

# Two Dozen and More Silkwomen of Fifteenth-Century London

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Medieval London was the centre of the English silkwomen's trade. Young girls came from all over England to be 'maydens in Chepeside and Soper Lane that be prentees ... prentees which mercer wives have'.<sup>1</sup> The Mercery stretched east along Cheapside from St Mary le Bow to opposite the frontage of the present Mercers' Hall and back as far as the east-west line of St Pancras Lane; it included and was divided by Soper Lane (Shopkeepers' Lane) now under Queen Street. It was a mass of small shops, selling stations and covered markets called selds, of which one of the best known was the *Crown*, owned by the Mercers' Company from 1411. There a mercer maiden might sit sewing in a window and inspire a poet soon after the accession of Edward IV:

Erly in a sommeristide  
y sawe in london, as y wente,  
A gentilwoman of chepe-side  
workinge on a vestiment.

She sette xij letters on a Rowe,  
And saide, if that y myght it understond,  
Thorough the grace of god, ye scule it knowe,  
This lettres xij schall save mery Englund . . .

The twelve letters included three Rs for the three Richards who had saved England: Richard of York, Richard of Salisbury and Richard of Warwick, and another 'R for the Rose that is frische and wol nat fade'. This was one of several poems celebrating the Yorkist victory that circulated in London in the 1460s.<sup>2</sup>

A silkwoman made items of silk, from braids, laces, ribbons to buttons, fastenings and tassels, and every thing which is still covered by the French term *passementerie*. She also dealt in certain types of haberdashery (once also mercery and still so called in French: *merverie*) and in such items as veils of silk and linen, kerchiefs, gloves, and linen and silk coifs for the head. All these goods were mercery, which in its widest definition included all goods which were not bulky or victuals – essentially all piece-goods – but unlike his provincial counterpart the London mercer could afford to specialise. His most prestigious and valuable commodity was silk, and his most common and relatively cheap one was linen, of which over a million yards were imported into London alone every year by 1480.<sup>3</sup> Worsted piece-goods were the other traditional mercery (gown-cloths, curtains for beds, coverlets and tapets), alongside a myriad small items ranging from mirrors and dice to books and dress accessories. The mercer's and the silkwoman's joint interest in silk made it essential for them to know each other, and do business together; inevitably they trained in the same households and married.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Batail's will, see n. 26 below.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Twelve Letters that shall Save Merry England', *Political, Religious and Love Poems*, ed F.J. Furnivall, Early English Text Society, OS 15 (1866), pp. 1-3; some letters modernised.

<sup>3</sup> For the changing definition of mercery, A.F. Sutton, 'Mercery through four centuries 1130s-c. 1500', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, vol. 41 (1997), pp. 100-25, and her *The Mercery of London: Trade, Goods and People, 1130-1578*, Aldershot 2005, passim. For linen imports, H.S. Cobb, 'Textile imports in the fifteenth century: the evidence of the custom's accounts', *Costume*, vol. 29 (1995), pp. 7-11, esp., pp. 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Further background can be found in the present author's 'The shop-floor of the London mercery trade, c. 1200-c. 1500: the marginalisation of the artisan, the itinerant mercer and the shopholder', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, vol. 45 (2001), pp. 12-50, and her 'Alice Claver d. 1489' in C.M. Barron and A.F. Sutton, eds, *Medieval London Widows 1300-1500*, London 1994, pp. 129-42, and her *Mercery of London*, ch. 8; and M.K. Dale, 'Women in the textile industries and trade of fifteenth-century England', unpublished MA thesis, University of London 1928, and her 'The London silkwomen of the fifteenth century', *Economic History Review*, 1st ser. vol. 4 (1933), pp. 324-35.

This article attempts to record systematically all the silkwomen of London who were daughters or wives of London mercers between 1400 and 1499.<sup>5</sup> For this period there survive not only an adequate supply of London wills, but also the wardens' accounts of the Mercers' Company 1390-1464, which literally provide a lifeline of the apprentices and masters of that trade in a detail unmatched before the seventeenth century. The careers of male apprentices and masters can help to locate the more elusive female apprentices and wives, to reveal family relationships and link one household to another through the learning processes of apprenticeship.<sup>6</sup> A list of silkwomen married to London mercers will not include all the women of the trade for some married men of other specialities,<sup>7</sup> but it can be suggested that the silkwomen of mercery households were usually among the most substantial of their trade.

The trade and craft activities of women and wives in the past are always difficult to find. Even silkwomen rarely called themselves silkwomen in their wills. The record of a sale of silkwifery or mercery piece-goods is the best means of identification but accounts are rare. To find these women, I have worked on several assumptions: scratch a mercer and you will find a silkwoman for he was the native supplier of the silk she worked with; any connection with vestmentmaking by the mercer husband suggests a craftswoman wife;<sup>8</sup> business acumen shown by a wife or widow indicates experience and silkwifery is her most likely trade; and lastly, references to female apprentices and servants, or a large number of bequests to women, especially young women for their marriage, suggest a silkwifery establishment.

