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Sir Rowland Hill (c.1495-1561)

'A foe to vice and a vehement corrector', as his tomb monument says, Hill was a generous philanthropist with a steely edge. Born in Shropshire and apprenticed to a mercer on his arrival in London, he had by 1541 become one of the three richest men in the City. Much of his wealth went to charity: schools, the Bethlem asylum and the new Bridewell hospital. But he had no time for incompetents or wrongdoers, whatever their rank. As Sheriff he sent a Member of Parliament to prison for debt, and was then himself imprisoned in the Tower when he abused the sergeant who demanded the MP's release.

Key events in his life

- c. 1495: Born, Hodnet, Shropshire
- 1519: Freeman, Mercers' Company
- 1542: Knighted
- 1543: First elected Master, Mercers' Company
- 1549: Lord Mayor of London
- 1559: President (later Surveyor-General), Hospitals of Bridewell and Bethlem
- 1561: Died. Buried St Stephen's Walbrook

A foe to vice

Rowland Hill came to London as a young man from the village of Hodnet in Shropshire, and was apprenticed to the London mercer, Thomas Kitson. Having obtained the freedom of the Mercers' Company in 1519, Hill prospered in the textile trade and rapidly became a leading merchant adventurer and one of the wealthiest men in London. Hill was elected Master of the Mercers' Company four times between 1543 and 1561, was Alderman for the wards of Castle Baynard and Walbrook and was knighted on 18 May 1542. He became Lord Mayor of London in 1549 and during the period of his mayoralty the City acquired the former dissolved manors of Bermondsey Priory and lands belonging to the see of Canterbury in Southwark. At the same time the Aldermen secured a charter which granted them additional powers over the troublesome suburbs on the Southbank and the Livery

Companies petitioned the Crown to re-acquire chantry properties lost during the Dissolution. Hill also used the opportunity presented by his mayoralty to launch a crusade to promote moral standards, and he gained a fearsome reputation as a 'foe to vice and a vehement corrector'.

Most sure and faithful friend

Much of Hill's personal energies were devoted to charitable and philanthropic causes. He gave generously to the poor and took a personal interest in the running of the hospitals of Bridewell and Bethlem, holding the post of president and later surveyor-general of the London hospitals from 1559 until his death. He also appears to have been a kind and benevolent landlord. When he put in an offer to the Mercers' Company for the lease of three tenements known as a 'great message' on the former site of the Hospital of St Thomas Acon, near Old Jewry in 1543, he undertook to repair the properties, which were found to be in a ruinous state, to provide accommodation for the sexton and mass priest who had chambers there, and to maintain the school until new accommodation could be found. The school was eventually moved at Hill's expense from the cloister area to rooms on the north side of the chancel. Sir Rowland eventually passed the properties over to the care of his 'most suer and faithfull friende' and fellow mercer, Sir Thomas Leigh.

Legacy and remembrance

Hill never forgot his birthplace and he established a school at Market Drayton in Shropshire. He also acquired extensive estates, much of it former monastic lands, in his home county as well as Cheshire, Flintshire and Staffordshire. Sir Rowland died on 28th October 1561 of 'strangwylyon' [strangury = a painful urinary condition] and his property passed to his nieces, one of whom had married his long-standing friend Sir Thomas Leigh. Hill was buried in the parish church of St Stephen Walbrook on 5 November 1561. He left provision in his will for the distribution of a dole of 12d per house throughout the City.

Further reading

On-line resources

- The Mercers' Company: www.mercers.co.uk

- The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: www.oxforddnb.com (note: this resource is available to subscribers only)

Books and articles

- J. Imray, *The Mercers' Hall*, London Topographical Society Publication No. 143, 1991
- D. Keene and V. Harding, *Historical Gazetteer of London before the Great Fire, I Cheapside*, Cambridge, 1987
- J. Watney, *Some Account of the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon, in the Cheap, London, and of the Plate of the Mercers' Company*, London, 1892 and 1906
- J. Watney, *An Account of the Mistery of the Mercers of the City of London, otherwise the Mercers' Company*, London, 1914