the penalty of £1000 that he would 'do or procure no hurt or harm to Ralph Ramesey and Henry Scogan, their men or servants'.⁴ This Henry Scogan is to be identified as the friend to whom Chaucer addressed his *Envoy to Scogan*, and also as the person of the same name who was in Sir Simon Burley's service at Dover Castle where Fastolf was acting as deputy constable.⁵ A quarrel between Fastolf and Scogan, however, is no reason for suspecting that Fastolf and Chaucer were not on friendly terms. But the point about Burley's deputy which here concerns us is that he was an esquire who assumed a place on the commission of the peace by virtue of representing the 'lord' of the county.

The 'learned in the law' (1361) are further described (1388) as 'serjeants of the law' (men who had the medieval equivalent of a high legal degree), as 'justices of the one bench or of the other' (the king's bench and the bench of common pleas) and as 'justices of the assises' (those who held commissions in several counties simultaneously and journeyed from one to another attending their sessions). Five members of Chaucer's commissions⁶ were serjeants-at-law by 1385: Sir Robert Tresilian, Sir Robert Beaknap, Sir David Hanmer, Sir Walter Clopton, and Sir William Rikhill. A sixth, Sir William Brenchesley, was designated 'king's clerk' in that year and became a serjeant-at-law before May 1389. Tresilian and Beaknap were the chief justices, respectively, of the king's bench and of the common pleas; Hanmer and Clopton were members of the king's bench; Rikhill and Brenchesley were later raised to the common bench. The judges of both benches were chosen from the serjeants-at-law, and the serjeants-at-law from the most learned and brilliant pleaders of their day. The king in person conferred upon them the degree of serjeant, 'no

¹ *CR*, 1381–5, p. 11.

³ *Id.*, pp. 191–2, 204–5.

² *Id.*, p. 152.

⁴ *CR*, 1385–9, p. 443.

⁵ In *Chaucer's Official Life* (p. 54) Hulbert says of Henry Scogan: 'In 9 and 10 Richard II he was a valetus of Sir Simon Burley's. Many entries in the Issue Roll of those years indicate that he was employed to carry money from the exchequer to de Burley, and to arrange for the fortification of Dover.'

⁶ For data *re* the lawyers, see *DNB*, *PR* and *CR*.

less celebrated and solemn', says Fortescue, 'than that of Doctor'. Each lawyer thus honoured held 'a sumptuous feast, like that of a Coronation'. It lasted several days, and cost, in modern reckoning, many thousands of pounds. So elevated was the serjeant's status that even in the presence of the king they were not required to remove from their heads the white silk coif which was part of their insignia.¹ Of such were the 'learned in the law'.

Sir William Brenchesley is the only one of the men just mentioned to whom that term may not have applied in 1385 and 1386. He was on the Kentish peace commissions of both those years, but was then only a 'king's clerk', not a serjeant-at-law. Conceivably, since he had an estate in Kent, he ranked as one of 'the most worthy in the county'.

'The most worthy' refers to those who were the owners or stewards of large estates. Three of the nine owners among Chaucer's associates are recorded in the *Dictionary of National Biography*;² about the others some information can be gathered from such sources as histories of Kent, *Archaeologia Cantiana*, and the *Close and Patent Rolls*. John Cobham, third baron Cobham of Cowling, came into his inheritance in 1355, was made a knight banneret in 1370, and on Richard II's accession in 1377, at the age of ten, was appointed as one of his councillors. He built a castle at Cowling in the hundred of Hoo, and a college on his estate at Cobham. This is a little inland from Gravesend, and through or near it ran the pilgrims' road from London to Canterbury. Sir John Devereux, another knight banneret and a knight of the garter, was the lord of Penshurst who began the transformation of the manor house there into the castle later famed for its connexion with Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*.³ He had been a close friend of Richard's father, the Black Prince, and in 1385 is mentioned as a steward in Richard's household. From that year till 1393 he was regularly summoned to parliament. In 1387 he succeeded his friend Sir Simon Burley as constable of Dover Castle and warden of the Cinque Ports. Two other friends of his, Sir Lewis Clifford and Sir Richard Stury,⁴ were also friends of Chaucer's. Sir Thomas Colepepir, 'of Bayhall in

¹ Professor Manly gives an interesting account of the serjeants and their feasts in *New Light*, pp. 130 ff.

² Cobham, Devereux and Savage. Also Burley, the 'lord' of the commission.

³ On one side of the great hall at Penshurst Place, decorating a roof-support, is a wooden figure which appears quite clearly to represent Chaucer. To left and right of it are figures of two women. All three are almost life-size and well preserved. According to the guide they are pre-Tudor work, and the women on either side of Chaucer represent Jezebel and the Witch of Endor! Neither the present owner of Penshurst nor the Kent Archaeological Society has any record concerning their origin.

⁴ Hasted, *History of Kent*, Pt. 1, 'The Hundred of Blackheath', ed. Henry H. Drake, London (1886), p. 148.

Pembury' and 'of Farleigh', belonged to 'a family so illustrious that at one time (according to Camden) it could boast of having no less than twelve members bearing the honour of knighthood'.¹ Sir Thomas Fogg, 'of Fogg's Court, Monegham' and 'of Repton, Ashford', was given a monument in Canterbury Cathedral.² Sir James Peckham was 'of Peckham in Hadlow, and Yaldham in Wrotham'.³ Sir Thomas Brockhill's father was 'of Saltwood . . . also of Calehill in Little Chart and in Charing'; Sir Thomas inherited at least the Saltwood estate.⁴ Sir John Fremingham is said to have been 'of Otham' and 'of Freningham or Farningham'.⁵ Sir John Clinton, 'lord of Folkestan', was the cousin and heir of the earl of Huntingdon,⁶ and 'probably of Court Lodge, Hunton'.⁷ Sir Arnold Savage, of Bobbing Court, Sittingbourne, on the pilgrims' road, came of a family whose heads 'during six generations represented Kent in parliament'. He himself was twice chosen speaker of the house of commons. Either he or his son was the executor of John Gower the poet. Sir Arnold's sister Eleanor, his heiress, married the son of Chaucer's friend Sir Lewis Clifford. All of these men except Devereux and Clinton were of old Kentish families. All except Colepepir, who was granted exemption from state services,⁸ and Brockhill, who was appointed sheriff of the county (a position which betokens power based on land), were repeatedly summoned to parliament.⁹ Peckham, Fremingham and Savage also acted as sheriff, twice each,¹⁰ and Clinton had been a commissioner of array for Kent in 1379.¹¹ There is no mistaking the class to which every one of them belonged; they were the landed aristocracy of the county.

Obviously in the matter of rank Geoffrey Chaucer esquire was not a member of this group. The suggestion that he may have bought or been given an estate which raised him to their level in landowning, if it has ever been put forward seriously, is founded on nothing more substantial than failure to find any other explanation for his appointment as a justice of the peace. Hulbert left his conclusion slightly ambiguous by saying that Chaucer 'must have held a manor and lands of considerable value' in Kent. 'Manor' usually means an estate, but sometimes it means a dwelling-house,¹² and to judge by Hulbert's additional phrase he uses the word in the latter sense. If so, his statement raises no objection; there is

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, xxi, 218.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.* and Camden's *Britannia*, London (1695), p. 193.

⁴ *Arch. Cant.*, xxi, 216.

⁵ W. H. Ireland, *England's Topographer: A New and Complete History of County Kent*, London (1828-30), III, 111, and *Arch. Cant.*, xxi, 214.

⁶ *CR*, 1364-8, p. 161.

⁷ *Arch. Cant.*, xxi, 218; cf. Ireland, *op. cit.*, I, 151.

⁸ *CR*, 1381-5, p. 36.

⁹ *Arch. Cant.*, xxi, 198-243.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *PR*, 1377-81, p. 360.

¹² Stephen's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, ed. 18, II, 33.

good reason to suppose that Chaucer had a house and grounds befitting the dignity of his position as a justice of the peace and a member of parliament. It does not follow, however, that the poet's qualifications for the magistracy were the same as those of Fogg, Peckham, Fremingham and the other knights. Nor is such a conclusion necessary. An alternative explanation is provided by considering the small group of justices—themselves plain esquires—who acted as stewards or representatives of the foremost landed proprietors in the county. Of these Hugh Fastolf has already been mentioned; the others are William Topcliff esquire and Thomas Shardelowe esquire.

