

## THE QUEST FOR THE LIVER BIRD

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IDENTIFYING the Liver bird has in the past provoked more speculation than any other avian species, real or imaginary, not excepting the Dodo to which in many respects it bears a distinct resemblance. The general conviction today is that the Liver was ever a mythical creature, perpetuating a view which was held as long ago as 1774. Enfield, in his *History of Liverpool*, denies the existence of such a bird as the Liver—'except in fabulous tradition and the Herald's office'.<sup>1</sup> By 1817 Matthew Gregson, in *Fragments Relating to the History of Lancashire*, could say that it was 'dubious', and had been 'cut and carved in all shapes from a goose to a long-necked heron'.<sup>2</sup> It is the intention of this paper therefore to trace the history of the name and to determine to what species of bird, real or imaginary, it had reference through successive stages of its evolution to the present day. In short, to undertake a 'Quest for the Liver Bird'.

The work of identification is assisted only in a negative sense by considering the etymology of the place-name, Liverpool. The element -Pool is derived from the O.E. *pol*, used to denote the estuary of a small stream as it widens into the sea. The pool in Liverpool is not the estuary of the river Mersey, however, but of a small stream which issued into it near the present Customs House, following the line of the modern Paradise Street, Whitechapel, and the old Haymarket. One might be tempted to assume from the name that it was on this 'Pool' that the so-called 'Liver' bird was first observed. Unfortunately, whatever else the first element of the place-name originally denoted, it certainly had no reference to any bird.

<sup>1</sup> William Enfield, *History of Liverpool* (1774), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Gregson, *Portfolio of Fragments relating to the History of Lancashire* (1817, 2nd. edn. 1824), Appendix, p. 63 (subsequently referred to as Gregson).

The earliest extant form of the name is, in 1190–94, *Liuerpul*<sup>3</sup> (Lancashire Charters), and thereafter *Liuerpul* (1207); *Liuerpol* (1211—Pipe Rolls, and again in 1246 and 1266); *Litherpol* (1222–6—Lancashire Inquests); *Leuerepul* (1229); *Lyuerpole* (1346); *Leuerpoll* (1393). Some place-names authorities<sup>4</sup> have maintained that these two alternative forenames *Liver-* and *Lever-* are two different forms of the same word, that is the O.E. personal name *Leöfhere*, alternatively *Lifhere*. More recently, and more cogently, E. Ekwall has compared<sup>5</sup> *Liver* with O.E. *Lifrig*, M.E. *livered*, ‘coagulated, clotted’ (as in *pe lerede se*, for ‘the Red Sea’). The name may therefore mean ‘pool with thick water’. Or *Liver-* may be the old name of one of the streams that fell into the pool. If so, it is identical with *Lifra* in Norway—‘stream with thick water’.

The place-name, then, had no reference to a Liver bird, and to determine its genesis we are required to go far back in the history of Liverpool, about which next to nothing is known before the creation of the borough in 1207. In Domesday it is almost certainly one of the six unnamed Berewicks attached to the Manor of West Derby.<sup>6</sup> On 28 August 1207, King John issued the so-called ‘charter’ which turned the vill into a borough<sup>7</sup> It has been supposed that the ancient common seal of the borough, of which a copy and impressions still exist, was created at or about this time. The point to note here is that for the first time an emblematic bird is found in association with the name Liverpool, depicted in the centre of the seal. At this stage one must admit that most of the published information concerning the common seal, and speculation as to the precise meaning of its inscription and figures, is derived from numerous papers and communications of nineteenth-century antiquaries, for the most part printed in the Transactions of this Society. Whilst such writings are invaluable, their authors appear on occasion to have been more concerned to refute contrary views than to examine their subject on its merits. With this caution in mind, we note that the form of the seal as it remains to us is described and figured as a pointed oval or *vesica piscis* common

<sup>3</sup> Henry Cecil Wyld and T. Oakes Hirst, *The Place-Names of Lancashire* (1911), pp. 174–81. See also W. Farrer (ed.), *Early Lancashire Charters* (1902); W. Farrer (ed.), *Lancashire Inquests Extents and Feudal Aids*, Lancashire Record Society, 48 (1903), 54 (1907); *Victoria County History, Lancashire*, IV (1911), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Notably John Sephton, *A Handbook of Lancashire Place-Names* (1913). (subsequently referred to as Sephton).

