

## SECRECY AND AUTHORITY IN LATE SIXTEENTH- AND SEVENTEENTH- CENTURY LONDON\*

PAUL GRIFFITHS

*University of Leicester*

**ABSTRACT.** *Governors always seek to monitor the flow of information and guide its release. Secrecy and tactical publicity are valued aspects of government, boosting authority but also marking limits of participation by restricting access to official words and their written expression. Close attention is given to two ubiquitous institutions in early modern London, guilds and vestries (material illustrating city government is also introduced). A distinction is drawn between concealed information and policy communicated to the people. Attention is given thus to the regulation of meetings, chests and keys, and the selective discharge of information. Secrecy gave rise to vocabularies of ‘public’ and ‘private’. It was a code (a form of protection), but in languages of ‘private’ and ‘public’ as they were used in specific contexts studied here, it also depicted the use of space, the distribution of authority, and the limits of access and participation. The study of secrecy and partial publicity adds another dimension to our knowledge of the formation of opinion, perceptions of authority were partly formed by this enclosure of information, secrecy spawned speculation. It also provides a linguistic indictment of the nature of government in institutions which mouthed fraternal tunes while remaining obsessed with formality and secrecy.*

---

In 1622 the lord keeper passed judgement on a dispute that had rocked the large extra-mural parish of St Botolph-without-Aldgate and divided the ‘substantial’ parishioners into two camps both of which claimed rightful possession of the parochial records. The ‘keeping, ordering and disposing’ of these written repositories of political authority and memory were sore and symbolic points. The plaintiffs – they called themselves ‘the minister, churchwardens, and vestrymen’ of the parish – alleged that a rival group, which claimed common identity as common council men and former churchwardens, had wrestled possession of the ‘common chest and divers bondes, evidences, writings, church bookes, vestrey bookes, accompts, and stockes of money’, the ‘custodie’ of which lawfully belonged to the vestry. The chest and its contents now lay shut up in a ‘private house’. The plaintiffs flatly declared ‘that no vestry ought to be kept in a private mans house nor by any private person’.

The principal defendant was Mr Vinton, the deputy of Portsoken ward. He justified the appropriation of parochial records in terms of civic status and right – as deputy and common councillors of the ward they had taken them ‘into their hands and into their particular custodies’, and did in fact ‘challenge to

\* I must thank Bob Tittler and Keith Wrightson for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

themselves the safe keeping, ordering and disposing thereof'. After 'long debating' the lord keeper declared in favour of the plaintiffs, the self-styled men of the parish. He ruled that Vinton and his associates, 'as they are officers chosen for the civill government' of the ward, 'cannot nor ought to assume unto themselves any such authority or custome' to seize the privileged information of the parish, its 'books and writings'. Indeed, their 'pretended usage' was 'utterlie voyd in law and againste reason, discretion, and common understandinge, and contrarie to the laudable customes and usages' of all other parishes in London.

The defendants were therefore ordered to carry the parish chest and its politically vital contents to the vestry house 'to be kept and disposed of by the minister, churchwardens, and vestrymen... as heretofore hath ancientlie bene accustomed'. Parochial politics, and more specifically its written record, were returned to the vestry house. 'At all tymes hereafter', the lord keeper announced, the vestrymen ought to keep meetings in the vestry house, the 'parliament' of the parish,<sup>1</sup> and 'not in a private house nor in any other place' where the secret counsels of the elite would be exposed to unregulated access and reinterpretation by the governed of the parish. Thus St Botolph's regained control of its 'writings', the chest was safely locked up in the vestry, and keys were given to the churchwardens and three leading vestrymen. Yet the 'writings' drifted back in dribs and drabs. Worse still, books were turned over with 'divers partes torne and defaced, so that the truth of the accomptes cannot appeare'. The spoiling of records could be political sabotage, a ploy to cover up past abuses, or to rewrite privileged information. The lord keeper took steps to restore the erased entries. Commissioners examined Vinton and his associates about the 'defacing of books and detaining of any others concerning the parish'. St Botolph's could not rest until full and accurate records were safely under lock and key and vestrymen resumed control of the parish behind closed doors. Only then could parish politics be put back on an even keel. For like all other parishes, the smooth government of St Botolph's depended upon closure, cloistered discussion, regulated access, and secrecy.<sup>2</sup>

The close regulation of words and documents, the monitoring of information, was routine yet controversial (and contested) business for all forms of government in early modern London.<sup>3</sup> Unregulated words often mocked authority, questioned policy and trimmed reputations. Rumours, mocking rhymes, libels, slanders, gossip and seditious words, drawing as they often did from a deep well of popular experience in which meaning was far more diverse and spontaneous than the conventional vocabularies of governors could allow, were pursued and prosecuted. The meaning of words was flexible, mutable and disputable. Their significance turned on who was reading, speaking and

<sup>1</sup> W. E. Tate called the vestry the 'parish parliament': *The parish chest: a study of the records of parochial administration in England* (3rd edn, Cambridge, 1969), p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> G[uildhall] L[ibrary] London, MS 9236/1.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Arlette Farge, *Subversive words: public opinion in eighteenth-century Paris*, first published in France in 1992, trans. Rosemary Morris (Oxford, 1994).

interpreting them. Unless it was thought necessary to publicize them, the words of governors were for their eyes and ears only. This was not only true of parish politics: the deliberations of the governors of guilds and the city itself ought to be confined to closed chambers and deposited in officially scripted documents and locked chests. Secrecy protected existing structures of authority.

Today, we can consult the records of city, company and parish government with relative ease. But for contemporaries these records were charged with ‘political electricity’,<sup>4</sup> they travelled along circuits of authority. It was hoped that the discharge of official information would be carefully conducted and its public entry choreographed and made to appear imposing and final. As such, secrecy is a valuable part of the discussion of the dissemination of news, the ‘public’ spaces of the city and the formation of opinion. Governors contrasted their orderly discussion and disclosure of sensitive words with the volatile temper of popular opinion in which gossip and speculation rushed to every corner of the city.

Their ideas about the partition of ‘public’ and ‘private’ provinces are one theme of this essay, which explores some aspects of the management of official words and their written expression; but in a restricted sense because its principal concern is with access. More specifically, who had access to records upon which we now base our discussions of the nature of life in early modern London? Who was able to pore over the records of proceedings in the vestry and its ‘instrument’, financial accounts, guild charters, the recorded decisions of company wardens and assistants, or, indeed, the principal records of city government? All of these records are formal testimonies. They were shaped by the priorities of government and by scribal convention, but also on occasion, by partial disclosure. They are products of secrecy and scrutiny. But how many words passed unrecorded? How many acts of forgery and sabotage have distorted our sense of this part of the past? What was labelled unfit to be disclosed or even written down? In January 1572 the court of aldermen communicated its sensitivity by an act of omission, for they would not put into words ‘a matter of great secessie and waight which is not thought mete to be named towchinge the citie’. On another occasion, the mayor and aldermen ordered that the sensitive details of an examination ‘be kept secrett’. Similarly, in 1579 the court of London bridewell refused to name a ‘sodometicall synne not mete to be wryten’.<sup>5</sup> Certain things were best left unsaid and concealed.

The squabble in St Botolph’s also reminds us that significance was attached to the physical site of record-keeping and meeting; that access to official words and their written expression was closely monitored; that records possessed and communicated authority;<sup>6</sup> and that the meaning of ‘public’ and ‘private’

<sup>4</sup> This phrase belongs to James C. Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts* (New Haven 1991).

<sup>5</sup> C[orporation of] L[ondon] R[ecord] O[ffice], rep[ertories of the court of aldermen] 17, fo. 246; 30, fo. 26v; GL, B[ridewell] C[ourtbooks] consulted on microfilm, 3, fo. 19 July 1579 (the date of the case is given in the absence of, or severe irregularity of, pagination).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Adam Fox, ‘The authority of writing’, in Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox and Steve Hindle, eds., *The experience of authority in early modern England* (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 89–116.

raised controversy. I will explore each of these areas in turn. Lurking in the shadows is the issue of the nature of government in early modern London,<sup>7</sup> though my principal concern is the means by which government was protected, propagated and on occasion contested. But let us begin with the formal meeting of elites and its written record.

## I

Parish, vestry and city governors selected strategic words to depict their political community and territory. They attempted to disguise inequalities by harmonizing disparate parts into a single ‘fellowship’, ‘fraternity’ or ‘society’.<sup>8</sup> It was hoped that such pretensions to publicity and democracy would cultivate a mood of inclusion to lighten the sense of differentiation and distance upon which authority depended. Yet it is well known that ruling cores established ‘a society within a society’.<sup>9</sup> Integrative rhetoric was commonplace, but it was difficult to bridge distances which were ritually paraded and protected. Both publicity and secrecy were used to preserve existing hierarchies.<sup>10</sup> Freemen promised to keep guild matters ‘private’, newly enrolled apprentices pledged not to gossip about their master, the essentials of a trade were a ‘mystery’. At a time of ‘differences and distractions’ in their company, the Stationers’ governors reported that ‘divers complaints were made unto the parliament wherein all the secretts and misteries of this profession were laid open’.<sup>11</sup> It was made clear that swift steps would be taken against members of a society who disclosed its affairs. Secrecy mattered: it was a valued quality of good government.<sup>12</sup>

A veil of secrecy covered the sensitive conversations of the mayor and aldermen, company elites and vestrymen. The governors of the city, guild and parish preferred to meet behind closed doors, and the exclusive nature of proceedings helped to institutionalize inequality by restricting access. A ‘disturbance’ upset the Stationers’ governors in 1651. They complained that ‘the court dore is not kept shutt soe that persons come in suddenly when the court is private whereby business is interrupted’, and requested that ‘speciall care be taken by the beadle for keeping the court private and that noe person be suffered to come in untill the bell be rung by the master or wardens’. It was the beadle who interrupted discussion in 1682. On this occasion the court told him that he should not ‘presume at anytime hereafter to come into the counsell

<sup>7</sup> The more important recent contributions include Ian W. Archer, *The pursuit of stability: social relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge, 1991); Jeremy Boulton, *Neighbourhood and society: a London suburb in the seventeenth century* (Cambridge, 1987); Valerie Pearl, ‘Change and stability in seventeenth-century London’, in Jonathan Barry, ed., *The Tudor and Stuart town: a reader in English urban history, 1530–1688* (Harlow, 1990), pp. 139–65, first published in *London Journal*, v (1979); and Steve Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds: structures of life in sixteenth-century London* (Cambridge, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> See my *Youth and authority: formative experiences in England, 1560–1640* (Oxford, 1996), ch. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Boulton, *Neighbourhood and society*, p. 150.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Tittler associates a concern with record-keeping, secrecy and scrutiny with the ‘political requirements’ of urban communities – ‘powers of social control at local levels of authority’ (*Architecture and power: the town hall and the English urban community, c. 1500–1640* (Oxford, 1991), p. 128).