A tentative list of about two dozen silkwomen married to mercers 1400-99 can be made, some of them running what were largely artisan households and shops for many years, passing them on to other women; with the addition of some less certain candidates the number passes thirty. The longevity of some of these establishments, and consequently their influence, is impressive.<sup>9</sup>

Silkwomen operating in the fifteenth century and born before 1400<sup>10</sup> included *Margaret, silkwoman widow of Elias Clitherowe*. Her husband issued from apprenticeship in 1400 which makes him (and probably her as well) about twenty-five years old at this date; he was successful enough to serve as a warden of his company in 1418-19. Such success may have owed much to her skills for it is known that she was a supplier to the gentry by 1410-11. At this time her husband rented a shop from the Mercers, which may have in fact been hers. She died in 1428, as a widow, having no less than the master of St Thomas of Acre and Thomas Batail, a mercer experienced in the silkwifery side of his trade, as her executors. She left one son and one daughter, three other children having died.<sup>11</sup>

A near contemporary was *Matilda Denton*, silkwoman wife of Thomas Denton, mercer, who regularly sold her wares to the king's great wardrobe, besides silk fringe to the Mercers' Company in 1415-16. Thomas had issued from apprenticeship in 1394-95, he too sold to the great wardrobe, and in 1430 can be found valuing an embroidered velvet gown along with a 'setter', that is a vestmentmaker or embroiderer. Three other Dentons were mercers at this date (John, Thomas and Richard) and were probably all related. John Denton bequeathed two sets of vestments in 1432, but the lack of wills prevents further explanation of the family and its trade.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This was undertaken as part of a paper presented at the Harlaxton 2004 Conference in honour of Caroline Barron. The rest of the paper will appear as 'The women of the Mercery: maidens, wives and widows', *London and the Kingdom: Essays in Honour of Caroline M. Barron*, ed M. Davies and A. Prescott, Tyas, Stamford.

<sup>6</sup> 227 wills of mercers and their widows underlie this research: the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC), The National Archives (TNA), Public Record Office (PRO), PROB 11, and the Commissary Court of the Bishop of London (CC), Guildhall Library of London (GL) MSS 9171/1 onwards. The other main source used is the Mercers' Company of London (MC), Wardens' Accounts 1348, 1390-1464 (WA).

<sup>7</sup> E.g. C. Barron and M. Davies, 'Ellen Langwith, silkwoman of London (died 1481)', *The Ricardian*, vol. 13 (2003), pp. 39-47.

<sup>8</sup> Sutton, 'Shop-floor', pp. 41-42.

<sup>9</sup> Dates relating to mercers' careers come from WA, see n. 6 above.

<sup>10</sup> For a description of the life of silkwomen before 1400, Sutton, 'Shop-floor', pp. 15-34, and her *Mercery of London*, chs 1, 2, 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Calendar of Letter Books of the City of London, A-L*, ed R.R. Sharpe, London 1899-1912 (hereafter *A-L*), K, p. 86. For her sales to Sir Hugh Stafford, Lord Bouchier, 1410-11, Staffordshire Records Office, D641/1/2/11; I am most grateful to this Office for the supply of a copy. WA, f. 50v (1409-10). No wills survive for either husband or wife.

<sup>12</sup> PRO, E 101/407/13, ff. 9v-10v (for both Denton suppliers). WA, f. 68v. *CPMR 1413-37*, p. 248. John Denton (d. 1432), PROB 11/3, f. 129; he also left three bequests to women, who may have been workers. Setter is glossed as vestmentmaker, A.H. Thomas and P.E. Jones, eds, *Calendar of the Plea and Memoranda Rolls of London (CPMR), 1323-1482*, 6 vols, London 1926-61, *CPMR 1413-37*, p. 33, n. 1.

*Alice Picot-Bridnell* was comparatively unusual in that she called herself silkwoman in her will, otherwise no guess could be made concerning her craft. She had no surviving child from her marriage and bitterly regretted it, for she came of a long line of mercers descended from Nicholas Picot, mercer and chamberlain (1300-04), who had died in 1312. It is possible she came from an equally long line of silkwomen wives of these Picots, whose names she also knew. As the last of her line and the descendant of so many mercers she persuaded the Mercers to admit her to the company – the descent was set out in the record of her admission in 1427-28 – and established a chantry for her ancestors in St Peter Cornhill, the parish church of her illustrious ancestor, the chamberlain, in her will of 1437.<sup>13</sup>