Topcliff had been appointed in 1364, on account of his 'faithfulness and industry', as steward to the archbishop of Canterbury.¹ Between 1366 and the late thirteen-eighties he was almost continuously on the Kentish commissions of the peace, and often on special commissions in connexion with the liberty of Christchurch. In January 1380 he and Sir David Hanmer, a serjeant-at-law, were charged 'to enquire touching false coinages . . . of the king's moneys and seals, to find the engines used and to arrest those engaged therein'. Topcliff would have had to do with conducting the investigation and Hanmer with pronouncing the verdict on his evidence. This commission may be worth mentioning because Chaucer almost certainly knew Topcliff, and no satisfactory literary source has been found for the extremely detailed knowledge of the ways of alchemists which the poet displays in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. He may have learned something about the subject from the archbishop's steward. A writ of April 1385 names Topcliff as a bailiff of Canterbury. His home at Maidstone was burned by Thomas atte Raven and his followers during the Peasants' Revolt, but in 1382 he received 'licence, at the supplication of William de Courtenay, archbishop of Canterbury . . . to crenellate and fortify a small "place" called "Shoford" in the parish of Maidstone, lately levelled by the insurgents'. He had no professional legal standing, but qualified as a commissioner of the peace for Kent, in the class of 'the most worthy', because he was steward to one of the county's greatest land-owners, the archbishop of Canterbury.

Thomas Shardelowe had been appointed in 1366 as 'king's attorney and coroner of the king's bench', with the task of maintaining the rights of crown property. In 1382 he was made 'steward of all the king's lands in Kent, including those of Edmund de Mortuo Mari, earl of March'. This appears to have been an extension of his previous office, occasioned

¹ *PR*, 1364-7, p. 58. For the following information about Topcliff and Shardelowe, see indexes of *PR* unless otherwise stated.

perhaps by the addition of Mortimer's Kentish estates to Richard's. From his appointment in 1366 till his death in 1385 his name appears in the great majority of Kentish commissions of the peace. He lived at Horseman's Place in Dartford,¹ and there in June 1381 the peasants 'burned all the evidence of the Crown and of the king's escheatry'. He may have been related to the John Shardelowe who was the 'manor steward' at Eltham in 1370.² Certainly he was not the Sir Thomas Shardelowe, apparently of the same calling but not of the same county, with whom he has been confused in the *Dictionary of National Biography* and in Chaucer studies.³

Shardelowe's appointments raise a question as to whether he qualified for the magistracy on the basis of land or of law. As 'king's attorney and coroner'⁴ he must have had knowledge of the laws pertaining to real estate. But even though he was of the king's bench, his legal standing is not to be compared with that of the serjeants. One of these law-qualified justices had to be included in every important commission of enquiry which was issued to land-qualified justices (such as Topcliff's 'touching false coinages' and Chaucer's touching an abduction) before the case could be finally settled. And the membership of the special commissions on which Shardelowe served shows that he did not rank as a law-qualified justice. In 1374, for instance, when he investigated a case with Cobham, Savage, and John Colepepir, a second commission was required which added the name of 'John de Cavendish, chief justice'.⁵ Again in July 1384 Shardelowe and Gilbert Purvis were commissioned to enquire into felonies in Kent; they prepared their indictment, and in September chief justice Bealknap and other law-qualified justices were added to the commission for purposes of *oyer et terminer*.⁶ The only exceptions to this arrangement are trivial cases: one concerning poaching, in which Shardelowe was commissioned with the knight who was the keeper of the forest; and another concerning some damage done to property, in which he and Topcliff were supported by the weighty authority of baron Cobham.⁷ It is clear, then, that Thomas Shardelowe esquire was not a Kentish justice primarily because he was a lawyer, or a property owner himself, but because he was the steward of one of the county's greatest landowners, the King.

¹ Hasted, *History of Kent*, II, 311.

² *Id.*, Pt. I, ed. Drake, p. 177, n. 1.

³ E.g. in Professor Kuhl's *Chaucer's Burgesses*, Trans. Wisconsin Acad. of Sciences, xviii, 673 and n. 6. Sir Thomas was mainly associated with Cambridgeshire (*CR* and *PR*).

⁴ The office is defined in Halsbury's *Laws of England* (1909), VIII, 229.

⁵ *PR*, 1370-4, pp. 488, 494.

⁶ *PR*, 1381-5, pp. 501, 504

⁷ *PR*, 1370-4, p. 472, and *PR*, 1377-81, p. 307. The keeper of the forest was Sir John de Foxle.

Apparently the term 'learned in the law' applied only to lawyers of at least the status of serjeants.

This survey of magisterial qualifications considerably clarifies the practice in Chaucer's time. Of the three classes of men who alone were eligible for appointment, the 'one lord' was the chief executive of the county, the 'learned in the law' were distinguished professional lawyers with the rank of knight, the 'most worthy' were either extensive land-owners of the greater or lesser nobility, or esquires who were the stewards or representatives of some outstanding magnate. Chaucer was not a 'lord'; he was not a professional lawyer; he was not an extensive land-owner of the greater or lesser nobility. The one course open to us is to conclude that he was a steward or representative of some outstanding magnate.

He did not succeed Fastolf as deputy to Burley, or Topcliff as chief steward to the archbishop of Canterbury, or Shardelowe as chief steward to the king. But he did succeed Shardelowe as justice, evidently because Brudenell, the new chief steward of the crown lands in Kent, was non-resident and a justice elsewhere. This indicates fairly clearly that Chaucer's employer was the king. It also suggests that among those who represented Richard as Kentish landlord Chaucer ranked next in importance to the chief steward. And this in turn would tend to connect him with Eltham, Richard's residential estate in Kent.

There is, in short, strong evidence for assuming that in 1385 Chaucer was employed as a steward or in some similar capacity by one of the greatest nobles in Kent, most probably the king, and very possibly on the royal manor of Eltham. If nothing in the known circumstances of the poet's life conflicted with that conclusion, it would remain a high probability. Actually, however, the known circumstances of his life confirm it to the hilt.

III. CLERK OF THE WORKS

Ex nihilo nihil fit. One employment grows out of another, and no one is likely to be given an important position who has not in some way been fitted for it by experience. We have accepted without much question the familiar sequence of Chaucer's occupations: prince's page, king's esquire and ambassador, customs official, (honours in Kent), chief clerk of the king's works, forester of the royal forest of North Petherton, and finally retired pensioner in a house at Westminster which was 'somehow connected with the lands of Richard and Anne'.¹ Yet it would surely be to

¹ Manly, *RES*, x (1934), 259, n. 1.

the point to enquire what in the poet's previous experience had prepared him for the chief clerkship of the works. The position was a highly responsible one, which involved overseeing whatever building was being done on the king's many residential estates, and keeping in good repair their dwelling-houses, outhouses, garden walls, park fences, fish-ponds and so on. A reconsideration of Chaucer's early career might well throw some light on his probable employment, and employer, during the mysterious interval between his active controllership of the customs and his chief clerkship of the works.

He had received his early education as a page in the household of Prince Lionel and Princess Elizabeth. Thereafter he passed on to the household of Edward III and Queen Philippa, where he remained till he was about thirty-four, first as 'valettus' and from 1372 onwards as king's esquire. In those capacities he would have accompanied the king and queen as they moved with their family and attendants from one to another of their manors, 'consuming its revenue in kind'. During a dozen or more years of such visits (the regular round of medieval monarchs and their households) Chaucer would have learned much of what there was to know about the running of the various royal estates. He may also have learned something of the art of building, since Edward was constantly engaged in building enterprises. The Round Tower at Windsor was one of his triumphs; another was the beautiful castle of Queenborough on the island of Sheppey, begun under the direction of William of Wykeham in 1361 as a gift for Queen Philippa.¹ Not improbably the king went down to Sheppey from time to time on visits of inspection, and on such occasions Chaucer may have had opportunities of watching work on the castle in progress. It was there on 20 June 1367 that the king granted him a pension of 20 marks a year for life, in consideration of services rendered to himself and the queen in the past and to be rendered in the future.

In June 1374 Edward appointed Chaucer as controller of the customs and subsidy on wool, skins, and leather in the port of London. The tax on these goods was described shortly afterwards in parliament as the source 'wherfrom arises the greatest profit that the king takes in his realm'.² The port of London, moreover, was the most important in the country; for taxation purposes it included all the quays from the Tower to Tilbury on the north bank of the Thames and to Gravesend on the south.³ Two

¹ Wykeham was assisted by the great mason of the period, Henry Yeveley, who was still chief mason while Chaucer was chief clerk of the works (July 1389–June 1391).

²D. Hughes, *Illustrations of Chaucer's England*, p. 242.