<sup>11</sup> S[tationers] C[ompany] minute book C, fos. 178–8v.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Farge, *Subversive words*, pp. 33, 61.

chamber or courtroome... while the court is sitting untill he be called in by the ringing of the bell'. The vestry of St Bride's Fleet Street 'thought fitt and ordered' in 1646 'that none excepte vestriemen and the clerke of the vestrie should be present in the vestrie at the time of debatinge of busines'. A staffman was ordered to 'attend without at the vestrie doore every sittinge to keepe men at distance from hearkinge to any proceedinges for want whereof [it was said] some inconvenience happened [at] the last vestrie'.<sup>13</sup>

The discussion of policy and finance was for certain ears only. The court of aldermen met in an inner chamber in the guildhall ensuring that their deliberations remained for the most part secret.<sup>14</sup> The wardens and assistants of the guilds usually discussed policy apart from the rest of the company in the court, a 'private' room, or more 'informally...over dinner at the hall'.<sup>15</sup> Vestries usually met behind locked doors in the vestry house – a separate building or a part of the church. The parish of St Alphage, London Wall, made plans in 1601 to build a vestry house in the church porch.<sup>16</sup> The size of some houses is a further reminder of the small numbers who made up the parish core. The vestry house of St Matthew, Friday Street was only ten feet long and eight feet four inches wide.<sup>17</sup> Nor were vestrymen slow to spend parish funds on comfortable and ornate furnishings – green cloth to cover chairs, a good table, an iron hearth, 'two dozen turkeywork chairs', 'deale framed wanskott fashion' above the seats, 'and other necessaries for the furnishing of the... vestry roome'.<sup>18</sup>

The boundaries of rooms marked the limits of formal discussion; physical segregation represented political partition. The Goldsmiths 'thought fitt to establish some order for ye preventing of the discoverie of such affaires as shall hereafter be passed at courts of assistants'.<sup>19</sup> The door opened out onto the street where things were less certain, where privileged information would be

<sup>13</sup> SC minute books C, fo. 266; E, fo. 153v; GL, MS 6554/1, fo. 18v. Cf. Tittler, *Architecture and power*, esp. pp. 117–18. The governors of hospitals also expected that their courtroom would be a closed institution. In 1561 the governors of St Thomas's ordered that 'none of the bedilles nor other officers be suffered to remayne within the courthouse during so longe tyme as the courte shall conteneue for that they shall not be privie to their talke other than onely their clerk'. They ordered 'that the beadle shall stand withoute the dore' in 1565. In 1576 they instructed that the steward 'should attend upon the governors' when they sat in court 'without the courte dore and not within for that his offyce is not thereunto incydent'. And in 1660 they ruled that 'neither the steward... nor any other officer but the clarke onely [is allowed to] be within the court duringe its sitting but [to] stay at the door without and be ready to be called into court upon any occasion. And that a bell be provided to call in suitors'. See G[reater] L[ondon] R[ecord] O[ffice], H1/ST/A1/1, fo. 44; H1/ST/A1/2, fo. 14v; H1/ST/A1/3, fo. 167v; H1/ST/A1/5, fo. 130v.

<sup>14</sup> F. F. Foster, *The politics of stability: a portrait of the rulers in Elizabethan London* (Royal Historical Society Publications, London, 1977), p. 77; Valerie Pearl, *London and the outbreak of the puritan revolution: city government and national politics, 1625–43* (Oxford, 1961), p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds*, p. 246.

<sup>16</sup> GL, MS 1431/1, fo. 21v. See also GL, MSS 2597/1, fo. 32; 1431/2, fo. 28; 4813/1, fo. 106; 8771/1, fo. 174; 4072/1, fos. 205, 206v, 211.

<sup>17</sup> GL, MS 3579/1, fo. 28.

<sup>18</sup> GL, MSS 4887/1, fo. 378; 1431/2, fos. 28, 37; 4072/1, fo. 291v; 819/1, fo. 85v; 1240/1, fos. 3, 36; 959/1, fos. 43, 170v; 4214/1, fo. 64. Tittler argues that English urban communities were spending more money on ornate furnishings at this time, and he relates this to rising concern with civic pride and authority (*Architecture and power*, esp. pp. 36–7, 119–20, 158).

<sup>19</sup> G[oldsmiths'] C[ompany] L[ibrary], minute book P2, fo. 220.

reinterpreted in wrong hands. Inside it was hoped that proceedings would be more regular and controlled. The vestry of St Dunstan-in-the-West, like many other similar institutions, passed a code of conduct for attendance and behaviour. Vestrymen were told to arrive promptly after the ringing of the bell; while ‘debateing busines... everie man [was to] be silent and attentive without talking or conferring one with another’; no vestryman was to ‘discover or disclose any busines agitated in the vestrie except by appoyntment and direccon’ of the rest at the risk of a steep fine or expulsion at the ‘discretion of the major part’.<sup>20</sup>

Aldermen, vestrymen and the governors of guilds solemnly pledged not to scatter ‘secret’ matters abroad. But such information did on occasion leak out and become public property and news. In 1635, for example, the governors of the Stationers protested that ‘many of the businesses of this court have bene divulged abroad by some of this company [‘assistants’ is scratched out] to the great scandall of the government thereof’. Assistants would be ‘fyned or suspended’ if they ‘divulge[d] or gave intimation of any busines whatsoever of secrecy done in court’. Several Goldsmiths’ assistants also breached the secrecy code. In 1624 the company noted that

it is found by experience that of late yeares many tymes the passages and proceedings at courts of assistants... have bene by some of the parties present at those courts published abroad and bene the occasion of much causeles evill opinion and unkyndnes to be conceaved by others that have bene absent.

In the following year it was ordered that wardens and assistants would be ‘absolutely dismissed and put out of the assistants and livery... never to be restored’ if they ‘published, discovered, or disclosed’ any ‘speeches or passages’ passed in the courtroom.<sup>21</sup> Nor were people outside ruling ranks to attempt to influence events. The Apothecaries ‘ordered that noe man shall hereafter presume before there be anie assembly of the assistants or att anie assemblye to move or persuade privately or publiquely anyone of the assistants to give his voyce for anie man [or] for anie matter to be afterwards determined of’.<sup>22</sup>

Sensitive matters were discussed behind shut doors, but this did not dam up conversation and speculation. In fact, the imaginative content of opinion was electrified by the clandestine nature of official conferences. Imaginations were sharpened and tuned by limited access. Small wonder, then, that rumours reached rulers and even less surprisingly, were roundly condemned for being ill-informed. Accusations of bribery, preferential treatment and governors lining their pockets were not uncommon.<sup>23</sup> We too must often speculate about the transactions in the governor’s room, though like early modern people we

<sup>20</sup> GL, MS 3016/1, fo. 250. See also GL, MSS 1175/1, fos. 37, 45; 819/1, fos. 9, 88v; 3016/1, fo. 636; 4813/1, fos. 2, 14, 14v; 4216/1, fos. 77, 175; 5019/1, fo. 57; 3579/1, fo. 46; 3908/1, fo. 34v; 877/1, fo. 205; 1264/1, fo. 10; 113/1 part 1, fo. 84v.

<sup>21</sup> SC minute book C, fo. 135; GCL, minute books P2, fos. 365–5v; Q1, fo. 16v.

<sup>22</sup> GL, MS 8200/1, fo. 45.

<sup>23</sup> For example, GCL, minute books O3, fo. 546; P, fo. 127v; P2, fos. 196v, 201v, 202v–4, 282; Q2, fos. 146, 146v; Z, fos. 131, 137–7v.

can make informed guesses which are rooted in our knowledge of their preference for secrecy. Yet much has passed unrecorded and it is lost. Official talk was certainly not limited to formal councils. But how important was informal conversation, moments snatched before or after church, a chance meeting on the street, or table-talk? Nor was the clerk who minuted proceedings present at every meeting, some of which were much like sub-committees managing ‘particular affairs’.<sup>24</sup> And when he was his pen did not flow freely, entries are mostly formal, the fine details of proceedings and cataloguing of orders.

These sorts of records cannot fully communicate the cut and thrust of debate. That was rarely (if ever) their purpose, which in this case was as much to conceal as to reveal, and, in so doing, give ruling elites one voice. The entries in records are not random, they are instead calculated and frequently routine. Much of what we find is mostly uncontroversial. Other items (e.g. election procedure, the vestry ‘instrument’, or guild and city charters) became controversial if they were contested. Nevertheless, whatever the nature of certain records, it was felt that they should be kept away from public reach. Access was carefully monitored, though rights of consultation were certainly framed by the purpose (or sensitivity) of particular documents, which itself could shift in time as circumstances altered. In 1662 the vestry of St Bride’s Fleet Street ‘ordered that the great ledger booke of the churchwardens accompts be not lett lye publicquely open in the vestrye as formerly, but that it be locked upp by the church-wardens unlesse it be desired to be left out in the time of [the] vestrye’.<sup>25</sup>

A good illustration of this sort of monitored access is provided by the principal records of the city, the journals of common council and the repertories of the court of aldermen, which were treated in quite different ways. In 1620 the court of aldermen ruled that ‘anye freeman’ may ‘have accesse in the presence of a clarke of the court to the actes of common councell’ and ‘have sight or coppie of anye of them’ to ‘the end that noe freeman may be ignorant of those lawes which they are bound to observe’. The books of the court of aldermen, however, were a different case. ‘But as for the actes and orders of this courte’, the order continued, ‘it neither standeth with justice nor conveniency that they should be communicated to anye but such as are members of, or of councell’ with the court ‘nor be suffered to be carryed out of the bookhouse’. It was only by ‘speciall licence’ of the court that records could travel outside its sealed quarters. Indeed, common council acts were no longer to be ‘mingled’ with the repertories but were to be stored in a separate place.<sup>26</sup>

John Strype ran into problems when seeking to consult the records of the city to prepare the ‘abundance of additions’ needed to bring Stow’s *Survey* up to date. He in fact crossed the border between open and concealed information. ‘It was not only necessary to gather up and present the many and most important’ common council acts, he wrote in a preface to his edition (1720),

<sup>24</sup> Foster, *Politics of stability*, p. 42, discussing the vestry meeting.