<sup>5</sup> E. Ekwall, *Place-Names of Lancashire* (1922); E. Ekwall, *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (1936).

<sup>6</sup> *VCH Lancs.* I (1906), p. 283.

<sup>7</sup> R. Muir and E. M. Platt, *History of Municipal Government in Liverpool to 1835* (1906), p. 153.

in the Middle Ages. Round the edge is a latin inscription which has been variously interpreted, and in the remaining central space a bird, with wings elevated, bearing in its beak a branch of foliage. Below the bird and within the central space is an inscribed label or 'caption', and at the right-hand point a star and a crescent. Speculation and controversy was rife throughout the nineteenth century as to the meaning of the inscription, with which we are not directly concerned, and the bird, the foliage, the label, the crescent and the star, with which we are concerned.

A Mr Barron Field declared in 1828 that 'the present seal is an unquestionable antiquity and originally made in the reign of King John'.<sup>8</sup> It seems more probable, however, that the original seal came into existence in 1229 when, on 24 March, King Henry III granted a new charter to Liverpool,<sup>9</sup> the burgesses paying ten marks for it. Now although this payment shows that they had learned to take common action, perhaps by forming an illicit 'guild', by its very clandestine nature it would be precluded from adopting an official seal. The charter of King Henry III, however, is of the first importance as it remained the governing charter of the borough down to 1626, all the intervening charters being merely confirmations. The most important concession of the charter was the right to have a 'gild merchant with a hansa and all the liberties and free customs pertaining to that gild', one of which would be the right to a common seal. It seems certain that this original seal was lost when, at the taking of Liverpool by Prince Rupert during the civil war, on the night of 14 June 1644, the Corporation lost their writings and ancient records. In an order of Parliament of 1646 it is said that 'all the wrytings and ancient records belonging to ye said Corporation were taken away when that Towne was taken by the enemy'.<sup>10</sup>

At least five impressions of the original seal remain to us however. The earliest surviving evidence of the town's seal is on a document of 1352 in the British Museum.<sup>11</sup> By a judicious policy of acquisition and permanent loan exercised over a number of years, the Liverpool City Museum has been able to assemble together in one place the four remaining impressions.

<sup>8</sup> Barron Field, 'On the common seal of the borough of Liverpool and the pretended charter of King Henry II', *Liverpool Mercury (The Kaleidoscope)*, 25 April 1828.

<sup>9</sup> Muir and Platt, *op. cit.* p. 155.

<sup>10</sup> H. C. Pigeon, 'On the common seal of the borough of Liverpool', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* I (1848-9), pp. 56-60, 105 (subsequently referred to as Pigeon).

<sup>11</sup> Henry Ecroyd Smith, 'Additional Notes on the ancient seal of Liverpool', *Trans. Hist. Soc. Lancs. Ches.* 19 (1866-7), pp. 217-24 (subsequently referred to as Ecroyd Smith).