³See the editor of the *Life-Records* on Chaucer's appointment to the wool customs in June 1374; cf. *CR*, 1381–5, pp. 191–2, 204–5.

men collected the tax along that reach and the controller accounted to the crown for all the takings. Chaucer had now been promoted to a position of greater responsibility than any he had held before, and one which made it necessary for him to have lodgings near his office on the Wool Quay. But contrary to a fairly widely held view, he did not thereby cease to be a royal esquire or to rank as a member of the royal household. On the very day Richard II succeeded to the throne (22 June 1377) he confirmed Chaucer's appointment as controller (as well as his pension) and in the same year, as some wardrobe accounts reveal, the poet was still receiving an allowance 'for winter and summer robes as the King's Esquire'. Two years later he is mentioned again in connexion with 'wages in the King's Household'.¹ In September 1385, still as one of the royal household, he was given mourning for the Princess of Wales. Dr Rickert is undoubtedly right in challenging the supposition that during the years of his active controllership Chaucer was either 'out of sight or out of mind' at court.

In May 1374, a month before his customs appointment was recorded, he had leased from the corporation the small dwelling-house above Aldgate and the cellar beneath it, which he was to have rent-free for life. 'The King,' says Professor Kuhl, 'who was not then in a financial position to give his esquire a house, may have asked the Mayor for a suitable place where the new controller could take up quarters.'² That this is the true explanation of the matter seems confirmed by the granting at the same time of another of the city gates to another royal esquire.³ It may be noted, too, since the point has a bearing on the date at which Chaucer became a Kentish justice, that his leasing of Aldgate a month before he received the patent of the controllership is evidence of what might in any case be presumed, that appointments were sometimes made before they were officially confirmed.

The question at issue is how and by whom Chaucer was employed between February 1385, when he was allowed a permanent deputy in the wool customs, and July 1389, when he was made chief clerk of the works. Had the customs official while in Kent been engaged in activities which fitted him to oversee all constructions, alterations, and repairs on the king's estates? The terms of the appointment are as follows:

Clerk of our Works at our Palace of Westminster, our Tower of London, our Castle of Berkhamstead, our Manors of Kennington, Eltham, Clarendon, Shene, Byfleet, Chiltern Langley, and Feckenham, our Lodges at Hathebergh in our New Forest, and in our other parks, and our Mews for falcons at Charing Cross; likewise of our gardens, fish-ponds, mills and park enclosures pertaining to the said Palace, Tower, Castles,

¹ *Life-Records*, p. xxvii.

² E. P. Kuhl, 'Chaucer and Aldgate', *PMLA*, xxxix, 109-10.

³ *Id.*

Manors, Lodges, and Mews, with power (by self or deputy) to choose and take masons, carpenters and all and sundry other workmen and labourers who are needful for our works, wheresoever they can be found, within or without all liberties (Church fee alone excepted); and to set the same to labour at the said works, at our wages.¹

The clerk also had to provide the building materials required, arrange for their carriage, pay the workmen's wages, and keep detailed accounts. It is just possible, though hardly probable, that Chaucer's experience as an esquire of Edward III had sufficiently prepared him for a position so exacting and responsible. A hypothesis which has more to recommend it is that there had been an intermediate stage; that his experience under Edward qualified him to oversee the buildings on one or more of the royal manors, and that this post further qualified him to oversee the buildings on many of them. This would supply what otherwise would appear to be a missing link in the chain of his adult employments: esquire in the household of Edward III and therefore familiar with the royal manors of Eltham, Sheen, Byfleet, etc.; controller in London of the collection of crown revenue from the tax on wool and therefore supplied with lodgings near the Wool Quay; clerk of the works for Richard II at Eltham and Sheen, with an adjacent dwelling in Kent, and therefore J.P. (and M.P.) for that county; chief clerk of the works for Richard; forester of the royal forest of North Petherton. In all his recorded employments the poet was in one way or another looking after the king's interests; hence there is a strong likelihood that in the unrecorded one he was doing the same.

The evidence, then, from the series of Chaucer's known occupations suggests that in the years immediately preceding his chief clerkship of the king's works he may have been prepared for the post by holding a similar one of a subordinate kind. This is in line with the conclusion to which the qualifications of justices has already pointed so clearly: that he became a member of the Kentish magistracy in October 1385 because he was then an overseer for the king in Kent, most probably at Eltham. So much for the presumptive evidence. The positive evidence tells the same tale.

The indications of Chaucer's whereabouts in Kent associate him steadily with Greenwich, the later ones decisively. In his *Envoy to Scogan*, assigned to 1391 or 1393, Chaucer wrote (line 45):

In thende of which streme I am dul as deed.

Opposite this line in the MSS. appears the gloss 'Greenwich', which was long accepted as evidence that Greenwich was at that time the author's place of residence. Professor Manly disputed this interpretation, declaring

¹ Quoted from Coulton, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

that 'there is no other evidence that in 1393 Chaucer was living at Greenwich'.¹ But Manly's assertion is refuted by the discovery of Chaucer's name among the members of a board of Greenwich freeholders in 1396.² In 1390 the poet was put on a commission with Sir Richard Stury to see to the repair of the 'coast' from Greenwich to Woolwich and in those towns. Such commissions were regularly given to men who had a base of operations in the district, and Stury had free warren (a privilege which would hardly have been complete without a hunting lodge) in lands just south of that part of the Thames.³ It should be remembered too that Chaucer's jurisdiction as London customs controller extended down the river to Tilbury and Gravesend, a reach which included Greenwich. A passage in Hasted which has apparently been overlooked in this connexion states that Thomas Chaucer had an interest in lands at Deptford, otherwise known as West Greenwich.⁴ The poet was robbed in 1390 at Hatcham near Greenwich. The Host's allusion in one of the links of the *Canterbury Tales* (the Reeve's Prologue) to 'Grenewich, ther many a shrewe is inne' suggests that Chaucer was living there when he wrote the line. None of the links is dated, but since Greenwich was near the beginning of the pilgrims' journey a prologue which mentions it is fairly likely to have been written early, and there is reason to surmise that the *Canterbury Tales* was in process of composition by 1385.⁵ On fewer grounds than these Professor Skeat concluded: 'It is highly probable that Chaucer's residence at Greenwich extended from 1385 to the end of 1399, when he took a new house at Westminster.'⁶

The palaces of Eltham in Kent and Sheen in Surrey were respectively about seven and eight miles from London. Midway between them was the royal manor of West Greenwich, and on that part of it called Rotherhithe was a comparatively unpretentious dwelling-house⁷ which Edward III used occasionally. Owing to the nearness of these estates one man could conveniently take charge of the buildings and repairs on all three. About 1370 Robert Sibthorp was 'clerk of the great works at Eltham, Shene and Retherhythe'.⁸ Soon afterwards he became chief clerk of the king's works,

¹ *New Light*, pp. 40, 41.

² S. Moore, 'The New Chaucer Items', *MLR*, xxii, 435, and Kuhl, *MLN*, xl, 511.

³ Hasted, *op. cit.*, Pt. I, ed. Drake, p. 215.

⁴ *Id.*, p. 4. Thomas Chaucer appears in several places and positions in which Geoffrey had been before him. Besides this connexion with West Greenwich, he became constable of Wallingford Castle, forester at North Petherton, and lessee of the poet's house at Westminster.

⁵ See my paper on 'Chaucer's Sovereign Lady', *MLR*, xxxiii (April 1938), 188.

⁶ Oxford *Chaucer*, Students' ed., p. xiii.

⁷ Hasted, *op. cit.*, Pt. I, ed. Drake, p. 54, note: 'Edward III had a residence in Rotherhithe within the manor of West Greenwich, styled a manor'. Cf. *Encyc. Brit.*, s.v. Greenwich.

⁸ Hasted, *op. cit.*, Pt. I, ed. Drake, p. 184, n. 1.

and as such had an assistant at Eltham, Sheen, Rotherhithe, and Banstead¹ (near Sheen in Surrey). Arnald Brocas, who became chief clerk of the works in May 1381² and apparently remained in office until he was superseded (not improbably at Gloucester's dictation) in January 1388 by Roger Elmham,³ had been clerk of the works at Eltham, Havering and Hadleigh (in Essex). Evidently the subordinate clerkship centering in Eltham varied in the estates it included, but was apt to lead on to the chief clerkship. Although the *Rolls* of this period are erratic on the subject of the king's works, the records just cited are enough to show that neither the post nor the promotion which seem *a priori* likely to have been Chaucer's is a baseless invention. Brocas had advanced to the chief clerkship from a subordinate clerkship at Eltham, etc., Sibthorp from a subordinate clerkship at Eltham, Sheen and Rotherhithe. The poet may well have advanced to *his* chief clerkship from a subordinate one which included Eltham and Sheen. That would account very simply and naturally for a hitherto baffling fact—that the places in which John Churchman believed it would be profitable to search for Chaucer in the year before he became chief clerk of the works were the counties of Kent and Surrey.