<sup>25</sup> GL, MS 6554/1, fo. 238.

<sup>26</sup> CLRO, rep. 34, fos. 521v–2.

‘but also to have recourse to the authentick books and records belonging to the chamber of London’. The bookhouse, however, was privileged territory, and Strype quickly discovered that entry was ‘very difficult to obtain’. It was only with the help of ‘friends of quality and good account’ that the aldermen granted him access to ‘transcribe’ what he thought ‘convenient’, and even then he was asked to ‘leave’ his notes with the clerk, ‘to be reviewed and examined lest some things published from them might seem prejudicial some way or other to the city’. After another ‘delay’, the court finally ruled that Strype’s work ‘can by no means alter or prejudice the custom of this honourable city’. His ‘very considerable’ notes were returned, he duly completed his edition, and it was published to spread ‘larger knowledge’ of the ‘honour and reputation’ of the city. It was a thought which had doubtless occurred to the city elite.<sup>27</sup>

The anxiety behind access to the ‘authentick’ books of the chamber and the journals is quite clear. Common council acts conveyed policy to the people. As such, they were prepared for consumption and it was right that citizens should fully understand their duties. But the more sensitive contents of the repertories, which included insights into the formation of policy, finances and relations with the guilds and the crown were marked for privileged access only. If their contents became public knowledge a debate might be set in motion; opinions would cross the city.

It was usually the company clerk who noted the proceedings of the wardens and assistants, and the parish clerk who entered ‘into a booke all suche thinges as should be determyned at every vestrye’.<sup>28</sup> The clerk was a key figure in the quest for privacy. He could stay in office ‘so longe as hee shall be of good and honest behaviour’, and it is sometimes noted that he was elected ‘havinge received’ of ‘neighbours such good testimony of his good behaviour and honest conversation’.<sup>29</sup> Clerks recorded secrets and promised never to reveal them. The city remembrancer was warned that secrets must remain unspoken after he left office, ‘all such matters as you lerne and understande in or by the books or recordes within the office concerninge the citty’, and all ‘the rightes, lawfull liberties, or customes’ of the city were not to be mentioned out of office. In 1571 the aldermen ordered that the lord mayor’s clerk and the town clerk’s assistants ‘shalbe sworne not to reveale any secrets in the bookes of this citie nor in any wise to geve any copies of the same’.<sup>30</sup>

Some records conveyed privileged knowledge and possessed status and authority. The registering of decisions set precedents and preserved political memory. In 1580 the court of aldermen ruled that ‘conference in matters

<sup>27</sup> John Strype, *A survey of the cities of London and Westminster: containing the original, antiquity, increase, modern estate and government of those cities, written at first in the year MDXCVIII by John Stow... corrected, improved, and very much enlarged: and the survey and history brought down from the year 1633* [hereafter Strype, *Stow’s survey*] (1720), pp. i–iii–v.

<sup>28</sup> GL, MSS 4165/1, fos. 3, 6, 148, 427; 2597/1, fo. 57; 3016/1, fo. 487; 4887/1, fos. 356, 455.

<sup>29</sup> GL, MSS 4415/1, fo. 102v (irregular pagination); 1431/1, fo. 26v. See also GL, MSS 943/1, fo. 13; 819/1, fo. 49; Tittler, *Architecture and power*, p. 121.

<sup>30</sup> CLRO, rep. 17, fos. 102, 222.



towchinge the libertyes of this cittye (the memorye wheareof maie be profitable) must be 'entered in a booke'.<sup>31</sup> The 'boke of recorde' signified government and order. It was often an impressive and elegant object. Orders for the regulation of the Goldsmiths were written down 'in a booke of vellum' which 'is to us our written law by which wee must be governed for that it was made by such grave and auncient men of authority'.<sup>32</sup> Company ordinances were read to the generality at regulated gatherings, but even then it was claimed that things were 'kept in secret'.<sup>33</sup> Government was not open. As with royal authority it was felt that power was augmented by 'mystery'. General knowledge of certain rights or the secret counsels of rulers not only dampened images of authority, it could also send tremors through the governed, stirring disagreement, and on occasion reinterpretations of the terms of government.

Rulers warned that open access to records rocked the foundations of order. The aldermen alleged that careless record-keeping had 'much wronged and prejudiced' London's 'priviledges, liberties, and customes'.<sup>34</sup> It has been argued that steps were taken to reform the keeping of records of central and city government in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and that rising concern for managing archives was related to much the same developments that sharpened anxieties about order and secrecy; the need to resist legal challenges to civic authority, the greater complexity of government and a concern with the honour of the country and city at a tense time of deep socio-economic strain and constitutional friction.<sup>35</sup>

Records communicated authority yet words were plastic, brittle and vulnerable. Meaning was often imprecise, and on occasion contested or even altered. Records could be stolen, forged, fabricated, ripped-up, or concealed to modify or disguise meaning.<sup>36</sup> Authority could be torn into pieces of paper. In 1560 the bridewell court was informed that Walter Smith, 'a forward and naughty boye', had 'denyed his servyce' to his master and 'hath rent in peeces his indentures of prentishood'.<sup>37</sup> Books went missing, others had pages torn out. One vestry reported that 'divers leaves have bin torn or cutt out of the vestry booke [and] aught is knowne of great concerne to this parish, and [it] cannot at present be discovered by whome'. The vestry of St James Garlickhithe

<sup>31</sup> CLRO, rep. 20, fo. 93. Cf. GL, MS 113/1, part 1, fo. 10; part 2, fos. 152–2v.

<sup>32</sup> GCL, minute book P2, attached papers at the end of the book, fos. 9–10.

<sup>33</sup> See below, pp. 940–44.

<sup>34</sup> CLRO, rep. 34, fo. 348v.

<sup>35</sup> Piers Cain, 'Robert Smith and the reform of the archives of the city of London, 1580–1623', *The London Journal*, XIII (1987–8), 3–16, esp. 3, 8–9, 11; Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, p. 42; R. B. Wernham, 'The public records in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', in L. Fox, ed., *English historical scholarship in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (Oxford, 1956), pp. 11–30, esp. pp. 24–6. Tittler has made much the same point for urban communities in other parts of England. He writes that although 'concern for the keeping of records', what he calls 'modern administrative habit', was 'certainly present in some, especially larger or older towns' before 1530, the second half of the 16th century 'seems to have been crucial in making it commonplace'. Tittler suggests that rising interest in keeping records was related to greater degrees of urban self-government, Cromwellian administrative methods 'percolating down' and the 'legal necessity' of producing records 'to substantiate legal claims' (*Architecture and power*, pp. 76, 88–9).

<sup>36</sup> For some further examples see my *Youth and authority*, ch. 6.

<sup>37</sup> BCB, 1, fo. 76.

proposed one solution. Their vestry book was ‘provided with alphabetts and numbered throwout to prevent abuse by tearing out of leaves as is to bee seene [they said] in the present booke’.<sup>38</sup> Mistakes were made, entries were corrected, orders were ‘blotted out’.<sup>39</sup> In other cases new words were inserted to make false accusations and cast aspersions. In 1600, for example, the lord keeper was told that there are two books ‘called the vestree booke’ and the ‘quest booke’ in the parish of St Dunstan-in-the-West, ‘wherein there be certen thinges inserted... conteyninge very scandalous and reproachful matters of supposed incontinence... malyciouslye and indirectlie donn and sett downe to disgrace and defame’ four parishioners who, it was said, were of good ‘reputation’.<sup>40</sup>

Records were on occasion rewritten or defaced to erase all traces of former quarrels which put present governors in a bad light. The record of a quarrel of 1628 troubled the Stationers in 1641. A ‘difference’ between Mr Cole (then master) and Mr Parker (the present master) created unrest, and ‘dyvers orders were entered up in a very harsh manner against... Mr Parker’ which remained ‘upon record’ to his great ‘disparagement’. It was alleged that Cole had used his position to push forward his cause. But now Parker ‘moved’ that the entries ‘might be razed out in regard the equity of his cause then in question was overruled by the power’ of Mr Cole ‘and other of his friends then assistants’. The court of 1641 ‘knowing the justice’ of their master’s case, duly instructed ‘that all orders, submissions, and other acts entered upon record in this booke or orders concerning... Mr Parker in yt difference... be defaced and razed out of the... booke of orders’.<sup>41</sup>

Once erased it was possible to forget such irritating memories. This case and others in which meanings were twisted by the hand of forgers or fabricators provided further reasons for limiting access to records. It was vital that the rulers of the parish, guild and city met in private; that secret matters did not become public news to be scattered across London; and that records remained safe. It was prudent to enclose sensitive knowledge in chests and rooms, and ensure that keys remained in trusty hands.

## II

We have one advantage shared by few contemporaries. We can consult records of government and interpret the words and actions of rulers. It is true that such records are riddled with intent and prejudice but we hope to take account of that. At least we can hold them. In early modern London it was common practice to shut away records in a locked chest and room. The parishes of St Peter Cornhill and St Dunstan-in-the-West locked records ‘in the cubbard in the vestry’.<sup>42</sup> This enclosure of information was calculated. The large and dark

<sup>38</sup> GL, MSS 3570/2, fo. 160; 4813/1, fo. 59v. See also GL, MSS 1240/1, fo. 108; 4072/1, fos. 240, 332; 4214/1, fos. 20, 37v–8.

<sup>39</sup> Alice E. McCampbell, ‘The London parish and the London precinct, 1640–1660’, *Guildhall Studies in London History*, xi (1976), 107–24, 116; GL, MS 3570/2, fo. 119.

<sup>40</sup> GL, MS 3016/1, fo. 38.

<sup>41</sup> SC minute book C, fo. 177.