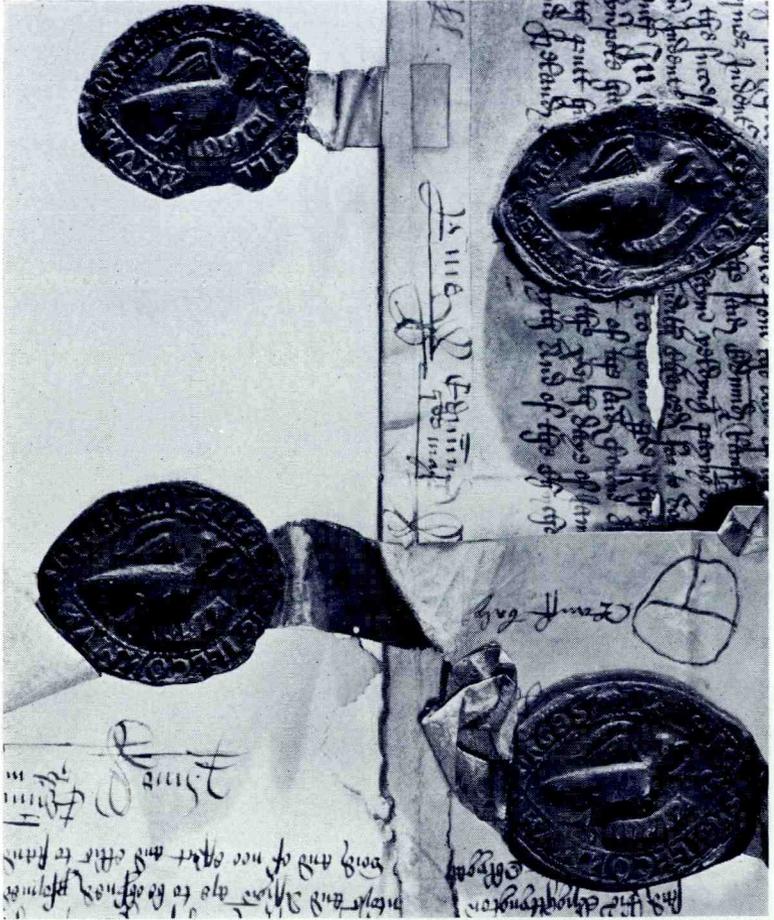


Figure 1

## LIVERPOOL SEAL IMPRESSIONS

Four original seal impressions, by courtesy of City of Liverpool Museums.

They now rest securely in an iron safe in the Museum, an indication of the value to be attached to these civic memoria, and I have been able to make a detailed examination of them there, by kind permission of the Curator. It is much to be hoped that the speedy completion of the re-organisation of the Museum will enable these interesting relics, and much else of Liverpool's history, to be displayed in a manner appropriate to a great city, for the benefit of its citizens and visitors alike, instead of, as now, of necessity hidden away.

The first impression in point of date is one attached to a document of 20 September 1458. William Gatherd, Mayor of 'Lyuerpull', granted to James Harebron certain lands in the said town. As is the case with all the impressions the inscription is in part deficient or indistinct, and the particular value of an 'aggregate' study of this kind is that it enables the complete inscription to be reconstructed, since each example is able to supply details which may be lacking in the others. Each exhibit is accompanied by a card which describes it as being 'The Ancient Common Seal of Liverpool. 1207'. The one under review has an additional note to the effect that the seal (meaning, presumably, the impression and not the original matrix) has been badly tampered with, probably by means of a hot wire or skewer. For some time it was known as the Lilford impression after the gentleman who donated it to this Society, from which the City Museum now has it on loan. The impression, in red wax, in common with its fellows, is still attached by tape to the lower edge of the accompanying parchment, together with a photostat copy of the whole. It is marked '105 His. Soc. Lan. and Ches'.

The next two impressions are attached to documents relating to the same transaction. They were placed on permanent loan in the City Museum in 1936, having then only recently come to light, by their respective owners, Sir Everard Scarisbrick, of Scarisbrick Hall, near Ormskirk, and the Committee of the Wigan Free Public Library. Both documents bear the date 16 January 1548/9. The Wigan Library impression is attached to an indenture between Edmund Gee, Mayor of 'Lyverpole', and Richard Wrightyngton, recording a transfer by the latter to the former of a lease of Chantry lands in the said town. The Scarisbrick Hall impression is attached to a bond in £100 by Edmund Gee, Mayor of 'Lyverpole', to Richard Wrightyngton, to secure the due performance of the said indenture. The lettering of this impression is rather sharper than that of its companion, though undoubtedly made by the same seal at the same time.

The fourth impression was also placed on permanent loan in the City Museum in 1936 by the owner, the Right Honourable

the Earl of Sefton. It was then described as the Croxteth Hall impression from its former presence in the muniment room of the Earl's country residence. It is attached to an indenture dated 7 October anno 4 and 5, Philip and Mary, that is 1557, between Sir Richard Molyneaux and John More, Mayor of 'Lyverpole', recording a lease by the former to the latter on the profits of the town. A curious feature is that this exhibit exactly fits the description of an impression recorded and reproduced by H. C. Pigeon in 1848, at that time known as the Okill impression from its presence in the collection presented to the Corporation by the Committee Clerk of that name.<sup>12</sup> Either these two records are of the self-same impression, which is unlikely in view of the discrepancies in attribution, or two impressions were formerly in existence relating to the same transaction, one of which, the 'Okill impression', has since disappeared. (See Appendix for references to individual impressions and reproductions, and fig. 1.)