*Isabel Bally-Otes-Frowyk*, twice lady mayoress, was a silkwoman *extraordinaire* with a career of over fifty years from about 1410 to her death in 1464. She first appears in the records as supplying the Mercers' Company with silk fringe in 1415-16; in 1417 she was left a widow by John Bally mercer, who referred in his will to her chests of goods and her craft (*sua arte*). She had her own shop by this time in Soper Lane abutting on Cheapside and they lived on Poultry, the continuation of Cheapside. She had three children by Bally and speedily acquired a new husband in the mercer William Otes, who died in his turn three years later in 1420. She then married Henry Frowyk, a younger man but probably a business partner of Otes for the two men apparently shared some apprentices.<sup>14</sup> Her wealth as a two-times widow and as a woman with her own business undoubtedly made her an extremely eligible wife for a fast-rising mercer. Frowyk had the additional advantage of belonging to a long-established and well-connected London and Middlesex family, the members of which had a tradition of moving back and forth between the civic and gentry worlds. He had a highly successful career and was twice mayor of London (1435-36 and 1444-45). Isabel was still running her business when he died, and her bequests to women, such as Margaret Odiham, in her will of 1464 suggest she persisted in it up to her death. The influence of such a wealthy and well-placed woman can only be surmised – her apprentices alone must have been many over the years – but the wealth of her husband ensures that her children did not need to be mercers or silkwomen by trade.<sup>15</sup>

*Isabel Fleet*, of a far lower status and wealth, is more representative of the average working silkwoman. She ran an important training-establishment for the new generation with her husband William between the 1420s and 1450s. As both left wills and his apprentices are known, the working unit can be largely reconstructed. Isabel Street came from Dursbury, Cheshire, and her husband from Fleet in Lincolnshire. Perhaps the two met as apprentices in the household of Symkyn Fleet, mercer and relative of William; certainly they met in the crowded Mercery, packed with apprentices of both sexes, a veritable marriage mart for young people setting out on their careers. Isabel rented a shop in the Mercers' own *Crown* sold from at least 1425-26 to 1448-49. In 1449 William died and left bequests to his four 'maidens' who must be identified as the female apprentices of his wife; in 1455 Isabel died and left small bequests to five women skilled in her crafts of 'dyer, throwster and corse weaver'. She and William had no surviving children but some of William's mercer apprentices carried on the habits of the busy working household: John Pikton started out as a shopkeeper, but then married well and could afford to make the transition to overseas trade; and Nicholas Hatton who married the silkwoman Isabel Brown. Through the Brown-Hatton household Isabel Fleet's influence stretched into the sixteenth century (see below).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Also Bridnell. Two wills of 1437 and 1440, GL, MS 9171/4, ff. 38, 38v-39. John Carpenter junior, common clerk and fellow parishioner, was designated as an executor along with others of the parish which benefited from the chantry. Her obscure husband, Edmund Bridnell, was not a mercer. Sutton, 'Shop-floor', p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> WA 1417-18, f. 72v; this corrects the statement that Frowyk was Otes' apprentice in Sutton, 'Shop-floor', p. 47. WA gives two dates for Henry Frowyk 'issuing' from apprenticeship: one in 1409-10, WA, f. 51 (no master given), and the other in 1420-21 from master John Otley, WA, f. 78v. As Isabel's new husband's civic career was already established it is likely the first payment is closer to the correct date, but both may represent payments in arrears.

<sup>15</sup> Her trade is mentioned in the wills of John Bally her first husband (d. 1417) and Henry Frowyk, her last. Bally was about 57 when he died so she conforms to the pattern of a young woman marrying a much older man as her first husband; she had no issue by Otes, see his will, Corporation of London Records Office (CLRO), Husting Roll 148 (39), which gives more than R.R. Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Wills Proved in the Court of Husting of London*, 2 vols, London 1889-90, vol. 2, pp. 422-23; Isabel and Robert Newton clerk were executors. Sutton, 'Shopfloor', p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> Isabel's maiden name was Street. There are clear signs of their trade in the wills of William and Isabel Fleet; unfortunately they were not survived by daughters. Their wills: GL, MS 9171/3, ff. 226v-27 and 9171/5, f. 190r-v. Sutton 'Shop-floor', pp. 43-46. William Bernewey mercer, a fellow apprentice and associate of Fleet, also made bequests to maidens of the Mercery, but he mentions no wife who can be listed here, *ibid.*, p. 46. Pikton: Sutton, *Mercery of London*, pp. 196, 206n.