Another relevant consideration is that Richard II, whose tastes ran to residences which would accommodate hundreds of attendants, apparently never used the dwelling-house on his Greenwich estate.⁴ Supposing therefore that Chaucer did in fact hold the post of clerk of the great works at least at Eltham and Sheen, it is worth asking whether the king might not have allowed him for his own use the unoccupied house on the royal manor between them. Richard gave even an assistant of one of his mother's lesser stewards 'a house and an acre of land' on his manor of Berkhamstead, ultimately rent-free.⁵ That is some indication of the kind of establishment he might have provided for a favoured member of

¹ *PR*, 1370-4, p. 270; 12 April 1373.

² *PR*, 1381-5, p. 6. For Brocas's previous position, see *id.*, p. 18.

³ *PR*, 1385-9, p. 379. If it was customary for the clerk of the works at Eltham to succeed to the chief clerkship, the usual succession would probably have been broken while Gloucester was in power (Nov. 1386-May 1389). One of his main objects was to remove Richard's appointees from office.

⁴ Edward visited Rotherhithe in the forty-third year of his reign (*PR*, 1388-92, p. 17), but the *Rolls* give no indication of Richard's ever having done so. Holinshed says (II, 868): 'Richard II kept greater state than any English king before or after him. 10,000 persons had meat and drink allowed them daily at his court; he had 300 kitchen servants; his yeomen and grooms were clad in silk and all were sumptuously apparelled'. There are contemporary references to his 'extravagant number of domestics' and 'outrageous multitude of maintainors' (Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 240).

⁵ *PR*, 1381-5, p. 384; March 1384. Cf. Joan's will (1385) in which she names John de Worth as 'senescallum terrarum mearum' and Henry Harpele, whose assistant the man in question was, as one of her 'delectos armigeros' (Nichols, *Royal Wills*, p. 80).

his own household who looked after the palaces in which he and Anne spent most of their time. But if he thought the disused manor house at West Greenwich too good for the future justice of the peace (by his appointment) and knight of the shire (apparently through his influence), no doubt he had other houses in the vicinity which he could spare.

We may be sure that Chaucer was established in Kent, presumably at Greenwich, by 12 October 1385, the date of the patent of his justiceship. But apparently his removal thither had taken place some months earlier. In February 1385 he submitted his brief and almost perfunctory petition to be allowed a permanent deputy in the wool customs. It is written in an ordinary chancery clerk's hand:

Plese a nostre Sieur le Roy granter a Geffroy Chaucer, qil puisse auoir suffisant deputee en loffice de Comptrolour a le Wolke de Londres, tiel pur qi le dit Geffray voet respounder, durant le terme qe le dit Geffray soit Comptrolour de la Custume nostre dit Sieur en le Port suisdicte.¹

This document was duly signed by the chamberlain,² young Robert de Vere, ninth earl of Oxford, Richard's kinsman and closest friend, and evidently it was de Vere who wrote above it 'Le Roy lad grante'. The warrant which followed concludes: 'Teste Rege, apud Westmonasterium, xvij die Februarij. Per ipsum Regem.' This, as Skeat says, was 'a great privilege'.³ Chaucerians have been inclined to think that it was granted at the request of some extremely influential person, such as Queen Anne, Robert de Vere, or Richard's mother, the Princess of Wales. They may well be right, but that does not preclude the possibility that the arrangement happened to suit Richard as well as Chaucer.

War against the French and Scots was already in view at the beginning of 1385.⁴ Richard was planning in February⁵ the military expedition to Scotland on which he set out in July. He required for it every penny he could get from his chief source of revenue, the customs and subsidy on wool, skins, and leather. It is hardly to be supposed that his experienced controller of the tax in London would have chosen this unpropitious moment to ask for a permanent holiday unless he had in prospect some other way of making himself useful to the king. Part of Richard's task

¹ *Life-Records*, p. 251. The rolls of Chaucer's customs accounts, which are (or were) to be seen at the PRO, are also in a clerkly hand, and it has been assumed that they are copies of the rolls he was required to keep with his own hand. But is it not possible that for clerkly purposes he wrote in a clerkly style?

² See Hulbert, 'Chaucer and the Earl of Oxford', *MP*, x, 433-6.

³ *Oxford Chaucer*, Students' ed., p. xiii.

⁴ Of the parliament which met in November 1384 Wallon writes in *Richard II* (Paris, 1864, I, 234): 'Le langage du chancelier, le vote du subside, tout dans ce parlement annonçait la guerre: et les Écossais par l'occupation de Berwick avaient montré si l'on avait eu tort de la prévoir'.

⁵ *PR*, 1381-5, p. 422.

was to arrange for the care of his estates and of his family in his absence. He needed a group of courtly, competent, and if possible entertaining men whom he could leave behind to look after his wife and his widowed mother. Several weeks before his departure he officially assigned three of Chaucer's friends, Sir Lewis Clifford, Sir Richard Stury, and Sir Philip le Vache, with a number of other knights and esquires, to see to 'the comfort and security of his mother wherever she shall abide within the realm, rendering other services befitting the estate of so great a lady'.¹ No record has been discovered of any arrangements on behalf of his wife, but undoubtedly they were made, and evidently they included Chaucer.

On 6 April 1385 Richard entrusted to the poet £10, equal perhaps to about £300 in modern values, which had nothing to do with his stipend from the customs or with his pensions. This was not yet a grant, for Chaucer was to be prepared, if the king so decreed, to return it. The entry on the Issue Roll is worded as follows: 'Galfrido Chaucer armigero. In denariis sibi liberatis per manus prop(r)ias de prestito ad restituendum ad voluntam Regis. . . X li.' On the same day, at Eltham, Richard transacted other business which suggests that he was putting his affairs in order with a view to the imminent war. He issued writs granting £10 a year for life to seven of his retainers—'a servant of the king's household', 'a buyer for the household' and so on.² Together with the fact that the writs concerning these sums of £10 are dated from Eltham, we observe that Chaucer's £10 is said to have been delivered into his own hands. Not improbably therefore the poet was at Eltham on 6 April. Other records of 1385 indicate that he was out of London in April, in June, and again in October. The above record shows that within two months of leaving the Customs House he was serving the king in some more personal way, possibly at Eltham. And it has already been shown, on independent grounds, that he was evidently made a justice of the peace in the autumn of the same year because he was in the employment of the king, most likely at Eltham.

All things considered, it appears that Richard released Chaucer from the customs because he wished to have him established near Eltham and Sheen when the campaign began, and hence in a position not only to see to the upkeep of the buildings, gardens and parks on those estates, but to help to entertain Queen Anne, and to escort her if she wished to move from one palace to the other, or to visit Princess Joan at Wallingford.³

¹ *CR*, 1381-5, p. 553.

² *PR*, 1385-9, pp. 546, 548, 579 and index.

³ Chaucer had paid Anne pretty compliments in *Troilus and Criseyde* (c. 1382-5), one at the beginning of the poem (bk. I, 171-3) and one at the end (v, 1778), in which last, I take it, 'Penelopeës trouthe' refers to Anne, and 'good Alceste' to Joan. The frontispiece in one

A good house and grounds rent-free at Greenwich, along with pensions and an income from the customs, would provide for the poet comfortably; any extra expenses he might incur, for instance through attendance on the queen if she wished to travel, could be met out of the £10 entrusted to him. If these inferences are substantially correct, then Chaucer was probably either living at Greenwich when he received the payment in April, or else on the point of moving there. In other words, it is likely that he was established in Kent five months or more before his appointment as a justice was made official (12 October 1385).

His own writings confirm this reading of the facts. According to a study of the *Legend of Good Women* which appeared in the *Modern Language Review* in April 1938, Chaucer was at Wallingford Castle with the king and queen in the early summer of 1385 (on the occasion of Richard's farewell visit to his mother before going off campaigning),¹ and again in July and August, when he worked at the Prologue to the *Legend*, and enjoyed the company of Clifford, Stury and the others whom Richard had sent to see to Princess Joan's comfort and security 'for the duration'. Chaucer's presence at Wallingford in the later part of the summer would evidently mean, as might be expected, that after Richard's departure early in July Queen Anne had paid a second visit to her mother-in-law, with the poet in attendance. An affectionate relationship existed between the two women, and Joan was already too ill² to travel to Eltham or Sheen to visit Anne.