The four impressions of the original seal are accompanied by a modern impression of the seal which is still in use. It is described as 'The Common Seal of Liverpool, 1644'. The present seal or die, having a matrix of silver, as preserved by the Corporation, was first seen to be a copy by a Mr William Hamper in 1824.<sup>13</sup> It seemed clear to him that 'the present matrix is not the original seal, but a blundered copy, the work of some artist unacquainted with the letters and language of its circumscription'.<sup>14</sup> (It had previously been thought that the imperfections of the present seal were caused by the deepening of the original letters. That is, that certain errors were made by the engraver employed in the alterations, by the substitution of letters not originally forming part of the inscription).

The date of fabrication of the present seal is not in doubt. In an inventory of the town's plate compiled in 1657 there is mention of 'Item.—one escutcheon with the Townes arms upon it: this the Townes Waite hath', and also, immediately following,

<sup>12</sup> H. C. Pigeon's lithograph is derived from a drawing in the Minute book of the Historic Society, which was in turn taken from a cast of the impression which Okill made in 1850. This is also the model for the engraving and description in the *Transactions of the Chester Architectural and Archaeological Society I* (1887), opposite p. 161. The deed to which the impression was attached is noticed in J. A. Twemlow, *Liverpool Town Books 1550-1862 I* (1918) pp. 286-7; 'Item, the said xiiiith day of this December, by mayster Robert Corbet, was brought and presentid, *palam omnibus*, an indenture sealid and signed wyth Sir Richard Molineux, knyght and mayster William Molineux esquier, his sonne and heyre etc., bearyng date the vi[i]th day of Octobre in the iiiith and vth yeres of Philippe and Marie, etc.'

<sup>13</sup> William Hamper, 'The arms and seal of the town of Liverpool', *Archaeologia* 21 (1827), pp. 534-6. (subsequently referred to as Hamper)

<sup>14</sup> Liverpool City Records, MS letter to Mr J. Roberts, 28 Dec. 1824.

'Item.—the Townes Common Seal'. Whilst the escutcheon is listed in an earlier inventory of 1644, there is no mention there of a common seal. In an appendix thereto, however, there is a further list of articles, apparently added later to the general stock, and the date 1648 is written in the margin opposite. This additional list includes 'one new Seal ingraved with the Townes' arms'. No doubt this seal is the one at present in use by the Corporation, since there is no record of a subsequent order for its renewal. It is an odd circumstance, however, that in 1743 it was ordered that, there being two Corporation seals, 'the newest of them, or the last made, be destroyed in the presence of the Council at such time as they should appoint'. It is on record that the order was carried out in the following October, though this entry does not state that the newest seal was destroyed. The conclusion is therefore that the seal at present in use is a copy of the original which dates back to about 1645. The haste in procuring a new seal would be dictated by the legal inability to transact the town's business without one. The puzzle remains, however, as to the nature and origin of the duplicate seal found to be in existence in 1743 and subsequently destroyed. Could it be that the original seal, lost at the time of Prince Rupert's seige in 1644, had mysteriously turned up again? Evidently not, if the order of April 1743 was faithfully carried out, for there is no doubt that the seal which survived on that occasion and which remains to us is a copy of the original.<sup>15</sup>

It is clear that we must examine the impressions of the earlier seal if we are to determine the significance of the bird depicted there. Two early speculations can be immediately discounted. Matthew Gregson claimed in 1817<sup>16</sup> that the bird is meant to represent the Eagle of the Roman god Jove, whose name is given in the label below. Quite apart from the conjectural reading of the label, however, which defies any certain interpretation, it is unlikely that at this time the classical allusion would be understood, much less consciously applied as an emblem for the borough of Liverpool.

Richard Brooke in 1849 submitted that the bird is meant to be

<sup>15</sup> See the *Liverpool Town Books* for 25 April 1743; and see James Touzeau, *The Rise and Progress of Liverpool*, I (1910), p. 254, for a description of the Inventories of 1644 and 1657. Touzeau is silent, however, on the question of the origin of the 'surplus' seal noted in 1743. If this was known to be the original seal, it would be highly improbable that this was destroyed rather than the later copy. The probability is that the newer of the two seals was a secondary copy used at some time by a rival faction in the government of the town. Robert Gladstone stated quite categorically, without adducing any evidence, that the surplus seal was the original: 'In 1743, by what means we are not told, the Corporation had recovered possession of the old seal'; 'The story of Liverpool's historic seal', *Liverpool Echo*, Saturday 18 Feb. 1922.