*Katherine Reynkyn-Rich* was another skilled artisan, who could have exercised a profound influence over many apprentices during a career of probably fifty years from c. 1420 to her death in 1469. She was the sister of John Reynkyn, who became a mercer after apprenticeship to Robert Strode. She married Richard Rich, mercer (originally from Broxbourne, Hertfordshire), and had a large family, but she continued in her trade and was still active, with a shop in St Laurence Lane, when he died in 1464. She probably taught all of her daughters her skills, but their father's money enabled them all to marry extremely well and acquire a position which could destroy a woman's desire to continue in her craft. They all survived her, but her choice of Elizabeth, who had married William Marowe, once mayor of London, as one of her executors, suggests Elizabeth, at least, had kept up the trade. Katherine's son and heir was also a mercer.<sup>17</sup>

*Beatrice Fitz-Andrew-Fyler*, had a substantial business from the 1430s to 1479. Her authority and status as a silkwoman were such that her husband permitted her to make her own will. She was the daughter and co-heiress of a London draper and a good catch for Thomas Fyler, mercer. They had seven children, of whom at least two died before Beatrice and all but one daughter before Thomas. This daughter, Joan, who married two mercers, Thomas Rawson and then John Marshall, had probably learnt the craft from her mother; she served as an executor of her mother with the aid of the silkwoman Alice Claver and her own eldest brother, Edward. Edward's will, made only days after his mother's, records many women's names and many can be suggested as among his mother's workforce.<sup>18</sup>

A little known contemporary of Beatrice was *Agnes Cotford*, a silkwoman, who can be glimpsed buying five pounds of gold thread from a Venetian for £11 13s 4d in 1441 -- Venice and Lucca were the main sources of good quality gold thread at this time. The quantity indicates she was well established in the trade.<sup>19</sup> She was probably the wife of the mercer John Cotford, on the livery of his company from 1419. His interest in silkwifery and the vestmentmaking aspect of mercery is shown by his acting as a valuer of velvets in 1446 and by his inclusion among the advisers in a case concerning the testamentary wishes of Maud Comeswell alias Aumery, silkwoman, in the commissary court of London. Maud's executrix and servant of fifty-one years standing was a Katherine Arnold silkwoman, who was duly allowed to buy goods from the estate and be rewarded with £40. Neither of these women can be linked to mercers, but the other advisers over the estate were the mercers William Fleet (already mentioned) and Thomas Batail (see below) along with an Agnes Gedney, probably a silkwoman.<sup>20</sup>

As obscure and prosperous as Agnes Cotford, was *Alice, the first wife of William Gladman*. Alice's goods are known to have reached buyers in Shropshire and York in the 1450s, but she predeceased her husband, who died his his turn in 1465.<sup>21</sup>

A little more can be reconstructed of the life of *Agnes Woodhouse-Gedge*, another contemporary of these silkwomen. She was a supplier of seven ounces of Cyprus silver thread to the king's great wardrobe for 21s in 1438-39 – the Isle of Cyprus was another important supplier of silver and gold thread but often of a lesser quality than that made in Italy.<sup>22</sup> She had been born a Woodhouse and while still a child had inherited money and later property from her brother John, a kinsman and a past clerk of the undersheriff William Creswyk. This had no doubt facilitated her apprenticeship to the expensive trade of silkwoman and marriage to a mercer with equally good prospects. She was certainly the wife of either William or Henry Gedge, both mercers and both past apprentices of John Coventry, an eminent London mercer and mayor (1425-26) whose family had originated in Coventry. It is likely the Gedges also originated in that city.<sup>23</sup> In 1464 she died a

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<sup>17</sup> Her trade was specified in her husband's will, PROB 11/5, ff. 32v-35v; her will GL, MS 9171/6, ff. 47-48v. Sutton, 'Shopfloor', pp. 47-48.

<sup>18</sup> Beatrice, died 1479, GL, MS 9171/6, f. 280v. Her son Edward's will 1479, GL, MS 9171/6, f. 280v. Her husband, Thomas Fyler's will, GL, MS 9171/6, f. 335r-v. For more on the Fylers, Sutton, 'Alice Claver', p. 135, and Sutton, 'The women of the Mercery', forthcoming.

<sup>19</sup> PRO, E 101/128/31, m. 11, cited Dale, thesis, p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> CPMR 1437-57, p. 93 (valuation). GL, MS 9171/3, f. 502 (Comeswell case). Alice Gedney might be the wife or widow of the mercer Thomas Gedney (on the livery from 1392) but she has not been identified. Sutton, 'Shop-floor', p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> CPR 1461-67, p. 510. [J. Raine, ed.], *Testamenta Eboracensia*, Surtees Society 45 (1865), vol. 3, p. 104. S. Jenks, 'Das sreiberbuch des John Thorpe und das hansische Handel in London', *Hansische Geschichtblätter* 101 (1983), p. 102, no. 74. William Gladman (d. 1465), GL, MS 9171/5, f. 376Ar-v, referred to Alice and his new wife Katherine.

<sup>22</sup> PRO, E 101/409/12, f. 19v (f. 20v in transcript by Dale, thesis, p. 174).