In the Prologue to the *Legend* Princess Joan (figuring as Alceste) is represented as commanding Chaucer to write a poem about good women. Her final instructions to him are:

And whan this book ys maad, yive it the queene,
On my byhalf, at *Eltham* or at *Sheene*. (F 496-7.)

In commenting on these lines editors have noted merely that Eltham and Sheen were the favourite residences of Richard and Anne. But may not

MS. of the *Troilus* shows Anne listening to Chaucer reading. It should also be noted that Chaucer was much employed in the service of royal ladies. His first patroness, Princess Elizabeth, died in 1362, Queen Philippa in August 1369, Blanche duchess of Lancaster in the following month, Princess Joan in 1385, and Queen Anne in 1394. In relation to this series of occasions for mourning, the Hoccleve portrait of Chaucer, white-bearded, wearing black, and meditatively fingering a rosary, has a certain appropriateness.

¹ In 'Chaucer's Sovereign Lady', the study referred to above, I tentatively associated with this occasion the *Balade* beginning 'Hyd, Absalon, thy gilte tresses clere', later incorporated in the *Legend* Prologue (F 249 ff.). I suggested that 'Absalon' meant the King, who was a tall and strikingly handsome youth with masses of golden hair. Since then it has come to my notice that at the time of Richard's coronation (at which Chaucer was probably present) the spectators had likened him to Absalom. This fact is reported in the contemporary chronicle of Adam Usk (quoted by Armitage-Smith in *John of Gaunt*, p. 190). It strongly confirms the proposed identification.

DNB.

the couplet imply that Chaucer himself was sometimes at Eltham (as we have reason to think he was on 6 April of this year) and sometimes at Sheen, and hence would have opportunities to make his presentation at either place? The Prologue to the *Legend* is notably rich in autobiographical elements. Chaucer's mention therein of his 'hous' and 'a litel herber [arbour] that I have' is generally regarded as an expression of exuberance when, after years of being tied to the city, he had just moved into the country and was bursting with pride in his new residence. On that analogy it may be that his mention of Eltham and Sheen is a similarly delighted reference to his new occupation on those estates. In view of all the evidence we have been considering, this appears to be the truth of the matter.

On 7 August, the day after the army crossed the Border into Scotland, Princess Joan died at Wallingford. Her body was wrapped in swathings of waxed cloth and taken to Stamford in Lincolnshire, on the main road to the north, to be buried beside her first husband, Sir Thomas Holland. On the return march Richard reached Stamford about 3 September.¹ He postponed Joan's funeral, however, as he was later to postpone Anne's, in order that it might be performed with due pomp and ceremony.² Before the middle of the month he was back at Sheen. On 10 September he ordered mourning for the members of his household, Chaucer included. At about the same time he converted into a grant the £10 which he had paid him on account in April. On 21 September he appointed Edmund Brudenell as his attorney and chief steward in Kent, to replace the recently deceased Thomas Shardelowe. But since Brudenell did not live in Kent and was a justice in another county, he was not eligible for the Kentish magistracy. That part of Shardelowe's dual function the king assigned to Chaucer.

On 20 June the London sheriffs had been ordered to distrain the poet and the two collectors who worked under him in the petty customs for a meeting on 'the Octave of St Michael' (6 October). They returned the writ on the same day with a note of what they had done. One of the collectors had been distrained; the other had nothing in their bailiwick. Chaucer was not mentioned and did not appear at the meeting. The sheriffs were then ordered to distrain him for 7 December and reported that distraint had been taken. This probably means that in June the poet was not in London and that in October he still had possessions there.

¹ *PR*, 1385-9, p. 10.

² Joan's funeral did not take place until 27 January 1386 (Colonel Babinet, 'Jeanne de Kent', *Bulletin de la Société des Antiquaires de l'Ouest*, 1894, p. 24).

Having distrainable possessions in London in October, however, is entirely compatible with being established as a resident in Kent from April onwards. Chaucer had not by any means cut off all connexion with the customs; he was still controller and entirely responsible for his deputy. Naturally therefore he would have paid a visit to his office now and again, and used the rooms in Aldgate on such occasions. His lease of them held good till the following October. But in October 1385 it seems not unlikely that he took Shardelowe's place at the autumn quarter sessions which began on the 6th of the month; that is, six days before his appointment as a justice was patented, and on the very day on which, without suffering the due penalty, he disobeyed the sheriffs' summons to attend a customs meeting in London.

Two records of later date remain to be noted. In May 1387 Chaucer was appointed, in co-operation with Sir William Rikhill, serjeant-at-law, to investigate a case of abduction at Chislehurst. This is the only recorded special commission he received as a justice, and it was for an enquiry on the royal manor of Eltham.¹ The fact is surely significant in relation to other clear signs that he was employed on that estate. Secondly, for some time in the late 'eighties Richard was practically powerless, but the moment he was again in a position to reward his servants he promoted Chaucer to the chief clerkship of the works. While the poet held that post the king gave him a special commission to pay the gardeners at Eltham and Sheen.

We have been asking whether the known circumstances of Chaucer's life would fit in with the high antecedent probability that he qualified as a Kentish justice (and also as chief clerk of the works) because in and after 1385 he lived in Kent and was an overseer on one or more of the king's estates, probably including Eltham. The answer is that the positive evidence reinforces the presumptive evidence in a way which seems to leave not the slightest doubt of its soundness.

In the thirteen-seventies there was a clerk of the works at Eltham, Sheen and Rotherhithe who became chief clerk, and in the thirteen-eighties there was a clerk of the works at Eltham, Havering, and Hadleigh who also became chief clerk. We have no reason to suppose that from the spring of 1385 onwards there was not a clerkship of the works at Eltham and Sheen, with or without other royal estates added, and that

¹ It may also be worth noting that the names of the two mainpernors for Chaucer ('Willelmus Reeve' and 'Willelmus Holt') and of the two for Betenham when they were elected as knights of the shire have been thought fictitious (*Life-Records*). If so, the designations of Chaucer's sureties would suggest, respectively, a steward and a forester on some Kentish manor, perhaps Eltham.

Chaucer may not have held it before he in turn became chief clerk in the summer of 1389. Eltham is in Kent, Sheen in Surrey, and those were the counties in which the London sheriffs were ordered to look for Chaucer in 1388. The holder of the post would have been provided, as responsible stewards always were in medieval times, with a house conveniently situated in relation to his work, and there is strong evidence for believing that the poet's residence in Greenwich, half-way between Eltham and Sheen, dated from 1385. His permission in February of that year to have a deputy in the wool customs came at a time when his royal master, who granted him the privilege, was beginning to prepare for war, and was therefore more likely to free his London controller for some form of national service than for a permanent vacation. Chaucer's accomplished courtiership, his business ability, and his long familiarity with the king's manors would have made him an obviously suitable person to serve as one of Queen Anne's attendants during the war, and to maintain her two favourite residences, Eltham and Sheen, in good repair. The fact that in April Richard paid him £10 on account indicates clearly that the poet was then in the king's service. The payment seems to have been made to him in person at Eltham. About three months later, in the Prologue to the *Legend*, Chaucer spoke of himself as having access to Queen Anne 'at Eltham or at Sheene'. In the same context he referred to his house and garden (not impossibly the disused royal residence at Rotherhithe on the Greenwich estate) in a manner which has convinced Chaucerians that they were recent acquisitions. Once before and once during the Scottish campaign he appears to have accompanied the queen on visits to her invalid mother-in-law at Wallingford Castle. In the autumn, when the campaign was over, he received from the king mourning for Princess Joan, an outright grant of the £10 entrusted to him in April, and a justiceship of the peace for Kent, an office traditionally assigned to the chief resident representative of the king *qua* Kentish landlord. In 1387 he was given a special commission of enquiry on Eltham manor, and some years later, when he had become chief clerk of the king's works, a special commission to pay the gardeners at Eltham and Sheen.

Considered by themselves these data go a long way towards justifying the solution proposed at the beginning: that from early in 1385 till the middle of 1389 Chaucer was an overseer at Eltham and Sheen, with a house at Greenwich, probably on crown land. And that is essentially the conclusion which a survey of magisterial qualifications has left us no alternative but to accept.