<sup>42</sup> GL, MSS 3016/1, fo. 314; 4165/1, fo. 356.

chest is ubiquitous in parish and guild records. It is called a 'long box', a 'great chest', a 'little chest', a 'great iron chest', 'a comone chest' with 'iii keyes and iii lockes', and 'a greate cheste bounde with iron'.<sup>43</sup> It was usually shut away in company halls and vestry houses.<sup>44</sup> It was here that records were kept unseen, except for a chosen few. In 1658 the vestry of St Mary Aldermanbury 'ordered that the books and evidences belonging unto this parrish shall remayne locked up in a chest in the vestry house and shall not be opened by any person except it be by the common councell man and churchwardens'. Nineteen years later, it was ordered that 'noe writings be taken out of the chest but by order of the vestrey' and they were to be 'registered' until their safe return.<sup>45</sup> The principal records of the city were kept in a bookhouse in the guildhall ('a place att hand for storage of them').<sup>46</sup> The passage of records to and from the bookhouse was closely watched. In 1579 the court of aldermen ruled that 'from henceforth no offycers of this cyttye... shall carrye eny of the bookes or recordes belongynge unto this cyttye oute of the treasurye and bookhowse' unless they had the 'assent' of the court. The clerks and other officers of the mayor's court had authority 'to commit to prison in any of the compters of the city all and every such person... as shall presume to come within the bookhouse... not being thereunto licensed'.<sup>47</sup>

The chest and the room in which it was kept were both opened by keys. The possession of keys unlocked secrets and it was also a mark of status, a function of responsible office and seniority. Only those with influence in the city, guild and parish were handed keys, and only a few keys opened each chest or door. In 1587 the keys of the chest keeping the common seals of the city were given to the mayor and two aldermen 'to be kept'. As late as 1620 only the attorneys of the mayor's court held keys to the bookhouse and had 'comon accesse and recourse... to books and records'. But in that year, as in others, it was reported that 'books and records' were 'missing out of the bookhouse' and 'not to be had againe'. Six months later keys were also cut for the town clerk, the chief custodian of the repertories of the court of aldermen.<sup>48</sup> The keys to company chests were also kept by the ruling clique. The Apothecaries' wardens kept keys 'to the chest of the hall'. The Goldsmiths' charters, books, and other 'papers' and 'writings' were sheltered from public gaze 'in the keeping of the wardens or the clerke'.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup> GL, MSS 2597/1, fo. 129; 3016/1, fo. 232; 4165/1, fo. 46; 943/1, fo. 52; 819/1, fo. 76v; E. Freshfield, ed., *Minutes of the vestry meeting and other records of the parish of St Christopher le Stocks in the city of London* (London, 1886) [hereafter, Freshfield, *St Christopher le Stocks vestry minutes*], p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> For example, GL, MSS 8200/1, fo. 139; 3570/2, fo. 82; 4165/1, fo. 46; 819/1, fo. 76v; 4813/1, fo. 130v; 4570/2, fo. 72; 1240/1, fos. 23; 80v; 959/1, fos. 65, 105v; 4072/1, fos. 10, 129v, 203; 3908/1, fo. 12. Cf. Tate, *The parish chest*, pp. 35–6.

<sup>45</sup> GL, MS 3570/2, fos. 82, 156.

<sup>46</sup> CLRO, rep. 34, fos. 348v–9, 522. Cf. Cain, 'Robert Smith'; Tittler, *Architecture and power*, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> CLRO, rep. 19, fo. 39; letter book Y, fo. 271v. See also rep. 29, fo. 87.

<sup>48</sup> CLRO, reps. 14, fo. 4; 34, fos. 348v–9, 522.

<sup>49</sup> GL, MS 8200/1, fo. 161; GCL, minute books V, fos. 33v–4v; P2, attached papers at the end of the book, fos. 10–11.

Usually only three or four keys were cut for each chest. Parish keys were kept by present or former officers, the parish ‘ancients’. In 1585 the vestry of St Dunstan-in-the-East ordered that two vestrymen should keep ‘the keys of the chest wherein the wryttings and evidences doe remayne perteyning to the parrysh’, and that the upper churchwarden should keep ‘the keyes of [the] dore yt is goinge in wher the sayd wryttings lye’.<sup>50</sup> The keys of other chests were put in the safe-keeping of parish notables. The four keys of St Dunstan-in-the-West were ‘kept in ye custodie’ of two ‘ancient churchwardens’ and ‘two other of the most ancient men of the parish’. The keys of St Christopher-le-Stocks were trusted to the parson, churchwardens, and the alderman of the ward. The upper churchwarden kept a key in St Peter Cornhill. In other parishes keys were left with the clerk, churchwardens and common councillors. While in St Dunstan-in-the-East three ‘collectors alias the keepers of the keyes’ kept ‘a key to the doore in the vestrye leadinge up the staires to the roome above where the wrytings for the parish lands are’. All keyholders had at least one thing in common; they were influential men.<sup>51</sup> Records were in their care and they opened this store of precedent and policy when summoned by the vestry. In St Alphage London Wall, as in other parishes, keyholders were fined if they forgot to bring their key to meetings.<sup>52</sup>

It was through close surveillance of chests and keys that governors hoped to restrict access to privileged information and monitor its public dissemination. Recorded official words were to be kept private unless occasion demanded that they be published to citizens, parishioners, or the generality of the company. Yet complaints about the passage of records to and from chests litter the sources. Books were reported missing. At a time when the complexity of government sharpened and legal challenges to the city’s accrued authority were more frequent, governors took steps to regulate access and storage. It had long been assumed that clerks would only record business in the safety of the guildhall. In 1571 the newly appointed remembrancer petitioned the court of aldermen ‘to have the books of the cittie home to his howse for to kalendar’. The court rejected his application, ordering that ‘books should not be carryed out of the hall’, entering and indexing business was to be ‘done in this hall’.<sup>53</sup>

It is clear that guild and parish clerks had more freedom to work at home. In many cases it seems that this transportation of books and secrets proceeded smoothly: it passes unremarked in the records which were simply updated. This flow of books did not raise much concern, despite the obsession with secrecy and scrutiny. It was, after all, the clerk or a trusted insider such as a vestryman who conducted this traffic in records. And when a new clerk entered office plans were made for the easy transfer of records. When the Stationers’

<sup>50</sup> GL, MS 4887/1, fo. 242.

<sup>51</sup> GL, MSS 3016/1, fo. 232; 4887/1, fos. 242, 320, 534; 4165/1, fo. 635; 943/1, fo. 52; 3570/1, fo. 19; 3570/2, fo. 82; 4216/1, fos. 153–4; 4216/1, fos. 153–4; 594/1, fo. 14; 3579/1, fo. 33; 4072/1, fo. 244v; 3908/1, fos. 12, 18v, 20, 55v; 959/1, fo. 65; 4570/2, fo. 45; Freshfield, *St Christopher le Stocks vestry minutes*, p. 15. Three alderman governors kept the keys ‘belonginge to the cheste of the evidences’ at St Thomas’s Hospital. See GLRO H1/ST/A1/2, fo. 69v; H1/ST/A1/3, fo. 72.

<sup>52</sup> GL, MS 1431/2, fo. 17.

<sup>53</sup> CLRO, rep. 17, fo. 177.

clerk resigned in 1681 the wardens and assistants ‘desired to see that Mr Lilly [the outgoing clerk] deliver all the register bookes of accompts and other bookes belonging to this company...into the hands of John Parrot’, the new clerk. Lilly’s stockpile of books included the company minute books, wardens’ accounts, the book of fines, register of deeds, apprenticeship registers, freemen’s registers, the register of plate, the ‘book of seizure of seditious and unlicensed bookes’ and ‘books of entry’ of mayoral precepts.<sup>54</sup>

On occasion, however, it was felt necessary to order that records be returned to the chest.<sup>55</sup> A clerk, churchwarden or vestryman trusted with their safe-keeping had kept them for too long; he had been negligent (a risk); a widow was ordered to ‘forthwith deliver all the church plate, books, writings, and all other things which her husband [‘late one of the churchwardens’] received belonging to the parish’;<sup>56</sup> leases were retained if property rights were being disputed; shifts of power in the vestry might mean that records were now in the wrong hands. In most cases parishes took steps to monitor the passage of information with more care. In 1648 Mr Kemp and Mr Hallywell of St Dunstan-in-the-West ‘brought and delivered into the vestry’ books ‘belonging to the parishe which were in their custodie’, including two parish registers opening in 1558 and 1632, churchwardens’ accounts stretching back to the reign of Henry VIII, the vestry book which reached back to 1587, overseers’ accounts beginning in 1633, books of leases and deeds and wardmote presentments from as far back as 1558. They were promptly ‘locked upp in the cubbard’ except for the ‘new’ vestry book, and overseers’ and churchwardens’ accounts, which were returned to Hallywell, ‘to make entries in them’, and the inquest book which was handed to the chancellor of the inquest.<sup>57</sup>

Quarrels about the custody of records sometimes dragged on for a few months or even years. The same names recur as parishes struggled to regain possession of their written records. Nor were some of them slow to bring the threat of legal action against parishioners (former vestrymen or others) who would not give up books, accounts or leases. In 1649 Mr Croxton, a vestryman of St Brides Fleet Street, ‘having acquaintance with one Mr Dawson who hath some writings in his hands belonging to the parishe’, was ‘desired to repair to him and demand them of him’. If Dawson proved stubborn he was to be warned that ‘some other recourse may be taken’. Four years later, however, two vestrymen were instructed to ‘again goe to Mr Dawson’ to ‘desire them out of his hands’. In 1666 a vestryman of St Peter Cornhill was asked to return records ‘in his hands’ within three weeks or risk being ‘proceeded against according to law’.<sup>58</sup>

The question of access turned on the purpose of particular records. Some of them were uncontroversial, others conveyed calculated policy. Access was also

<sup>54</sup> SC minute book E, fos. 108v–9. See also GL, MSS 594/1, fos. 8, 76, 78, 90; 1240/1, fos. 21v–2v; 3579/1, fos. 14, 23; 4072/1, fos. 129v, 166; 3908/1, fo. 108.

<sup>55</sup> See GL, MSS 3016/1, fos. 261, 262, 274; 4165/1, fos. 356, 380, 531, 536; 1453/1, fo. 33; 6554/1, fo. 265; 4072/1, fos. 195v, 209; 959/1, fos. 65, 78. <sup>56</sup> GL, MS 4415/1, fo. 243.

<sup>57</sup> GL, MS 3016/1, fo. 314. See also *ibid.* fos. 423–8.

