City Sanitation Regulations in the Coventry Mayor's Proclamation of 1421

Dolly Jørgensen

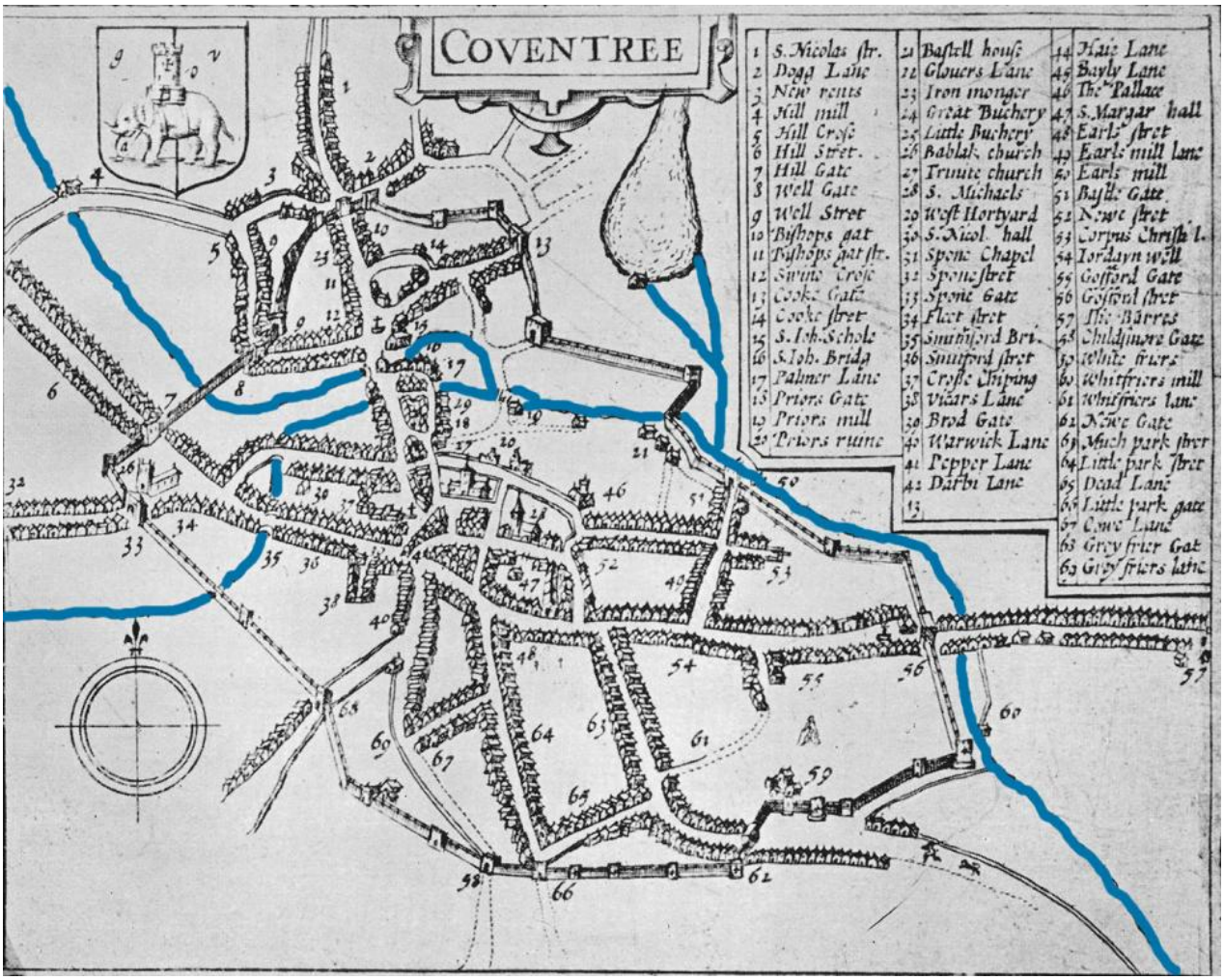
Summary

On 25 January 1421, John Leeder, the newly elected mayor of Coventry, England, issued a mayoral proclamation outlining how the city would be run. This proclamation included regulations for the food trades and focused on various ways to maintain the city and the urban environment. This reveals that late medieval city dwellers were quite aware of their urban environmental conditions. The proclamation, later regulations issued by Coventry's city council, and existing court records indicate that people who threw waste in the street or river were labeled as miscreants and fined for breaking pollution laws even in late medieval times.