IV. KNIGHT OF THE SHIRE

Knights of the shire were in theory elected by the whole shire court, in practice by the great men of the county. On this subject Maitland writes:

From the first the language used of the knights is that they are to be elected in full county court, by the assent of the whole county, *in pleno comitatu, per assensum totius comitatus*, and so forth. . . . The county court. . . . comprised the whole body of freehold tenants holding whether by mesne or by immediate tenure of the king. . . . It seems very possible. . . . that the smaller tenants, socagers and so forth, did not often attend the county court, that the office of representative was by no means coveted, and that the election was *de facto* made by the great men. . . . The king at various times exercised a power of inserting clauses in the writs directed to the sheriff specifying the sort of persons to be chosen—generally they were to be two knights girt with swords; this order, however, seems to have been pretty generally disobeyed, many of the so-called knights of the shire were not knights.¹

Richard's writ to the sheriff of Kent for the election of two knights to attend parliament on 1 October 1386 was dated from Oseney Abbey, Oxford, on 8 August. Sir Arnold Savage had been appointed as sheriff of Kent for that year, but several weeks before the writ was issued he had sailed for Spain with John of Gaunt. Exactly when the meeting took place at which Geoffrey Chaucer and William Betenham were elected, or who presided over it, has not been ascertained.

Foremost among the great men of the shire at this time were the king, Sir Simon Burley, William Courtenay archbishop of Canterbury, Robert de Vere, and possibly Thomas Holland earl of Kent, Richard's eldest half-brother. Of these only Courtenay was not of the king's party. He had recently rebuked Richard for his ill government, and so angered him thereby that Richard 'would have struck the Archbishop, if his uncle, lord Thomas of Woodstock had not prevented it'. But at least one member of the Courtenay family seems to have been on definitely good terms with Chaucer.² The king owned most of the north-west corner of the county and other large tracts of it besides. Sir Simon Burley, since his appointment in 1383 to the constablership of Dover Castle, had been accumulating Kentish estates at the rate of about ten a year. Robert de Vere held land at Dover³ and was the constable of Queenborough Castle. Thomas Holland drew part of his income from estates in the neighbourhood of Chislehurst and Deptford;⁴ he had also been chief commissioner

¹ *Constitutional History of England* (1920), p. 86. The county court met monthly (id. p. 88).

² Peter Courtenay, who had to do with Chaucer's appointment as forester in North Petherton (see R. Krauss in *Three Chaucer Studies*). One of Princess Joan's daughters married Hugh Courtenay (Wallon, op. cit., I, 400).

³ S. P. Strahan, *Dover Charters*, p. 97.

⁴ An inheritance from Princess Joan (Hasted, op. cit., Pt. I, ed. Drake, p. 50). Cf. *PR*, 1377-81, p. 92, *re* Joan being robbed in that district.

of array for the county after the Peasants' Revolt and may still have had some say in its affairs.

A list of the more important members of the Kentish electorate who knew Chaucer either personally or by hearsay would include all of 'the most worthy' among his fellow justices and some of the 'learned in the law'. A few other men who had some influence in Kent may be mentioned. One of the king's strongest supporters, the wealthy merchant Sir Nicholas Brember, had long had an estate near Tonbridge. In December 1385 Richard had committed to him, in addition, certain manors at Greenwich and Lewisham which had reverted to the crown from an abbey in Ghent.¹ In the same year the king had confirmed to Gilbert Maufeld, another of his merchant supporters and another of Chaucer's associates, a grant of land which had been made to him by one John Kent in some region unspecified.² There was a Greenwich man of that name,³ possibly the John Kent whose unsuccessful attempt to smuggle wool out of the country in 1376 had benefited Chaucer to the tune of over £70. Still another wealthy merchant of the king's party and of Chaucer's circle, the Hugh Fastolf who acted as Burley's deputy at Dover, appears to have owned an estate in Kent.⁴ In 1386 the king confirmed to Sir Richard Stury free warren on royal lands at Lee, Lewisham and Bromley.⁵ The poet John Gower, attorney for Chaucer during his absence in Italy in 1378, was an 'esquier de Kent'. He had various holdings in the county and perhaps lived at Aldington Manor, near Maidstone, which he had rented in 1365.⁶ The John Gower who was appointed in January 1387 as an assistant to Burley, 'to receive the victuals at Dover Castle, and keep and distribute them as advised by the king and council',⁷ may have been the same man.

There is reason to suspect, however, that Chaucer's election as a knight of the shire was not simply a matter of personal popularity, but a move in a political struggle which had begun with Richard's accession, and which reached a climax in the parliament of 1386. It is unfortunate for Chaucerians that historical studies of this period are in general either superficial or biassed. The standard modern biography of Richard II, Henri Wallon's, tries to whitewash the king in compensation for what the author regards as the blackening of him by the monk of Evesham, Walsingham, and other chroniclers of the time. One can only hope for more help from

¹ *Fine Rolls, 1383-91*, p. 122.

³ Hasted, *op. cit.*, Pt. I, ed. Drake, p. 36, note.

⁴ *Calendar of Wills Relating to the County of Kent*, ed. L. L. Duncan, p. 29.

⁵ Hasted, *op. cit.*, Pt. I, ed. Drake, p. 215.

⁶ *DNB*.

² *PR, 1385-9*, p. 21.

⁷ *PR, 1385-9*, p. 266.

historians in the future, and meantime deal as briefly as possible with the aspects of the struggle which have, or may have, a bearing on Chaucer's position.

The death of Richard's father the Black Prince in 1376, and of his grandfather Edward III in 1377, had brought him to the throne when he was not yet in his teens. He had been a warm-hearted idealistic boy, eager to turn his kingdom into Utopia with a wave of his sceptre. The cold worldly wisdom and self-interest of his uncles (John of Gaunt, Thomas of Woodstock, and Edmund of Langley) frustrated his generous impulses from the first. As he grew older his impotence against them became increasingly infuriating. They on their side had reason to doubt Richard's ability to rule. He developed a violent temper, and his generosity rapidly turned to wild extravagance. Money in plenty was supplied to him by the commons and by the wealthy merchants of London, Brember, Philpot and the rest, for his own expenses and for the defence of the realm against the ever-present threat of French invasion. Richard squandered it on the upkeep of an 'outrageous multitude' of attendants, on gorgeous clothes, and on gifts, so that the country was left, as the commons said in 1381, 'not . . . any better defended'. In fact they roundly declared 'that if the government be not shortly amended, the realm will be utterly ruined and destroyed for ever'.¹ At the end of 1384 the conflict had reached such a pitch that John of Gaunt, hearing rumours of Richard's intention to kill him, shut himself up in his fortified castle of Pontefract and refused to attend the council which the king had summoned to meet after Christmas. The peace was kept between them only by the strenuous efforts of Princess Joan, who seems to have had the respect and affection of all concerned. Her death removed the one strong moderating influence in the situation.

In the course of the army's march to Scotland in 1385 Richard created Thomas of Woodstock duke of Gloucester, and Edmund of Langley duke of York. Part of their incomes as such was to be derived from the customs and subsidy on wool, skins, and leather,² the controllership of which, as far as England's chief port was concerned, was in the hands of Chaucer and his deputy. Richard's honours to his uncles, however, were merely strategic, to offset the elevation of his favourites. He had recently made Michael de la Pole lord chancellor, Sir Simon Burley constable of Dover

¹ Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 240. One of Richard's many extravagances was entertaining the King of Armenia lavishly at Eltham in the autumn of 1385 and granting him a pension 'of £1000 a year for life' (Rymer, *Foedera*, vii, 494). Chaucer perhaps helped with the entertainment of this visitor.

Wallon, *op. cit.*, i, 489.

Castle and warden of the Cinque Ports, and Robert de Vere constable of Queenborough Castle. Before the year was out he had given de Vere the dukedom of Ireland, with powers scarcely less than his own. John of Gaunt's departure for Spain in July 1386 left the less kindly Gloucester to cope with their nephew's folly. Richard could not have failed to foresee trouble in the parliament which he summoned for October, or to pack it as far as possible with his own supporters. The election of his favoured esquire Geoffrey Chaucer is hardly surprising in the circumstances.

No one knows how much of the session the poet actually spent at Westminster. The conclusion that he attended at all is an inference from the unsigned return of his and Betenham's names, from the fact that his testimony in the Scrope-Grosvenor trial proves him to have been in London in October, and from the precept, issued on 28 November, that he and Betenham were to be paid their expenses for 61 days (1 October to 30 November). The allowance for both men totalled £24. 9s. 0d. 'They appear', says the editor of the *Life-Records*, 'to have been paid 8s. a day between them; but if so, the total should be 24l. 8s.' Nothing about Chaucer's part in the session is quite clear. Yet he may, both during and after it, have done the king's party some important services behind the scenes.