<sup>58</sup> GL, MSS 6554/1, fos. 75v, 135v; 4165/1, fos. 356, 377.

a privilege because status helped to open the doors of the bookhouse. Several companies were granted access to search in the city's records.<sup>59</sup> Like individuals or committees who hunted for information in guild and vestry records, they were often collecting evidence to defend or prosecute suits or grievances endorsed by governors. On occasion, courts requested sight of records. The Apothecaries and College of Physicians were locked in a bitter dispute and in 1637 the company's 'courtbook' was 'carried' to the 'star chamber office' 'according to the order of the Lords' who were judging the merits of the squabble. The company asked for 'a noate under the hand of the president to testify the receipt thereof'.<sup>60</sup>

In other cases groups of vestry and companymen studied 'ancient' records to draw up feoffments, check accounts, settle titles to the parish house, fix the terms of the minister's lease, let estates, prove legacies, review the clerk's wages, or to uncover 'obligations' to keep 'doors and lights' in the parish warehouse.<sup>61</sup> Nor was approval to dip into the past limited to the ruling core. Some items of business such as apprenticeship indentures, freemen's admissions, or subsidy payments were recorded so that they could be consulted to settle disputes. On occasion, members of the generality, though usually in company with senior figures, were asked to review policy decisions to help draft petitions or parliamentary acts. In 1640 a committee of eight assistants, four liverymen, and four others was set up by the Goldsmiths to draw up a list of grievances to be presented to parliament. The sixteen were 'for the time beeing' granted 'sight of the companyes charters or bookes or any papers or other writings which are in the keeping of the wardens or the clerke and which may tend to the good of the worke intended'. In 1645 the Stationers summoned 'all the comonalty' to canvas opinions 'about the reformation of grievances in the government of the company and the companies undertaking to print the Bible'. After 'full debate' a 'committee was chosen by the generality with the assent' of the wardens and assistants to 'view over, correct, augment, and determine' ordinances as 'shall seeme best with the present and future welfare and happiness of the company'. They, too, were allowed to sift through 'the writings' and 'books belonging to the corporacon' if they thought it 'convenient'.<sup>62</sup>

The twin towers of property and authority loomed over these suits and altercations. This dual concern was uppermost in the minds of rulers, and it was potentially damaging if records slipped out of reach or were copied at will.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Cain, 'Robert Smith', p. 8.

<sup>60</sup> GL, MS 8200/1, fos. 355v, 366v. Cf. GCL, company minute books W, fo. 214; Y, fo. 47v; GL, MS 1431/2, fo. 302; SC minute book D, fo. 40.

<sup>61</sup> GL, MSS 4887/1, fo. 421; 1453/1, fo. 25; 6554/1, fo. 4v; 1175/1, fos. 62v, 68v-9; 819/1, fo. 159v; 3016/1, fos. 555, 588; 4813/1, fo. 59v; 1240/1, fos. 13v, 79v; 4072/1, fo. 160v; 978/1, fos. 40, 40v; GCL, minute books V, fos. 125-5v; Y, fo. 245; SC minute books C, fo. 124v; D, fo. 40; E, fo. 26.

<sup>62</sup> GCL, minute book V, fos. 33v-4v; SC minute book C, fo. 217v. See also GCL, minute books T, fo. 35; Y, fos. 136v-7, 148v, 165-5v, 248-8v, 260v; SC minute book C, fos. 178-8v.

<sup>63</sup> A typical example of concern with unmonitored copying occurred in 1577 when the governors of St Thomas's Hospital ordered that the clerk shall not 'make or cause to be made any copie of

This is why we often find that records were only fetched from chests for the ‘good’ or ‘happiness’ of the guild or parish; that chests were unlocked with the assent of governors; and that proceedings returned to their inner room ‘before any conclusion’ was reached. The Goldsmiths’ workmen were given ‘sight of the charter’ and other ‘bookes, writings, or papers’ in 1637 but only as wardens ‘thought fit to conduce to the good’ of the company.<sup>64</sup> The ‘view’ of records was often partial, abridged and manipulated. The clerk hovered close by, note-taking was screened. It was often only a few members of the generality who were able to turn the pages of the books. Members of the ruling core were often present in the room, perhaps guiding discussion. Yet this was in name at least an act of consultation. Opinion was canvassed, knowledge was tapped. Gestures were made to broaden the scope of participation in government in much the same way as elites appointed trusted workmen or parishioners to minor positions of responsibility,<sup>65</sup> yet this increasing circle of involvement was managed by the ruling core. Ultimately it boosted their authority by conferring a more complete legitimacy. If humble parishioners or workmen made the leap into the vestry or livery, access to records and secrets was less difficult to obtain and more frequent.

Yet it is true that greater access was expected with certain records. The influence and status of regulatory decrees depended upon managed publicity. The governed too, could request access to this sort of document which, after all, communicated law and policy. ‘If any member of the company desires to see any ordynance’, the Apothecaries declared in 1642, ‘the clerke may read yt to him or let him read yt, but [he was] not to make him any cobby without consent of the company’. Guild members were ‘sworne to the ordynances’.<sup>66</sup> In similar fashion, citizens were able to request ‘sight or coppie’ of any common council act. In such records, John Strype observed, they would quickly discover their ‘duties’ and the liberties and privileges of the city.<sup>67</sup>

Authority, therefore, was made to appear even more intimidating by the skilful manipulation of publicity and secrecy. There was a regular and tactical discharge of information. Proclamations were issued, rules were read to the governed, and tables were hung up listing duties and obligations, or the names of governors. It was for this reason that elites issued invitations to the generality, summoning them to assemble as the company clerk, for example, recited ordinances. More acutely sensitive records of political discussion, financial transactions and decision-making remained enclosed in books in chests. But policy, the terms of government, had to be conveyed to the furthest points of the city or parish, along streets, and inside households and workshops.

---

any act of court out of any of the books [of the court]... without consent of court first obteyned in writinge uppon pain of losse and forfeiture of his office’ (GLRO H1/ST/A1/3, fo. 181v).

<sup>64</sup> GCL, minute book T, fo. 35.

<sup>65</sup> See Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, p. 127; Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds*, pp. 245–8; Boulton, *Neighbourhood and society*, p. 268.

<sup>66</sup> GL, MS 8200/1, fos. 402, 375.

<sup>67</sup> CLRO, rep. 34, fos. 521v–2; Strype, *Stow’s survey*, p. iii.

And so governors issued invitations to the generality, spreading principles and points of authority, making them appear convincing, upright and almost inevitable.

### III

People flocked to the open spaces, market places and the principal streets of the city, telling stories, passing on news, recasting rumours, stirring imaginations and in so doing, creating a constantly replenished stream of opinion in circulation. Rulers, too, relayed messages to these most public locations. Ceremonies were choreographed, official news was read out. The route followed by bearers of proclamations or public punishments crossed that taken by civic and royal processions – a tour of busy sites to maximize publicity.<sup>68</sup> Civic orders were ‘proclaymed in the open streetes’ and in markets ‘throughoute all the accustymable’ and ‘convenient’ places in the city, and ‘sett upon posts’ in public gaze.<sup>69</sup> They were also sent to guilds to be read to workmen.<sup>70</sup> In such ways it was hoped that decrees would be paraded in public and assimilated by attentive spectators.

Guilds and parishes also valued selective publicity, reciting decrees or drawing on the expertise of parishioners and workmen. Some things had to be displayed and in as many advantageous spots as possible. The Ten Commandments were hung up in a ‘table’ inside the church, or they were ‘written on the wall’.<sup>71</sup> A table of parish fees for ecclesiastical rites was also put up in the church or vestry ‘in publique view’, so that people ‘may take notice thereof for their better informacon’.<sup>72</sup> Such tables were a tested means of conveying information. In 1678 the Stationers ‘ordered that the printed by-laws ... be read’ and ‘delivered by the beadle’ to ‘every member’, and ‘that they poste’ them ‘upon their shops and workhouses’.<sup>73</sup> Tables of by-laws and ordinances were also hung up in the company hall nearby the portraits of worthy companymen, ‘that they may be seene and read by all persons resorting to the hall’.<sup>74</sup>

There were several such points of public communication in the parish and guild. Vestry news or word from the guildhall was passed on from the pulpit.<sup>75</sup> On quarter days livery companies issued invitations to the generality. Workmen were summoned and reminded of duties written down in ordinances. The Goldsmiths issued such a call to order, directing ‘yt all the orders’ in the ‘book should be publiquely read twice every yeare to the generality whereby every man might be informed of his duty’.<sup>76</sup> One such occasion is described in

<sup>68</sup> See Michael Berlin, ‘Civic ceremony in early modern London’, *Urban History Yearbook* (1986), 15–27; Lawrence Manley, *Literature and culture in early modern London* (Cambridge, 1995), ch. 5.

<sup>69</sup> CLRO, reps. 15, fos. 291v, 494v; 17, fo. 321v; 18, fo. 107v; 19, fo. 182; 20, fos. 425, 461; 21, fo. 537.

<sup>70</sup> See my *Youth and authority*, ch. 2.

<sup>71</sup> GL, MS 4415/1, fos. 8v, 15v (second series of pagination). See Tessa Watt, *Cheap print and popular piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge, 1991), chs. 5–6.

<sup>72</sup> GL, MSS 1175/1, fo. 73; 4415/1, fos. 8v, 15v (second series of pagination), 164v (second series of pagination); Freshfield, *St Christopher le Stocks vestry minutes*, pp. 10, 28.

<sup>73</sup> SC minute book E, fo. 58v.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. fo. 140; GL, MS 8200/1, fo. 437v.

<sup>75</sup> GL, MS 6554/1, fos. 110v, 124.