<sup>23</sup> A later Gedge was an apprentice of John Tate II, another mercer with Coventry origins. No Gedge will survive. Woodhouse died 1413 and left Agnes £20 for her marriage, and property in Highbury and Peckham after the life-estate of his widow; Agnes and her money were put in the care of Margaret, wife of John Sydyngbourne (one of Woodhouse's executors), and it is therefore probable that it was Margaret who taught Agnes her craft. For these Woodhouses, see A.F. Sutton, 'The career of

widow, leaving two torches to the Mercers' Chapel, and selling a brewhouse in Peckham to the scrivener Robert Bale – but leaving no surviving will.<sup>24</sup>

*Joan Batail* was probably a silkwoman. She and her second husband, mercer Thomas Batail, apprenticed her daughter, Joan, by her previous husband, Robert Bosoun goldsmith, to Anne Spencer, a throwster, in the early 1440s. It must be said that if Joan were a silkwoman it is odd that she did not teach her own daughter, but her second marriage may have made this inconvenient or im-possible.<sup>25</sup> Batail was certainly experienced in the silkwifery and vestment-making side of mercery: he was an executor of Margaret Clitherowe silkwoman, and an adjudicator over the estate of the silkwoman, Maud Cameswell, described above. Both Thomas and Joan left bequests to maidens of the Mercery. Thomas was an old man of seventy-two in 1456 when he made his bequest to five 'maydens in Chepeside and Soper Lane that be prentees or oute of ther termes dwelling or were prentees which mercers wives have', giving them the remarkably large sum of ten marks each for their marriages. Usually such girls were lucky to receive 6s 8d (half a mark) each. His bequest is one of the most informative about the maidens of the Mercery that survives in a mercer's will, and Joan's will further described the maidens who received her charity as 'frendles', indicating an experienced awareness of their plight. It is reasonable to place Thomas among the mercer dealers in silkwifery and to make his wife a silkwoman.<sup>26</sup>

A mention of a female apprentice is often the only clue that suggests a woman was in trade – property required that there be a mistress in a household where there were female apprentices, and the law usually demanded that women take their apprentices in conjunction with their husband. *Clemence wife of Richard Somery* of St Laurence Jewry, had two female apprentices at her husband's death in 1430; they had no children and, although not an executor (she was probably a second wife), she received the entire estate after expenses.<sup>27</sup> There is no evidence, besides these apprentices, that Clemence, was a silkwoman, but the suggestion is supported by the Somerys' association with Maud and Thomas Muschamp. Thomas Muschamp was a product of the Somery household, in other words he had been Somery's apprentice, and Muschamp, in his turn, took as his apprentice, William Morton, who was to become a supplier of splendid vestments to Edward IV.<sup>28</sup> Morton therefore had learnt the skills of vestmentmaking from the Muschamp household, and by extension Muschamp had learnt it from the Somerys. In 1449-50 Muschamp 'made' and 'ordained' vestments for the Mercers' Company while he was a warden.<sup>29</sup> Another apprentice of the Somery household who should be mentioned as part of this tradition was Roger Roos, whose wife Maud may have had a silkwifery shop.<sup>30</sup> There seems little doubt that this sequence of mercery households – Somery-Muschamp-Morton and probably Roos – passed on the skills of the vestmentmaking and silkwifery side of the mercery trade. *Maud Muschamp*, had a career in silkwifery of about fifty years, twenty-six of them as a widow; she had her own shop and in her will divided the 'ustilmentes of my shop with coffyns, focer and frames that long to the same' between her two daughters, both called Elizabeth, 'the elder to chose one parcell and the yonger an

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Robert Bale, scrivener and chronicler of London', forthcoming.

<sup>24</sup> WA, f. 211. *Catalogue of Ancient Deeds*, vol. 1, C 1078, p. 493, 8 Feb. 1464. She may have avoided a will by the gift of goods and chattels she made to William Clon, writer of the court letter, 1460, *CPMR 1458-82*, p. 155.

<sup>25</sup> Anne was the wife of Richard Spencer at the time and then remarried William Rotheley a goldsmith. A chancery case resulted over their failure to enroll her in the first year of her term, *CPMR 1437-57*, p. 88.

<sup>26</sup> *CPMR 1437-57*, p. 88. Sutton, 'Shop-floor', pp. 42-43. The Batails died 1456 and 1458, PROB 11/4, ff. 44v-45v, 88.

<sup>27</sup> Richard was on the livery 1414; he mentioned two 'late' female servants, Alice Charlton and Isabel Warmington, and 'my' two female apprentices, Margaret Rode and Alice Lech, as well as all the apprentices he had ever trained; there are several bequests to women in his will, GL, MS 9171/3, f. 250v. Two other Somerys were mercers at this date, and probably Richard's brother, John, was the mercer of that name.

<sup>28</sup> He was Morton's second master, after William Miles. For Morton's career A.F. Sutton and P.W. Hammond, eds, *The Coronation of Richard III*, Gloucester 1983, p. 64.