Backed by Gloucester, parliament declared that it would not vote subsidies until the king's chosen chancellor, Michael de la Pole, and his chosen treasurer, the bishop of Durham, were removed from office. Richard in great indignation retired to Eltham. There he waited many days for the members to submit to his wishes, while they waited in Westminster, refusing to 'despatch the smallest point' till he should return. After a time Richard asked them to send out to Eltham to confer with him forty knights 'of the most skilled and able of the commons' (a specification which should have included Chaucer). Instead the duke of Gloucester rode out with an imposing array of armed followers and talked in thinly veiled terms of deposition. According to the continuator of Knighton, the king replied: 'Now we think indeed that our people are plotting to resist and rise up against us; and in such case, it seems that we cannot do better than appeal to our kinsman the King of France.'¹ Other chroniclers of the time report the king's answer in similar terms; but their word has been doubted, because, it is said, they were writing to please John of Gaunt's son, Henry IV, the usurper of Richard's throne, and deliberately misrepresented Richard as contemplating treachery to his people.² The sceptics' case, however, appears to be based on wishful

¹ Hughes, *op. cit.*, pp. 247-8.

² Wallon, *op. cit.*, I, 311.

thinking. They say nothing of the fact that Kent is the key county in relation to France, that Richard had conspicuously been strengthening his hand there for some time, and that when the struggle began it was to his Kentish palace that he chose to retire. Nor, for that matter, do they allow for the human likelihood of such an answer from Richard, given his age, his temper, and the galling situation in which he found himself at the moment.

The honours in Kent which he had recently been bestowing on his friends are worth noting, partly because Chaucer's belong to the series. Enough has been said already of Richard's appointment of Burley in 1383 to a position of unparalleled power in the county. The custody of Queenborough Castle he had taken from John of Gaunt and given to de Vere in March 1385, by a writ dated at Eltham, 'with the curse of God and St Edward and the King on any who do or attempt aught against this grant'. Queenborough 'commanded the entrance to the Thames, and formed one of the strongest naval bases on the Kentish coast'.¹ The king's favours of one kind and another to Brember, Maufeld, Fastolf, Stury, and Chaucer were conferred in 1385 or 1386. The new commission of the peace for Kent issued in the summer of 1386 included the name of that great power in the land, chief justice Tresilian. Not long afterwards Tresilian was to lose his life for pronouncing judgment in favour of the king as against his uncles. There can be no doubt that by the time Chaucer was elected to parliament Kent was a stronghold of the king's party, and little doubt that the poet's election was due to the king's influence.²

Having put himself in the worst possible light in the presence of Gloucester and his followers, Richard could do nothing but return to Westminster and submit to the dismissal of his chief officers. He had also to submit to the appointment of a council of regency under the duke's leadership. Its avowed object was to enquire into and amend Richard's affairs, 'as well the state and governance of his household and of all his courts and palaces, as the estate and governance of his officers and ministers . . . to amend and correct all faults, wastes and excesses'.³ But not all of the fourteen members of the council can have been entirely to Gloucester's liking or entirely under his influence. One of them was baron Cobham, whose daughter married a brother of Michael de la Pole. Another was Sir John Devereux, who had been much honoured by Richard's father and was a friend of Sir Simon Burley. Cobham and Devereux were two of

¹ Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt*, p. 216.

² The names of Chaucer's mainpernors, it may be remembered, suggested that possibly they were employees on a Kentish manor, perhaps Eltham (see p. 23, n. 1).

³ Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

the Kentish justices whose estates were nearest Greenwich. If they had any neighbourly regard for Chaucer, they may perhaps have helped to save him from the worst effects of Gloucester's animosity against the chosen servants of the young king and queen.

The council's first important enquiry for purposes of reform was into the collection of the wool tax. There had been some trouble about this during Chaucer's active controllership. The merchants of London had refused to pay the 'tronage' charge for the weighing of their goods at the Wool Quay, and in January 1384 a commission had been appointed to discover why.¹ The poet's loss of both his controllerships followed hard on the enquiry instituted in the autumn of 1386 by Gloucester, who had a personal as well as an official interest in this source of revenue. 'It is uncertain', says Professor Robinson, 'whether Chaucer's retirement from the Custom House was voluntary, or due to the hostility of Gloucester and his faction toward the King's appointees.' The weight of probability, however, is all with the second alternative. Chaucer, it is true, was now controlling the collection of the wool tax for Gloucester's benefit, not Richard's, and may have disliked the position. Or it may be that under the duke's tight-fisted regime (he even charged Anne for bed and board in the king's palaces)² the controllerships were hardly worth holding. Yet if for some such reason Chaucer did actually resign, the 'voluntary' element in his action would still be almost negligible.

The same may be said of his 'surrender at his own request' of his pensions to John Scalby on 1 May 1388. This transaction is not mentioned until 16 February 1389, and at some later date, presumably after Richard had regained control of his kingdom (May 1389) it was 'vacated'.³ There are many instances of vacated warrants during the years in which Gloucester was undoing Richard's work and Richard was afterwards undoing Gloucester's, and this has every appearance of being one of the latter. In October 1386, for instance, Richard decreed that all the fines imposed in his court at Dover should go to Burley without any account being rendered. In the following month, when Gloucester had come into power, this warrant was 'vacated' on the ground that it had 'issued out of Chancery irregularly'.⁴ The exact significance of the transfer of Chaucer's pensions to Scalby has never been understood and perhaps never will be. But the very mystery in which it is wrapped, and the fact that it was in the end 'vacated', suggest strongly that it was one of the arrangements

PR, 1381-5, p. 359.

² Perhaps a comment on Richard's grant to Anne, after his mother's death, of a large private income out of Joan's estate.

³ *Life-Records*.

⁴ *PR*, 1385-9, p. 225.

over which Richard and Gloucester were in conflict. On the other hand, Chaucer's surrender of Aldgate at the beginning of the parliamentary session of 1386 was an arrangement which appears to have involved only members of the king's party.

After the session was over, Richard summoned de Vere, Burley, Brember and others to a council of resistance. He spent most of 1387 preparing to assert his rights by force. Gloucester also collected an army and set out to win the support of the country at large for himself and his cause. Part of his programme was to spread abroad rumours calculated to damage the cause of his opponents.¹ One was that Richard's councillors were advising him to sell England's continental possessions to France. For that purpose, it was said, he had sent 'a servant' to Charles VI. He had also sent a letter to Sir William Beauchamp, captain of Calais, ordering him to hand over the town to the bearer. Beauchamp had refused and passed on the letter to Gloucester. Neither the servant dispatched to Charles nor the bearer of the letter to Beauchamp was named. It may be recalled therefore that in this same year Richard gave Chaucer permission to cross to Calais in the retinue of Sir William Beauchamp, and that he had previously sent him to France on several missions concerning the royal families of both countries. But licences to go abroad were often obtained as a means of discouraging the attentions of creditors,² and early in the following year the poet had a determined creditor on his tracks. It may be significant too that Chaucer is not named in the detailed account of Beauchamp's controller. On the whole it seems more likely than not that he stayed in England. It is not improbable, however, that Gloucester's faction knew of the licence which Richard had granted him.

Another rumour of 1387 was that the king had planned to go to Canterbury under pretext of making a pilgrimage, but in reality to sail thence to France in order to sell Guines and Calais to Charles. 'The composition of the General Prologue to the [Canterbury] tales', wrote Professor Robinson in his edition of 1933, 'is commonly associated with 1387. It has been assumed that Chaucer himself took part in a pilgrimage in April of that year. . . . But . . . it is altogether uncertain how much there is of fact, and how much of fiction, in the account of the pilgrimage.' More recent research tends to place the composition of the General Prologue earlier, but in any case the great new poem by Chaucer must have been a matter of some interest in court circles at this very time; that is, when the

¹ Wallon, *op. cit.*, I, 331 ff.

² There are many revocations of such licences in the *Rolls*. One which was withdrawn from a Greenwich man in 1383 says outright that he 'only obtained it to defeat his creditors' (*PR*, 1381-5, p. 303).

poet's master was being accused of making a pilgrimage to Canterbury for nefarious purposes.