<sup>76</sup> GCL, company minute book P2, attached papers at the end of the book, fo. 12.



the Apothecaries' records: 'the younger brethren' gathered 'before the court att the newe purchased house in the Blackfriars being the first meeting of the generality... there the ordenences of the company were reade by the clerke unto them and divers paid theire quarteridge'.<sup>77</sup> The quarter day provided a platform to speak warmly of 'fraternity' and 'brotherhood', but also to inform, caution, or censure workmen. Ordinances were published 'according to custom'. It was hoped that they would shape the political memory of each member.<sup>78</sup> General calls to order also gave opportunities for more particular comment on trouble currently stirring controversy in the company, to expand upon certain ordinances and to slip in mention of decisions reached elsewhere (in privy council, for example) that supported the governors' policy.<sup>79</sup>

Once delivered, it was hoped that orders would be lodged in the minds of workmen as a rule to be remembered. There was now no sound defence for forgetting duties for rules had been made public, and a failure to turn up was itself a dereliction of duty. An apothecary was summoned to his company court 'for making up' medicine 'without view'. He explained 'that he never understood nor had knowledge of any such ordinance whereby he stood bound to shewe publiquellie the said composicon'. This rather ill-judged plea failed to squeeze any sympathy from the governors, who ruled that as he 'mighte have taken knowledge of the said ordinance' if he had 'made his appearance at the quarter dayes where ordinarilie the said ordinances are publiquely read, ignorance shalbe allowed for no sufficient plea where meanes of knowledge is daylie offered'. The slack apothecary was fined 'for not appearing to take knowledge' and 'failing to observe' the rule to display his 'composicon' for inspection.<sup>80</sup>

Occurring as they did at regular points in the year, these invitations to the generality helped to structure relations between the wardens, livery and workmen. I want to look more closely at the invitations issued by one company, the Goldsmiths'. It must be kept in mind that the large pool of artisans in this company sharpened potential for discord,<sup>81</sup> and temperatures could boil on quarter days. On many occasions, however, public readings passed off with few hiccups, and several lines in the records typically tell us that workmen turned up, ordinances were published, there was barely a whisper from the generality, and they trooped out of the hall leaving the assistants and livery to eat a light 'fraternal' meal of cakes, buns, cheese and wine. Yet such choreographed and scripted publicity was riddled with potential points of tension. We can easily trace their conventional form, but a more pressing yet often unresolved question concerns the responses of the audience who were expected to consent to the reading. On occasion, many of them simply did not turn up, and even liverymen stayed away. Only a small number turned up in some years, as few as three or four. Absences were sometimes understandable; plague was

<sup>77</sup> GL, MS 8200/1, fo. 302v.

<sup>78</sup> SC minute book E, fo. 37v.

<sup>79</sup> GCL, company minute books R2, fos. 133v-4; Z, fo. 266; 3, fo. 284.

<sup>80</sup> GL, MS 8200/1, fos. 112-13.

<sup>81</sup> See Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, p. 141.

sweeping through the city.<sup>82</sup> In other years, however, poor attendances are less easy to explain, and the blank spaces in the hall may have conveyed a message of indifference or disagreement, mutterings about points of policy or quarter-edge payments.

Quarter days also gave workmen a platform. On occasion, rulers were seeking approval for a course of action, it was said that everybody had ‘an equall liberty to speake their mindes freely for or against’,<sup>83</sup> and a vote was taken in much the same way as vestries put issues to a vote of ratepayers only and claimed that they had the ‘full consent’ of the parish.<sup>84</sup> In 1643 the Goldsmiths were asked to contribute a loan of £3,500 ‘for the safety and defence of the city’. Plans were made for a ‘general’ meeting to ‘acquaint’ artisans with the letter and to invite responses, ‘accordinge to the usuall custome of this companye in matters of this nature, itt beinge of great consequence and concernment to the corporacon’.

Three years earlier, the company was licking its wounds and drawing a list of grievances for a parliamentary bill. The generality were again included in vital conferences which touched all aspects of the trade. Proceedings were ‘published unto them for their assent and approbacon’. Subsequent turns in these events, however, also marked the limits of their participation.<sup>85</sup> The generality had presented proposals which remained unanswered, and they were ‘frustrated of their expectations’. They also asked for a copy of the bill before it was formally presented, though this was turned down by the ruling core who preferred instead to admit three workmen ‘to peruse the bill in presence of the clerk before it bee put in’.<sup>86</sup> Yet it seems that workmen fully expected to be consulted when ‘business was intended for the good of the societie’ in general, when a sweeping reform or damaging turn of events threatened all sections of the trade.<sup>87</sup>

It was said that artisans had ‘equall liberty to speake their mindes’, though debate was often stifled (or regulated) by a deep concern with secrecy and formality. Yet there was dissent, or a call for consideration, if only as a prelude

<sup>82</sup> For examples of poor attendance see GCL, company minute books S part 1, fos. 390, 454, 525; T, fos. 27v, 81; V, fo. 124v; Y, fo. 24; Z, fos. 102, 210; 2, fo. 120v; 3, fos. 23, 157.

<sup>83</sup> GCL, company minute book Y, fo. 207.

<sup>84</sup> This consent covered many issues, including the auditing of churchwardens’ accounts, granting leases, electing ministers, taxation, scavengers’ fines and the minister’s salary. See, for example, GL, MSS 2597/1, fos. 132v, 133, 137, 146v, 182, 200v; 3016/1, fo. 403; 3570/1, fos. 6v, 7; 3570/2, fos. 17, 54, 61v, 131, 131v; 1431/2, fo. 15; Freshfield, *St Christopher le Stocks vestry minutes*, pp. 7, 16, 25, 28, 29, 31, 33, 35.

<sup>85</sup> Rappaport writes that assistants ‘performed most executive, legislative, and judicial functions within companies... Though at times the opinions of liverymen and even householders were solicited, all matters of great importance to the company were discussed and decided by men who sat on the court, from the framing of ordinances to the construction of a new hall’ (*Worlds within worlds*, p. 264). Foster writes that the ‘court of assistants was the executive and legislative directory of the company. It was meant to lead, and no one objected seriously to its oligarchic character, though the assistants were expected to confer with the entire fellowship on certain formal occasions’ (*Politics of stability*, p. 45).

<sup>86</sup> GCL, company minute books W, fo. 83; V, fos. 33v–4v, 155v, 178–9. Cf. SC minute book C, fo. 206v.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, GCL, company minute book V, fos. 45–5v.

to a vote in favour of guild policy. Workmen did not always listen in silence; 'mutinous courses' and 'contemptuous speeches' expressed a more ugly mood. In 1655 'there was some disturbance and interruption' among goldsmiths 'at the time of reading the ordinances'. The reading of the Stationers' charter and rules in April 1645 was greeted with a volley of complaints, 'and severall speeches touching the same... occasioned such opposition that nothing could be done in the busines of the day'. Voices were raised in support of 'a new way for choice of master, wardens, and assistants' and other 'innovacons in the government of the company'. The Goldsmiths' workmen were 'willed to depart' after the reading of rules in November 1629, but they 'refused' to leave the hall until they were told about the contents of a petition drawn up by a fellow worker, which was believed to contain matters of significance for all of them. They were again asked to disperse and reminded that an earlier version of the petition had been read to them, so 'it was needles to read it againe'.<sup>88</sup>

At stormy times readings offered access to governors, and even the meaning of rules was disputed by liverymen and workmen, sometimes with a common voice. Even more revealing are occasions when workmen invoked clauses in the company charter to put their case, especially when grumbling about election procedure sparked quarrels. It was even alleged that they had been kept in the dark, that parts of the charter were kept as secrets unspoken, that the reading of rules was in fact rather selective.

In 1652 ninety-seven citizen goldsmiths filed a petition questioning procedure for electing wardens which they felt was unfair and irregular. They claimed that the company charter gave them 'power to chuse fower wardens yearely of the men of the comonalty' to 'oversee, rule, and duely governe... for evermore as by the words of the 'charter doth plainly appeare'. But that right had been concealed 'for above 40 yeares' in which time 'a small number' of assistants had 'chosen wardens from yeare to yeare' in breach of the charter, treading upon the privileges of the generality and settling highly advantageous leases on their circle of confederates. And now the workmen requested the return of their 'undoubted rights', the knowledge of which they had only recently been made fully aware. It was only in the 'last yeare having attained to the knowledge of their charter (beeing untill then kept from them)', that they had 'protested' their cause. Access was limited, workmen claimed, and the reading of records was partial. All the 'books and records and other evidences' were closely kept by the wardens and 'other officers'.

But word had leaked out. Dissent had been brewing in the previous year, and the quarter day in May exposed a crack in the 'fraternity'. Once the ordinances and the names of the wardens were 'published', records report that 'the major parte of the generalitye did acquiese', but 'two or three' of them 'did then move that the charter might be read unto them'. Excuses were put forward by the elite – 'the day was very neere spent in other affaires', there was 'more busines to be yet performed', and the 'greater parte' of the workmen

<sup>88</sup> GCL, company minute books 1, fo. 68v; Q2, fo. 147; SC minute book C, fos. 218, 223–4.

appeared satisfied. It was decided that ‘the companyes charter shalbee reade’ to workmen at the next court of assistants ‘if time permitt’. But the note of melancholy touched more than a handful of artisans. And now, at the next quarter day, ‘a great body’ of the ‘comonaltye’ made their feelings plain – the naming of wardens by a choice few in private was not a ‘legall eleccon’. The ‘peaceable and regular way’ which gave workmen a greater role was buried in the charter. Both sides of the squabble were ‘debated’ by a parliamentary committee in the following month, counter-petitions were filed, but the ‘citizens’ case was ‘dismissed’.<sup>89</sup>

The forms of election were a point of tension at regular intervals. Tensions festered but then broke forth in fresh calls for reform in which access to records was a point of practical and symbolic significance. The ‘working goldsmiths’ clearly felt that their historic and half-remembered rights lay rotting in the unseen charter. This issue often resurfaced before 1651. ‘A shew of discontent’ by liverymen and yeomen had ‘marred’ the reading of rules in May 1619. ‘A generall rumour and report’ reached the ears of wardens and assistants and they were uneasy. A petition had been filed at the court of aldermen censuring wardens ‘concerning the proceedings hear on the last quarter day in the election of the wardens as also for not reading all the ordinances to the generalitey’. A question was asked on behalf of the ‘comonalty’ – what had become of a ‘worthy order’ entered in the ‘vellome book for the choise of wardens’? That book was the ‘written law’, but unlike others of a less turbulent nature this order was not read in public and it remained hidden in the book, ‘soe long kept in secreat’. Allegations of preferential treatment, especially in the terms of leases, swiftly followed charges of bogus electioneering and manipulation of documents.<sup>90</sup> The books are like a trophy, their contents had to be made public. It is the enclosure of information which prompts so much speculation, uncertainty and doubt.

This selective publicity also reveals fault-lines and confirms that some aspects of government were most certainly closed. Steve Rappaport appropriately depicts movement up the ladder in the guilds in terms of the opening of doors, ‘the door to the inner room, the court of assistants, was always ajar’ for those who were raised into the livery. But doors were also closed to exclude ‘most companymen’ who never joined the livery.<sup>91</sup> Authority too, was sealed and exhibited by closing doors and chests. The contrast is always presented in the words of both governors and governed between the ‘public’ hall and the ‘private room’ in which guild elites met behind doors.<sup>92</sup> Borders between

<sup>89</sup> GCL, minute books Y, fos. 253v, 258v; Z, fos. 118–19v, 120–20v, 124, 125v–6, 130–30v.