<sup>29</sup> WA, f. 168; he 'made' and 'ordained' the same, with Robert Baron – there is no firm indication Baron was in the same business but Muschamp was one of his executors in 1456, PROB 11/4, ff. 40v-41. Thomas's will, PROB 11/6, ff. 104v-06.

<sup>30</sup> Roos mentioned in his will of 1475 that his cousin Eleanor had been running her mistress's shop for a year and a half, the details unfortunately unexplained – his last wife, Maud, or an earlier wife, may have been the mistress meant, GL, MS 9171/6, f. 195v; Richard Wise, mercer, advised Roos's widow. Roos was of Colton, Norfolk; on livery 1443-44. A large number of mercers were called Roos at this date, although not all were related, e.g: William Roos mercer (adm. 1472) and vestmentmaker, PRO, Common Plea Rolls, Mich. 1484, CP 140/890, m. 162.

other', at her death in 1498.<sup>31</sup> Through these connections, the Somery household's influence stretched from 1400 to 1499 and beyond.

The spider's web of interconnections through skills learnt by apprenticeship in the household of the master and mistress are all important for understanding the life of the Mercery of London -- the interlocking trades of mercer, vestmentmaker, embroiderer and silkwoman, reached across the social divides that success and wealth could create. In the sixteenth century this web was to facilitate the dissemination of the reformed religion in London. The influence of the Fleet household can be picked up again in the person of *Isabel Brown-Hatton*, sister of John Brown, mercer and vestmentmaker, who went into the female side of the business as a silkwoman, and may have trained like her brother in the household of Thomas Gibbes, mercer, vestmentmaker and embroiderer. Gibbes was in fact king's embroiderer to Edward IV.<sup>32</sup> Isabel's husband, Nicholas Hatton, had trained in the mercer-silkwifery household of the Fleets, so he would have readily accepted, indeed actively wanted, a wife with textile skills. Isabel trained at least three apprentices, and had a shop in the *Crown* sold with her husband, as Nicholas's past mistress, Isabel Fleet, had done. Nicholas ended his days as silkweigher, operating the small beam of the city on which he weighed all silk brought to him by sellers and buyers within the city, especially those sales which involved a man who was not a citizen of London. It was a job that brought him into contact with silkwomen on a day-to-day basis. The Hattons and Browns were therefore part of a mercer, vestmentmaking, silkwifery tradition that stretched back to the establishments of the Fleets and Gibbes, but it also stretched forward to include Richard Lakyn, another highly successful mercer-apprentice of Thomas Gibbes. Lakyn was to prosper exceedingly as an entrepreneur of vestments, with clients including Henry VII, and as an adventurer. At his death in the early sixteenth century he became a benefactor of the Mercers' Company. The influence the Fleet dynasty of skill therefore ran throughout the fifteenth century.<sup>33</sup>

*Margery Frost* was another mercer's widow who had two female apprentices in her house at her death, and was perhaps of the silkwoman's trade. She left one married daughter, but another, Beatrice, died a single woman, again possibly a silkwoman. Both mother and daughter died 1471-72.<sup>34</sup> *Margaret, the last wife of Thomas Gasse* had two apprentices, Margaret Morley and Agnes Holgrave. Although she was not left the goods of her husband's shop -- a second wife often did less well as a legatee if there were children by an earlier wife -- Margaret was an executor with her husband's son-in-law.<sup>35</sup> *Elizabeth Bufford* similarly had an apprentice, Elyn, when she died in 1498 -- and eight children. Was she not also a silkwoman?<sup>36</sup> Lastly in this list of mercer wives with apprentices, there was *Margaret Reynold*, for thirty-six years the competent widow of John, and a benefactress of the Mercers' Company. She had an apprentice, Margaret, in her care at John's death as well as Alice, a maiden taken in for charity, and at her own death in 1528 she left her 'frames' to her servant Ellen. Again, it is likely she was a silkwoman.<sup>37</sup>

There is no doubt that *Alice Claver* was one of the most successful silkwomen of later fifteenth-century London. It is just possible she was a product of the teaching of Beatrice Fyler whose executor she was. She herself must have taught many apprentices in her thirty-three years of widowhood. As silkwoman to the Yorkists kings and their courtiers, she is one of those rare silkwomen whose goods can be glimpsed in the great wardrobe accounts of the kings of England, giving some idea of the scope and quality of her trade. She supplied work to decorate Edward IV's books and the mantle laces for the coronation robes of Richard III

<sup>31</sup> Thomas had been affluent enough to serve as sheriff 1463-64. Location of her shop not stated, PROB 11/11, ff. 163-64v, esp. f. 164v. The husbands of her daughters are not named. Both Thomas and Maud tried to control their unruly sons by their wills: Stephen Muschamp mercer was still operating Nov. 1496, PRO, Early Chancery Cases, C 1/189/9.