<sup>16</sup> Gregson.

a dove with an olive sprig in its beak, that it is a mediaeval rebus for the word PAX, and that the disputed letters on the face of the seal are intended for NOBIS or VOBIS.<sup>17</sup> Again, there is no cogent reason why the dove should be applied as an emblem to Liverpool at this time, apart from the fact that it is taken to be 'emblematic alike of confidence at sea and peace at home',<sup>18</sup> but it should be noted in mitigation of this otherwise incredible claim that the bird as depicted certainly looks more like a dove than an eagle.

That the label, however interpreted, is meant by its position to be read with reference to the bird seems certain, although at one time it was urged that it was merely a continuation of the inscription round the border. The latter, with certain contractions expanded, has generally been read as SIGILLUM COMMUNE BORGENN—SIUM DE LEVERPOL ('The Common Seal of the Burgesses of Liverpool'). The place name in the earlier impressions is written out in full, but the present seal appears to terminate with an abbreviation, thus LEVER B: for this reason William Hamper (to whom the earlier impressions were unknown) concluded that the engraver, on discovering that he had no more room left in the margin, completed the place-name in the only remaining space in the centre, thus: LEVER-POLIS. (What he does not explain is how his reading, as plainly reproduced in his engraving, IODIS, becomes -POLIS in his text.)<sup>19</sup> Richard Brooke, to whom the earlier impression was known, committed an even more outlandish Latin barbarism on the same lines by reading LEVER-POLIOPIIS.<sup>20</sup>

We come now to the more plausible suggestion that the bird on the seal is meant to be a representation of the eagle of St John whose origin is to be found in the vision of Ezekiel of the likeness of four living creatures: 'They four also had the face of an eagle: and their wings were straight upward and they went everyone straight forward'. The four creatures reappear in the Revelation of St John the Divine in the form of a lion, a calf, a man, and a flying eagle. It was Irenaeus who in the second century assigned each as an emblem of one of the four evangelists, respectively St Mark, St Luke, St Matthew, and St John. Thus the eagle of St John is said to typify the soaring upward after heavenly mysteries characteristic of the saint, of whom St Jerome speaks: 'having taken the wings of an eagle and "hastening to loftier things, speaks of the word of God".' It is for this reason that the

<sup>17</sup> Richard Brooke, 'Observations on the inscriptions upon the common seal of Liverpool', *Trans. Hist. Soc. Lancs. Ches.* 1 (1848-49), pp. 76-9, 94-5 (subsequently referred to as Brooke)

<sup>18</sup> Hamper.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Brooke.

lectern in many parish churches is in the form of an eagle, supporting the bible as the 'Word of God'. It must be said at once that the bird of the earlier Liverpool seal impressions in no sense resembles an eagle, except, it may be, in the delineation of its upraised wings. This need not necessarily tell against such an interpretation, however, since it is evident that the original engraver was no artist. That is to say, taken by itself, the figure on the seal could be held with equal justification to represent any one of a great variety of ornithological species.

The identification of the bird on the seal with the eagle of St John turns on the rendering which is given to the enigmatic label, which has hitherto baffled all attempts at a convincing explanation. It was H. C. Pigeon (happy name) who in the very first volume of the *Transactions of this Society*,<sup>21</sup> first recorded the theory that these letters were meant to stand for JOH'IS, the contracted form of the genitive JOHANNIS. The theory was given added weight when in 1850 John Gough Nichols published in the *Transactions*<sup>22</sup> an engraving of a 'brass medal' which had come into his possession from the Dean of St Patrick's collection. This depicted on the obverse an eagle, with, below, in Lombardic capitals, JON, and on the reverse I H S. J. G. Nichols was no doubt right in attributing the badge to some large monastic community under the patronage of St John.