<sup>90</sup> GCL, company minute book P2, fo. 201v, attached papers at the end of the book, fos. 9–10. Archer writes that when ‘disputes occurred about the constitutional arrangements within the companies the point behind them usually appears to have been the suspicions of the younger and poorer members about the misapplication of company funds and partiality towards individuals rather than a sense that the court of assistants was an instrument in the hands of the wealthier members for the subjugation of the poorer craftsmen’ (*Pursuit of stability*, p. 141).

<sup>91</sup> Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds*, p. 359.

<sup>92</sup> See GCL, company minute book Z, fo. 119.

groups were reaffirmed by vocabularies of privacy and publicity which were also used by the governed – they identified trespassers. The manipulation of privacy and publicity defined and protected concepts of secrecy. ‘Private’ and ‘public’ appear frequently in guild and parish records, and they are liberally sprinkled throughout this essay. It is now time to look more closely at the provenance and meaning of these vital words. Meaning was fluid and even contradictory, but certain themes emerge, and they cast further light on the meeting and its written record, and contribute a linguistic indication of the nature of government in the parish and guild.

#### IV

The partition of ‘public’ and ‘private’ space by governors (and governed) was manipulated to suit changing political conditions and contexts. The plaintiffs in the St Botolph’s feud situated opponents in ‘private’ space,<sup>93</sup> contrasting privacy with its implications of hidden transactions with the ‘public’ territory of the vestry. The dangers of records falling into ‘private’ hands were neatly juxtaposed with the safety of the ‘common chest’. Yet this highly tactical interpretation of ‘public’ and ‘common good’ belonged to a regulatory vocabulary of authority and enclosure. It comprised only the words and actions of elites who managed ‘public’ affairs on behalf of the whole parish. It was said that records were ‘openly read’ in the vestry just as it was said that ‘orders and affairs’ of guilds were ‘openly read’ to governors in their cloistered courtroom.<sup>94</sup> This compressed meaning of ‘public’ disguised the stark reality of limited access and partial publicity. It merely papered over the cracks.

It is also evident in the drift towards pruning participation in the vestry as more select vestries of ‘substantial’ parishioners were set up after 1600. The politics of the parish of St Margaret New Fish Street were reshaped in 1612 when the vestrymen claimed ‘power’ by ‘an instrument’ from the bishop of London (1611) ‘to order and determyne such things privately amongst themselves as shall seem fittinge for the conformity of their parishe and peace of their church’. ‘Selected persons’ gathered in the vestry to settle ‘the well ordering’ of all parish and church ‘business’. The vestry ‘instrument’ was safely locked up in the chest.<sup>95</sup>

‘Private’ and ‘public’ also serve up images of physical space. The Goldsmiths’ elite disappeared into a ‘private room’.<sup>96</sup> When artisans filed into the company hall it became a ‘public’ space and they made demands on this basis. But the status of spaces was forever changing in keeping with the position of their occupiers. As wider invitations were extended, as parishioners or workmen filled rooms, they became ‘public’ rather than ‘private’ spaces. It was the exclusive company or wishes of elites which defined privacy and turned conversations into secrets. The Stationers’ wardens and assistants met in a

<sup>93</sup> See above, pp. 925–26.

<sup>94</sup> GL, MS 8200/1, fos. 225, 322.

<sup>95</sup> GL, MS 1175/1, fos. 50, 73. And for the first steps towards setting up this select vestry see *ibid.* fo. 45.

<sup>96</sup> GCL, company minute book Z, fo. 119.

‘private court’, the doors were shut, and the sitting stayed closed until a bell was rung at which point the court was to be ‘acquainted with the persons attending and their business’.<sup>97</sup>

This slippery usage of ‘private’ and ‘public’ signified changes in events, fixing borders between concealed talk and consultation, between secrecy and partial publicity. Rules were ‘publicly read’ to workmen, they were ‘published abroad’ to a ‘public assembly’.<sup>98</sup> Yet they were drawn up in privacy. After a ‘public’ reading of a draft parliamentary bill, the Goldsmiths’ assistants returned to their room and ‘their private affaires for the companye’.<sup>99</sup> Privacy in official rhetoric was a mark of authority. It implied exclusion, though its meaning was sometimes stretched in the guilds to include liverymen to express their alleged common interest with wardens and assistants. In 1645 the Goldsmiths debated ‘whether the next quarter daye... should be kept in a private way’ for wardens, assistants and liverymen, ‘or in a publique manner for the whole generalitye of the companye?’ In the previous year they had opted for the ‘private’ day ‘according to the manner... lately used’. This was a risky step because it narrowed the scope of elections for high office, a point of tension in the past as it was to be in future years. On this occasion, however, it was decided ‘that there should be a publique quarter daye’.<sup>100</sup>

It was hoped that vocabularies of publicity and privacy would fix structures and provinces of authority in early modern minds. Thus one vestry ruled that ‘no private person or persons whatsoever shall disburse any money for the parishe without the consent of a parishe meeting’. Another expressed concern that orders had ‘bine kept privately in persons hands and not sett downe in the vestrye booke to the dishonour of the parish’.<sup>101</sup> ‘Private’ implied secrecy, enclosure, exclusion, and in as much as these institutions were small worlds in which the balance of power lay with influential men, it was a language which depicted gendered spaces too. ‘Public’ implied partial disclosure, inclusion, and participation, and was closely censored by concerns about citizenship and relations between men and women, young and old, and between classes. Theories of ‘public’ and ‘private’ space coexisted in tension and were manipulated to urge identification, even though they described privileged information and territory. It was a useful vocabulary, heavy with assumptions about secrecy, that perennial concern.

Is there a history of secrecy? Can this silent quality be tracked through time? Rulers always seek to monitor the flow of information, to guide its release, and stop up leaks. Yet even if this tactical interplay of ‘private’ and ‘public’ is a timeless concern, can we measure its urgency and uncover material and ideological contexts in which inclinations to secrecy sharpened, to trace shifting moods and predilections? One such period in London was the late sixteenth

<sup>97</sup> SC minute book C, fo. 266.

<sup>98</sup> For example, GCL, company minute books P2, fos. 196v, 365–5v (irregular pagination), attached papers at the end of the book, fos. 10–11; V, fos. 164–4v, 255v; SC minute book C, fo. 206v; GL, MS 8200/1, fos. 112–13.

<sup>99</sup> GCL, minute book V, fos. 155v, 164–4v.

<sup>100</sup> GCL, company minute book W, fos. 225v, 292v.

<sup>101</sup> GL, MSS 4813/1, fo. 77; 877/1, fo. 196.

and early seventeenth centuries, a time of rising demographic pressure, a testing rate of in-migration, and sharper social distancing, when the constituency for consent narrowed in vestries and guilds. In such conditions government was more uneasy and complex. The dark thoughts of rulers, contemplations of disorder, were expressed in a flood of alternative fixations – comeliness, beauty, order, regularity, categorization, standardization or secrecy – and (it has been said) in an elevated sense of civic identity.<sup>102</sup> None of these things was new: it is a question of scale and temperature. But in such pressing conditions concern with authority (and the methods by which it was upheld, including publicity and secrecy) was more keenly felt.

There are clear signs of pressure and social distancing in parish and guild records. Many companies grew in size and one visible consequence was more conspicuous distance between governors and governed. Greater gulfs were expressed in rituals and in ‘a more hierarchically articulated’ ‘communal bond’ at ‘the end of the sixteenth century, as commensality was eroded and the practice of poor relief [in companies became] more intensive’.<sup>103</sup> They were also conveyed in a social vocabulary of no little significance, which has been connected to more notable social separation and alterations in authority structures at the close of the sixteenth century. Authority and status were represented in discriminatory language: ‘sorts’ of people or ‘the best and chiefest of the company’.<sup>104</sup> In parishes too, this discriminatory vocabulary signified social boundaries and the distribution of authority. It was ubiquitous and instinctive, endorsing realignments of social relations and power. Records are packed with titles like the ‘most and better sort’ of people, and ‘sufficient’ or ‘good men of the parish’.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Berlin has suggested that in sixteenth-century London the mayoralty ‘underwent a particular elevation in status’, which was also reflected in ‘more grandiose’ civic ceremonial (‘Civic ceremony’, esp. pp. 18, 20, 24). I will more fully explore fixations with beauty, comeliness and order in an essay entitled ‘“Uniformity and seemlynes”: the political value of space in early seventeenth-century Cheapside’, in Paul Griffiths and Mark Jenner, eds., *Londinopolis: essays in the cultural and social history of early modern London*, to be published by Manchester University Press. I will also more fully discuss social problems at this time and the responses of governors in a book provisionally entitled *The first bridewell: prisons, policing and petty crime in London, 1545–1645*.

<sup>103</sup> See Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, esp. pp. 116–18 and pp. 120–4, quoting p. 124. Archer writes that it ‘may well be that this contraction in participation was prompted more by reasons of escalating costs and the increased size of the companies combined with the constraints of hall space than by any real sense of greater social exclusiveness. However, the consequences were very much the same: a reduction in contact between yeomen and liverymen whose social rounds moved increasingly in separate spheres’ (ibid. p. 120).

<sup>104</sup> For just a few typical examples see SC minute book C, fo. 77; GCL, company minute books P2, attached papers at the end of the book, fo. 10; T, fo. 17. The association with shifts in authority and sharper social differentiation has been most prominently made by Keith Wrightson, most notably in his ‘Estates, degrees, and sorts: changing perceptions of the social order in Tudor and Stuart England’, in P. Corfield, ed., *Language, history, and class* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1991), pp. 30–52, and ‘“Sorts of people” in Tudor and Stuart England’, in Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks, eds., *The middling sort of people: culture, society, and politics in England, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke, 1994), pp. 28–51.