<sup>32</sup> For Gibbes, *Coronation of Richard III*, p. 64, and next note. Unfortunately he left no will.

<sup>33</sup> Her brother, John Brown, and Henry Colshill, both mercers and vestmentmakers, prosecuted another man over a debt, 1484, PRO, CP 40/890, m. 163; both Brown and Richard Lakyn (see Sutton, *Mercery of London*, App: Benefactors: Lakyn) were apprentices of Thomas Gibbes (called vestmentmaker, PRO, CP 40/890, m. 472). Isabel's 3 female apprentices were in Nicholas's will, GL, MS 9171/6, ff. 287v-88, dated 1470 and proved 1480. John Brown was Nicholas's executor, and was probably the mercer who died 1504 and was kin of Hugh Brown mercer, PROB 11/14, ff. 15v-16. See Sutton, 'Shopfloor', pp. 45-46.

<sup>34</sup> Of the mercer-dominated parish of St Mary Aldermanbury. Beatrice refers to many relatives but no trade, GL, MS 9171/6, f. 103v-04 (1472). Margery's 2 apprentices were Joan Crooke and Grace Overton, 9171/6, f. 104 (1471). Leonissa Frost, corseweaver of St Martin Pomary, was not a relative (d. 1431), 9171/3, f. 243.

<sup>35</sup> PROB 11/4, f. 21v (1455); he was aged 55 at death. There were 4 other children, all minors.

<sup>36</sup> William and Elizabeth Bufford's wills (1497, 1498), PROB 11/8, ff. 7r-v, 126v-27.

<sup>37</sup> Of St Pancras parish; John left her £1000 and all the household goods and made her an executrix, but she did not receive his wares; they had 6 children. John (d. 1492), PROB 11/9, ff. 96-98v; she died 1528, PROB 11/22, ff. 325-26. Sutton, *Mercery*, Appendix 'Benefactors'.

and Queen Anne, among other items. Her mercer husband, Richard Claver, died in November 1456 and her only son, Richard, died early in his career as a mercer. She never remarried and left her business to her favourite apprentice, *Katherine Champion*, who married a mercer in her turn, Thomas Miles. Miles was still living in Alice's great house on Catte Street (now Gresham Street) in 1500. Alice had paid over £8 a year rent for this house, a sure sign of the success of her business.<sup>38</sup>

Another possible apprentice of Alice Claver, and certainly her acquaintance, was *Anne Banknot*, silkwoman niece of the mercer Nicholas Hagour. She came from Shrewsbury to learn her craft in London and there married the mercer William Banknot. Little is known of them – neither left wills which survive – but their acquaintances were prosperous, pious and educated mercers of the area round Guildhall, and William at least was still alive in 1495.<sup>39</sup>

In the circle of Alice Claver, there were some mercer wives who can only be suggested as silkwomen. Such was *the wife of John Abbot*, who can be put forward on the basis that her female servant, Alice Boothe, married well to a fellow apprentice called William Pratte in the 1450s and became a life-long friend of Alice Claver until she died in the 1490s. If Abbot's wife was a silkwoman so was *Alice Boothe-Pratte* and vice-versa.<sup>40</sup> *Alice Wise-Fabian* lived a stone's throw to the east of these women. Simply because she was the daughter of a mercer, Richard Wise (and then first wife of the mercer Thomas Fabian), she may well have been trained in the female mercery craft.<sup>41</sup>

A contemporary of Alice Claver and a fellow supplier of goods to the great wardrobe in 1483 and 1485 was *Cecily wife of John Walcot*, mercer. The Walcots seem to have been prosperous, but John's fortunes may have foundered for he died intestate and Cecily refused to administer his estate.<sup>42</sup>

There were also affluent and capable widows to whom no craft can be allotted with certainty. *Emma Boston* was admitted to the city's freedom on 8 May 1451 as the widow of Thomas Boston and as a mercer, soon after her husband's death. Possibly a silkwoman, her taking of the freedom shows she was determined to continue his business as a mercer.<sup>43</sup> *Elizabeth Rowley* received the sole direction of his estate from her husband, John Rowley, when he died at the young age of thirty-two in 1458. This may indicate she was a business woman and certainly shows she was capable. They had one daughter.<sup>44</sup> Affluent and equally capable was *Elizabeth Lock*, left a widow by the mercer John Lock in 1463; there were six children entrusted to several male custodians so they may not have been hers, but she was appointed one of the executors. It is doubtful that any Lock step-children would have suffered from her second marriage to the stapler William Yorke for it was prudent, wealthy, and had connections to gentry circles.<sup>45</sup> *Margaret Agmondesham* died possessed of counters and a balance and beam in her warehouse in 1494; she also bequeathed a quantity of vestments and

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<sup>38</sup> Miles was an apprentice of Thomas Bradbury, admitted 1490. Sutton, 'Alice Claver', pp. 129-42, and *Mercery of London*, pp. 206-07.