On 20 December 1387 the army which de Vere was attempting to bring south for Richard's defence was defeated at Radcot Bridge, on the Thames near Oxford. According to the chronicles of Malverne and of Knighton's continuator, de Vere escaped, disguised as a groom, and rode hard to London to interview Richard.¹ Chaucer was in London at the time, for on the day after the battle he borrowed from the exchequer an advance of £1 on his annuity, a sum which, surprisingly, was not entered against him when he drew his next allowance, or, as far as is known, at any future date. His borrowing may have no connexion whatever with the plight of the young man who was 'tout le cuer du roy', and yet the coincidence is curious. After de Vere's talk with Richard, the above chroniclers continue, he went down to Queenborough Castle and thence sailed to the Continent. He was probably accompanied to the coast; and Chaucer, being in the service of the king, was probably at the service of the king's best friend. But the details of de Vere's flight are likely to remain as secret as they were at the time, and Chaucer is only one of many who might have shared his last journey through Kent.²

On 26 December Gloucester marched into London and virtually imprisoned Richard in the Tower. The duke then summoned parliament for 3 February 1388, taking pains to specify that he desired only those knights of the shire to be elected who were 'the most indifferent in the debates of these days'.³ This surely is conscious virtue, and perhaps a hint that the elections to the previous parliament (including Chaucer's) had been manipulated by the king. The poet was not re-elected. With the supreme power entirely in his hands Gloucester plunged into impeachments right and left. Before the session ended, in the first week of June, he had either executed or exiled Michael de la Pole, Robert de Vere, Sir Simon Burley, Sir Robert Tresilian, Sir Nicholas Brember, and a number of less exalted supporters of the king. For weeks, indeed, London ran with the blood of Chaucer's associates.

About this time a series of three writs was issued, ordering his attachment for a debt of three guineas to John Churchman. The first (16 April) was directed to the sheriffs of London, one of whom was Hugh Fastolf, Burley's former deputy. The sheriffs certified that they could find neither the debtor nor any attachable goods of his. The second writ (undated)

¹ *DNB*.

² A poem in praise of the de Vere family was prefixed to the *Canterbury Tales* in the Ellesmere MS.

³ *CR*, 1385-9, p. 457.

indicates that the search had been extended to Kent and Surrey with the same result. The third (4 June) was equally unsuccessful in producing any information as to Chaucer's whereabouts. Yet the Issue Roll states that on 13 May, while the search was on, he drew his pension at the exchequer 'per manus proprias'. Possibly Fastolf had suppressed the truth in the interests of a friend. Chaucer's transfer of his pensions to Scalby is said to have been made on the first day of the same month, which may or may not mean that he then appeared in person at Westminster. Between his possible visit to Westminster on 1 May and his probable visit on 13 May, Burley was beheaded on Tower Hill (5 May), in spite of Queen Anne's having pleaded on her knees for his life. But where Chaucer was during these difficult days there is little hope of discovering.

Gloucester's victory in the 'merciless' parliament of 1388 robbed him of most of the sympathy he had won by opposing the king's extravagance. In May of the following year Richard called a council at Westminster and made the celebrated speech which restored him to power. Not improbably someone with a sense of dramatic effectiveness had helped him to plan it. He began abruptly with the question: 'How old am I?'¹ When the assembled lords had answered, he reminded them that by the law and custom of England every heir who had attained his majority had a right to control his inheritance. He then thanked them for their guidance in recent years and went on: 'We have attained our majority and are at present in our twenty-second year; therefore we request henceforth full liberty of ruling and controlling ourselves and our inheritance, and we desire to possess our realm, and to choose our officers and ministers at pleasure . . . and appoint them to any offices, remove those now in office at our will, and appoint others in their places.'² His demand being thankfully granted by the majority, he at once proceeded to dismiss the chief ministers who had been forced upon him and to find posts for the few of his most trusted friends who had survived Gloucester's rule. On 12 July his appointment of Chaucer as chief clerk of the works was made official. According to the evidence already considered, this post was simply an extension of the one Chaucer had been holding at Eltham and Sheen for the preceding four and a half years. In that period he must have been rendering Richard services which deserved reward. One remembers too that towards the end of this ill-starred reign he addressed to the king some verses in which he pleaded with him to govern his people more justly. That can hardly have been the first occasion on which the poet had with impunity offered advice to his young sovereign.

¹ Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer*, I, 83.

² Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

The date at which Chaucer ceased to be a justice has apparently not been discussed, but is not beyond all conjecture. No commission of the peace for Kent has been found between that of 28 June 1386, directed to Burley and including Chaucer, and that of 15 July 1389, directed to Sir John Devereux and omitting Chaucer. This period corresponds almost exactly to the period of Gloucester's dominance, during which it is more probable that the king issued no new commission for what may be called one of his 'home' counties, than that annual commissions were issued and have been lost. In that case the justices appointed in June 1386 would have remained in office till July 1389. Chaucer was given a magisterial commission in Kent in 1387, and again, in 1390, was granted temporary magisterial powers for the purpose of his commission with Stury concerning the bank of the Thames from Greenwich to Woolwich. It seems likely that he had continued to rank as a Kentish justice until he became chief clerk of the works (12 July 1389). There is of course nothing derogatory to him in the fact that he was not included among the Kentish justices appointed three days later. The commission of 15 July 1389 was limited to six residents, in accordance with the statute of the previous year which had granted payment for attendance at sessions, and the poet's new post would have left him, at least at first, with little or no time for other occupations.

The remaining records of Chaucer's life consist mainly in a series of favours received from Richard, and later from Henry IV. One of Richard's gifts, in 1394, was a pension of £20 a year. Another, in May 1391, was a protection against creditors, in which Richard stated that he had in the past 'appointed his beloved esquire, Geoffrey Chaucer, to perform many arduous and urgent duties in various parts of the realm of England'. That seems a fitting obituary notice for Chaucer the man of affairs.

The questions with which we began have led in the end to a review of his whole career, and, it is hoped, to a clearer conception of his relations with the royal family. For that, as scholars are more and more recognizing, is a matter of importance when it comes to the most important of all Chaucer matters, the reading of him with understanding.¹ He was successively of the households of Prince Lionel, Edward III, and Richard II,

¹ Especially, though not by any means exclusively, in the allegorical poems. Chaucer's relations with royalty seem likely to be the right quarter in which to look for answers to many questions about him; such, for instance, as two which Professor Patch asks in his recent book, *On Rereading Chaucer*: Why did the poet deal chiefly or most convincingly with women marked by Cressid's weakness? (the resemblance between Cressid and Princess Joan in her youth was pointed out in 'Chaucer's Sovereign Lady') and Why did he constantly pose as an outsider in affairs of the heart? (a matter on which the present paper might give food for thought).

serving in ways appropriate to page, valetus and king's esquire. This included attendance on Princess Elizabeth, Queen Philippa and other great ladies of the court. His appointment in 1374 as a customs official, with charge of the collection of crown revenue in London, and with rooms near the Wool Quay, was a reward for, and a continuation of, his personal services to Edward III. In the next reign he received payments as a member of the royal household concurrently with payments as a controller of customs. In 1385, for some problematic reason, Richard II allowed him a deputy controller in February, paid him £10 on account in April, converted the sum into a grant some six months later, and commissioned him as a Kentish justice in October. The explanation here offered is that preparatory to departing on a military campaign Richard transferred Chaucer from Aldgate and the customs to Greenwich and the works at Eltham and Sheen, where he could be of service to Queen Anne during her first experience of solitary state, and that, on returning from the campaign in September, the king rewarded the poet's services. This causes the multifarious evidence, from the qualifications of justices and from Chaucer's life-records and writings, to fit into place like the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle and to present the required coherent picture. In 1386 he was elected as a knight of the shire for Kent and thereafter suffered for being associated with the king's defeated party. When Richard came into power again he promoted Chaucer from the clerkship at Eltham and Sheen to the chief clerkship of the king's works. As long as he remained in power he continued to honour 'his beloved esquire, Geoffrey Chaucer'. Henry IV was no less kind to him.

In 1385 and 1386 Chaucer was at the height of his good fortune. His justiceship in those years would hardly have occupied more than occasional hours and occasional whole days, and his oversight of the buildings on two or three estates would have been less wearing than office routine. The next two years were clouded by insecurity and apparently by pressing financial difficulties. We should probably be justified in thinking that the period in his official life which gave him at once most leisure and the general circumstances most encouraging for writing began in February 1385 and ended in October 1386. Prior to that period he had spent a solid decade mostly if not entirely in the city, enduring the racking drudgery of perpetual book-keeping. Then early in 1385, in time to watch spring transform his garden, he was allowed to leave London and to live and work in the country. A few months later, in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, we find traces of his delight in his new surroundings and employment. The radiant lines on 'Aprille with his shoures soote' which

open the *Canterbury Tales* may have been written at no very distant date. One would be glad to think that the General Prologue, with its April mood throughout, belongs to the sunny period between February 1385 and October 1386. Nor is there any apparent reason for drawing a less pleasing conclusion.

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