<sup>105</sup> For example, GL, MSS 9236/1, account book fo. 94, register of orders and decrees, fos. 76–7; 3016/1, fo. 45; 4415/1, fo. 88 (second series of pagination); 3570/2, fo. 97; 4887/1, fos. 196, 214;

This was a time of strain, especially in the larger extramural parish, where pressure on resources was more acutely felt. The uproar about inmates was more agitated in peripheral parishes. It has been argued that swelling pressures in Elizabethan London weakened ‘common identity’ in some parishes and ‘sharpened the awareness of social distinctions’.<sup>106</sup> It is no coincidence that at this time parishes in both the heart and outskirts of the city were narrowing the compass of consent and institutionalizing ‘a perception of social divisions’ by putting affairs into the hands of a ‘select’ core of ‘substantial’ parishioners.<sup>107</sup> Parish politics was recast.<sup>108</sup> Petitions for ‘select’ vestries were formal testimonies of social distance, squeezing of resources, more pressure and a consolidation of authority and secrets in fewer hands. ‘Sundrie honeste and credible persons’ of St Dunstan-in-the-West made an application for a select vestry in 1601, pointing out

that through the severall admittance of all sortes of parishioners into their vestries their falleth out greate disquietnes and hinderance to good proceedings by the discente of the inferior and meaner sorte of the multitude of the inhabitants... beinge greater in number and more ready to crosse the good proceedinges for the benefit of the church and parishe.

The vestry was trimmed to twenty-four men, ‘who have all bene eyther churchwardens, constables, or of the enqueste’, and, as in other parishes, were said to be ‘the most sufficient...grave and honest men fitt for that place’.<sup>109</sup>

Some parishes were quite small and twenty-four or forty-eight ‘select’ vestrymen was a sizeable slice of the population, though certainly not in the

---

4216/1, fos. 62, 72; 959/1, fos. 58, 84v; Freshfield, *St Christopher le Stocks vestry minutes*, p. 23; idem, ed., *The vestry minute book of the parish of St Margaret Lothbury in the city of London, 1571–1677* (London, 1887), pp. 14, 24. The significance of this social vocabulary in the city at this time has been discussed by others, including Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English local government...the parish and the county* (London, 1906), esp. pp. 40, 176; Tate, *Parish chest*, p. 18; Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, p. 67.

<sup>106</sup> Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, p. 84.

<sup>107</sup> Quoting *ibid.* p. 70. See also p. 71. Archer writes that all ‘the heavily populated extramural parishes had select vestries by Elizabeth’s reign. [And that] By the time of Laud’s survey of parochial government in 1638, 59 out of 109 London vestries were select’ (*ibid.* p. 69). See also McCampbell, ‘The London parish’, p. 109. Foster claims that ‘virtually every London parish by the late sixteenth century was in the hands of a small group’ (*Politics of stability*, p. 43). The decisive shift towards the setting up of a ‘selected’ vestry is usually located in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. See McCampbell, ‘The London parish’, p. 111; Boulton, *Neighbourhood and society*, p. 265. Tate writes that as a rule ‘the select vestry began at some time in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century by a resolution of parishioners at the open Easter vestry appointing a sort of committee...[which] contrived to recruit itself through cooption long enough to claim a prescriptive right to do so’ (*Parish chest*, p. 19). A large number of parishes ‘had formally sought episcopal sanction...but others claimed [select] status by prescription alone’ (Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, p. 69). McCampbell suggests that ‘many parishes maintained the general vestry with broader membership in the 1640s, and then following the trend of the national government re-established select vestries after 1654’ (‘The London parish’, p. 123. See also pp. 121–3). It should also be said that the Webbs believed that roughly one-quarter of parishes in the city were governed by select vestries at the close of the seventeenth century (*English local government*, p. 174, n. 1).

<sup>108</sup> Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, p. 93.

<sup>109</sup> GL, MSS 3016/1, fo. 43; 9236/1, register of orders and decrees, fos. 76–7.



populous parishes on London's fringe.<sup>110</sup> The ruling parish core was often a small group; the quorum was as low as half the full number or less.<sup>111</sup> To be sure, vestries still mouthed communal tunes, spinning rhetorics of fraternity and neighbourhood.<sup>112</sup> They were also bound to the larger community by a ring of connections like poor relief, work, affection and minor offices.<sup>113</sup> But let us not forget the proximity and extent of inequalities of wealth and authority, paraded in rituals and toasted at exclusive dinners;<sup>114</sup> that points of contact with the community were managed by elites; that recent literature has shown that the distribution of office closely shadowed wealth;<sup>115</sup> and that the ruling core was never entirely open, it was instead a self-perpetuating elite; vestries commonly reserved the right if any of their number should 'decay', move away, depart this life, or 'become scandalous', to appoint his successor from the ranks of 'sufficient men'.<sup>116</sup> A churchwarden of St Dionis Backchurch 'propounded' in 1663 'whether a select vestrie might be for the benefitt and uniteing' of parishioners or to their 'disadvantage and disquieting'. After 'some consultation', the parishioners 'voted' that it would be a 'disadvantage'.<sup>117</sup>

As the constituency for consent was pruned in the parish, the status of records (and secrets) became more sensitive. Access was limited still further. In many guilds too, an acute sense of distance and complexity of government at a difficult time gave rise to shifts in the politics of the community. One offshoot was a greater care for records. Another was the more meticulous recording and closer scrutiny of their contents.<sup>118</sup>

The city produced more words and paper in the seventeenth century and more secrets to shield from public gaze. Its principal records are suddenly more bulky, for there is more to record. Several years are packed into one repertory in the middle of sixteenth century, but just a single year is covered in a seventeenth-century volume. Records grow in pace with the teeming city they chronicle. London's problems were transcribed in its records, and booming business meant bulging records. It is in this climate of brooding uncertainty, I

<sup>110</sup> Cf. Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, pp. 71, 89; Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds*, pp. 183, 215; Pearl, 'Change and stability', p. 153; McCampbell, 'The London parish', p. 108.

<sup>111</sup> See, for example, GL, MSS 6544/1, fos. 2, 31v, 121v; 4415/1, fo. 74 (second series of pagination); 943/1, fo. 66; 819/1, fos. 9, 10, 32, 102, 136; 4216/1, fo. 77; 4813/1, fos. 3, 54, 147v-8; 4214/1, fo. 42v; 4049/1, fo. 28v.

<sup>112</sup> See Boulton, *Neighbourhood and society*, esp. pp. 236-47; Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, p. 84.

<sup>113</sup> See Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, esp. pp. 71, 73, 92, 98; Valerie Pearl, 'Social policy in early modern London', in H. Lloyd-Jones, V. Pearl and B. Worden, eds., *History and imagination: essays in honour of H. R. Trevor-Roper* (London, 1981), pp. 115-31, esp. p. 117; Boulton, *Neighbourhood and society*, esp. pp. 263, 268, 273-4; Foster, *Politics of stability*, p. 41.

<sup>114</sup> For example, GL, MSS 978/1, fos. 23v, 40v, 79, 81; 952/1, fo. 52.

<sup>115</sup> Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, p. 64; Boulton, *Neighbourhood and society*, esp. pp. 139-41, 268; Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds*, esp. pp. 256, 258-9, 348-9, 367.

<sup>116</sup> GL, MSS 9236/1, register of orders and decrees, fo. 77; 943/1, fo. 40; 1175/1, fo. 38; 819/1, fo. 5v; Tate, *Parish chest*, p. 19. Much the same note can be detected in the companies, see Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds*, pp. 256, 348-9.

<sup>117</sup> GL, MS 4216/1, fo. 186.

<sup>118</sup> See above, esp. p. 9.

believe, when it seems that the basis of government in a large number of companies and parishes was narrowed, that the delicate interplay between secrecy and selective publicity became even more significant and urgent, especially when, as in the case of the select vestry, that political shift was registered by a single, symbolic document – the ‘instrument’.

Yet the thirst for news on the street was never more furious than in uncertain times when more doors were closed to exclude more people. The people of London were rarely given the full story, for much was left unsaid and fragments of official information were often woven into more substantial opinions by the accumulated knowledge of experience and more animated speculation from rumours in circulation. The imaginative content of gossip – comic, extravagant, mischievous or seditious – was a popular commodity. The authorities took steps to curb this endless stream of conjecture, but they were partly to blame for its volatility and extent. The private meeting, the locked chest, the small number of keys and the unseen record, the finality of closure stirred imaginations. Gaps had to be plugged, and it is no wonder that ‘much causeless evill opinion’ circulated on the streets<sup>119</sup> – that secrecy spawned speculation.

Yet closure and selective publicity were essential tactics of government. It was hoped that they would make authority seem solemn and absolute. Access to records and knowledge was not open. Sensitive information, including financial accounts, was put to one side or shut away, and elites made choices about the merit of disclosing documents. Their enclosure and manipulation of information could seek to inform or steer opinion, but also to puzzle people and to leave them short of facts or in the dark. Policy was usually published, but much remained hidden. Accusations that ordinances had been passed over in silence and that the charter was kept out of their reach stirred feelings of injustice among artisan goldsmiths.<sup>120</sup> In other cases too, governors kept tight hold of records, only releasing them after a helpful delay and much quibbling. Records conveyed rights as well as obligations, and could themselves become the point of heated bickering, most notably in 1641 when London was rocked by a fierce quarrel between the city and commonalty about the election of sheriffs. A committee of the commonalty had been granted access to city records to help settle differences or to prop up their defence. But they complained to the house of lords that the task was not only ‘vast’, there being ‘many and great volumes’, but also that the city’s clerks would not let them take notes ‘unles they show the same unto them’, and that they kept back ‘some books of great concerne’.<sup>121</sup>

Ultimately, government was boosted by the skilful manipulation of distant polarities – public and private or secrecy and openness. That much is clear. But this was also a vocabulary in which meaning was stretched and even twisted, and fruitful opportunities were presented to describe authority and boundaries marking the limits of access and participation. Secrecy was not only a code (a

<sup>119</sup> GCL, company minute book P2, fo. 365v.

<sup>120</sup> See above, pp. 943–4.

<sup>121</sup> House of lords main papers, 6 July 1641, 16 July 1641, 17 July 1641, 23 July 1641. The missing records included journals of common council and repertories of the court of aldermen.

form of protection), in the language of 'private' and 'public' as it was used in these specific contexts it also depicted the distribution of authority, the knowledge of rights and obligations, and the use of space in terms of privileged concepts such as citizenship and the parish, and also relations between men and women, young and old, and different classes. But it was frequently a mixed blessing, as it was from this same source that perceptions of authority and events were partly drawn and opinions formed, sending news and speculation rushing across the city with such regularity.