<sup>39</sup> Her trade is described in the will of her uncle, mercer Nicholas Hagour, PROB 11/10, f. 129r-v. And see A.F. Sutton, 'Caxton, the cult of St Winifred, and Shrewsbury', *The Fifteenth Century V*, ed. L. Clark, Woodbridge 2005, pp. 120-21. William was one of those who presented the silkweigher, elected by the Mercers, to the mayor in 1495, WA, f. 210v.

<sup>40</sup> The unnamed wife predeceased her husband, John Abbot, who died 1443, PROB 11/3, ff. 272-73. Sutton, 'Alice Claver', pp. 141-42 and A.F. Sutton, 'Caxton was a mercer: his social milieu and friends', *England in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. N. Rogers, Harlaxton Medieval Studies IV, Stamford 1994, pp. 142-43.

<sup>41</sup> For Fabian, see Sutton, 'Alice Claver', p. 141 n.

<sup>42</sup> *Coronation of Richard III*, pp. 114-16, 409.

<sup>43</sup> CLRO, Recognizance Roll 19, m. 4d (cited by Dale, thesis, p. 97, as m. 2d; the roll has since been repaired); her sureties were Hugh Wiche, Richard Bonyfaunt, William Redknap and William Lightholders, mercers. Thomas was admitted to the Mercers 1443-44, on the livery 1445-46, and dead c. 1450. Not to be confused with John Boston, mercer, alias Frankish, to whom Hugh Wiche was apprenticed from 1413-14. John was warden 1429-30, but was dead by 1440, when sureties were taken for an estate of £1000 for his son, Thomas, *K*, p. 251. (As this child was not yet 21 in 1443, it is unlikely he was the Thomas, who was admitted 1443-44, on livery 1445-46, and dead c. 1450.) The Wiche connection implies a relationship between two Bostons. John Boston and Wiche's widow were benefactors of Queens' College, Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, Queens' College, Book 76, ff. 3-6v.

<sup>44</sup> Rowley, PROB 11/4, f. 102.

<sup>45</sup> Born a Cokayn, and it is her gentry status which suggests she was Lock's second 'trophy' wife. She had children by Yorke. Lock (d. 1463), PROB 11/5, ff. 7-9; Yorke died 1476 when she was executrix again. She died 1497, PROB 11/11, ff. 113v-14v. Her connections included Thomas Windsor, the nephew-in-law of Alice, last wife of Hugh Wiche, see Sutton, 'Women of the Mercery', forthcoming.

tablecloths to churches, commodities which strongly suggest but do not prove her a silkwoman.<sup>46</sup> *Katherine Wyndout-Haddon*, who survived marriages to Alderman Thomas Wyndout and Sir Richard Haddon (mayor 1506-07, 1513), is another candidate, but only her first husband, Thomas Wyndout, falls within the period discussed here. His ownership of a house in the parish of St Pancras, the main Mercery parish, and a shop in the *Crown* sold, full of mercers and silkwomen, and his employment of two maidens, all suggest an interest in retail and silk-wifery which may have involved his wife. When she died in 1524, Katherine left bequests to an Alice Trouster (possibly her trade rather than her surname) and her son, and set aside £100 especially to provide alms for women – both natural charities for a past silkwoman.<sup>47</sup>

Undoubtedly this list does not include all the mercer daughters, wives and widows, who were silkwomen in fifteenth-century London. It also certainly misses more from the poorer ranks than the richer echelons, those

maidens in Chepeside and Soper Lane that be prentees, or oute of ther termes dwelling, or were prentees which mercers wifes have

who so desperately needed the charity of such as Joan and Thomas Batail to help them to a dowry and so attract an offer of marriage. The silkwoman's craft made a woman desirable as a wife, but money mattered too.

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<sup>46</sup> Widow of Philip, d. 1490, PROB 11/8, ff. 264v-65; she died herself 1494, PROB 11/10, ff. 44v-45v: her sheets were to be divided among poor women and she left a bequest to Katherine Hardman who had been supported by Alice Claver. Her sons had received their inheritance from their father before his death; a daughter married Christopher Hawe mercer and stapler.

<sup>47</sup> For Wyndout see D. Keene and V. Harding, *Historical Gazetteer of London before the Great Fire*, vol. 1, *Cheapside*, Cambridge 1987, 145/14-15, 104/33, and PROB 11/12, ff. 28v-29. Katherine was not, however, an executor. Her second husband, Richard Haddon, was a relative and apprentice of William Bufford, whose wife Elizabeth has been suggested as a silkwoman above and who left her sister Haddon a diamond ring, PROB 11/8, f. 127. Katherine's will, PROB 11/21, ff. 236-38. And see Sutton, *Mercery of London*, App: 'Benefactors': Haddon.