On 25 January 1421, John Leeder, the newly elected mayor of Coventry, England, issued a mayoral proclamation outlining how the city would be run. He began by regulating the food trades, including setting the price for bread and beer, limiting where and when fish and grain could be sold, and banning the sale of rotten meat. His proclamation then turned to city upkeep and the urban environment. These statements, recorded in the *Coventry Leet Book*, give us insights into medieval urban sanitation concerns and their regulation in the later medieval period.

Controlling urban livestock was a central concern in the mayor's proclamation. Swine were banned from the street, as well as forbidden to run loose in gardens and pastures. The city swineherd was instructed to drive the pigs to unused land around the city, rather than into farmed meadows or fields. Ducks were also forbidden in the street—if they were found, they would be seized by the city officials. Butchers were not permitted to slay cattle within the town walls; they could butcher pigs, but only at the common scalding house, rather than in their own yard or shop. All animal dung had to be removed from the city and taken to one of three dunghills.

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Map of Coventry by John Speed from 1611. The River Sherbourne (highlighted in blue) runs west to east around the northern side of the city. The Radford Brook (also in blue) enters the Sherbourne from the northwest.

BY-NC-SA Dolly Jørgensen based on: a PUBLIC DOMAIN map by John Speed published in Speed, John. *The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine.* London: Sudbury and Humble, 1611.

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Keeping Coventry's river flowing was another main issue in 1421. Throwing animal dung from stables or other waste into the Sherbourne River was strictly forbidden. No one was permitted to block the river with trees, stones, or other structures, such as crafting equipment. The mayor ordered that all people with property along the Sherbourne and other smaller brooks in the city had to remove any encroachments and clean out any accumulated muck from their section of the watercourse. The mayor noted that river blockage in the past had resulted in flooding, so these river upkeep measures were necessary.

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By the twentieth century, the Sherbourne River had been channelized and runs underground through most of Coventry. This exposed section runs on the eastern side of the medieval town near Gosford Street.

2008 Amanda Slater

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Maintaining clean streets was the third sanitation concern voiced by the mayor. All householders had to clean the pavement in front of their houses every Saturday or they would be fined for noncompliance. Individuals had to have a cart ready to carry away human or animal dung; waste could not be piled up temporarily in the street. Cooks were not allowed to throw scraps, such as feathers or entrails, into the street.

The 1421 Mayor Proclamation reveals that late medieval city dwellers were quite aware of their urban environmental conditions. Unlike many popular portrayals of medieval times that show people plodding through muck-filled streets, the mayor set minimum cleanliness standards that would have kept the streets relatively free from filth. This proclamation, later regulations issued by Coventry's city council, and existing court records indicate that people who threw waste in the street or river were labeled as miscreants and fined for breaking pollution laws even in late medieval times.

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Further readings:

- Aiton, William Townsend. *Hortus Kewensis: Or, a Catalogue of the Plants Cultivated in the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew.* London: Longman, 1813. E-book
- Carr, David R. "Controlling the Butchers in Late Medieval English Towns." *The Historian* 70 (2008): 450–61.
- Harris, Mary Dormer, ed. *The Coventry Leet Book or Mayor's Register*, part 1. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1907.
- Jørgensen, Dolly. "'All good rule of the Citee': Sanitation and Civic Government in England, 1400–1600." *Journal of Urban History* 36 (2010): 300–15.
- Jørgensen, Dolly. "Local Government Responses to Urban River Pollution in Late Medieval England." *Water History* 2 (2010): 35–52.

Related links:

- Historic Coventry
  http://www.historiccoventry.co.uk/
- Florilegium Urbanum
  http://users.trytel.com/~tristan/towns/florilegium/flor00.html

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