There are two objections to this theory, and the first concerns the form of the letters of the label themselves. The middle letter is not on the face of it an h, but rather a 'small-case' h turned upside down. In this position it could be taken for a capital P, the head of which has been partly erased, hence Brooke's rendering (LEVERPOL)-IOPIS. The final letter is very clearly an S reversed, but this alone cannot justify H. C. Pigeon's manifestly false conclusion that the label is a reversed inscription; it is not a 'mirror-image' such as one would get in the case of a die cast 'retrograde' so as to give a right way round impression on wax. True, three of the letters—I, O and s—could be said to be 'reversed', but their order is not reversed. That there is here an element of reversal, however, and the reason for it, I hope to demonstrate later.

The second objection is grammatical in nature, and was first put forward concurrently with H. C. Pigeon's explanation by Richard Brooke, thus: 'to put a noun-substantive, or a proper name, quite alone, and in the genitive case, without any other

<sup>21</sup> Pigeon.

<sup>22</sup> John Gough Nichols, 'On the seal of Liverpool', *Trans.Hist.Soc.Lancs. Ches.* 2 (1850), engraving, token of copper, opposite p. 54. Previously reproduced in *Gentleman's Magazine*, July 1847, p. 22, with a description by 'JGN', p. 24 (subsequently referred to as Gough).

word to give it some meaning, such for example, as would signify 'the Grant' or 'the Gift' of John, does not make sense; and bad as the latin of the Middle Ages often was, it was scarcely so bad as that, nor so much at variance with the rules of grammar'. (IOHIS, the genitive of 'John', occurs on the seal of Yeovil, but in that case the governing noun is also given).<sup>23</sup>

I have no doubt in my own mind that the label is meant to signify 'of John', and the rest is circumstantial evidence. First, it would be natural for the burgesses to place upon their seal the name of the king who had first granted the charter which incorporated their borough. If it be objected that by my own admission the seal itself is not likely to have been anterior to the granting of the second charter by King Henry III in 1229, such an attribution could well have been made retrospectively without implying any discourtesy to the reigning sovereign. After a lapse of only 22 years, the grantor of the first charter would still be held in clear memory and at least nominal esteem. Secondly, the 'sun' and the crescent (moon), depicted to the right of the bird's beak, and five pellets depicted above its tail, and which have been held to represent stars,<sup>24</sup> can all be shown to have been used as regal emblems during the reign of King John. They appear on the only coins which are certainly known to have been issued by him, the silver Irish pennies and halfpennies which bear the name of the king on the obverse, and on the reverse the name of the moneyer and mint.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the 'sprig of foliage' in the bird's beak may be meant to represent the pod and leaves of the broom plant, the 'planta genista' (hence Plantagenet), that is, the Plantagenet badge of King John. We know that he acknowledged his namesake St John the Evangelist as his patron saint, the result being, both on the seal and elsewhere, a curious combination of symbols in honour of both saint and king.

An alternative explanation for the 'sprig of foliage' might also serve to identify the bird on the seal with the eagle of St John. In the earlier impressions this has the distinct appearance of a *fleurs-de-lys*, anciently the emblem of purity and innocence. As such it became especially the symbol of the Virgin Mary and of a few saints, notably St John, the 'beloved disciple' of our Lord.<sup>26</sup> However, I know of no other occurrences in art of the conjunction of these two symbols, the eagle and the *fleurs-de-lys*, as together representative of St John. In 1850 J. G. Nichols asserted that 'the bird of the original matrix was meant to be an

<sup>23</sup> Brooke.

<sup>24</sup> Clearly discernible on the 1458 impression, and on the present seal; less so on the impressions of 1548-9; only just discernible on the impression of 1557. They are omitted in most reproductions.

<sup>25</sup> Ecroyd Smith.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

eagle, the eagle of St John the Evangelist, and the object carried in his mouth is or was meant to be the inkhorn wherewith the bird is usually depicted as attending on the prophet in the Isle of Patmos'.<sup>27</sup> Though nothing could look less like an inkhorn than the object carried in the bird's beak in the earlier impressions, it is highly significant that both eagle and inkhorn have been incorporated in the armorial bearings granted to the bishopric of Liverpool on the 17 July 1882. The heraldic description is as follows: 'Argent and eagle rising Sable, beaked and legged, and a Glory round the head Or, holding in the dexter claw an Ink-horn proper, a chief per pale Azure and Gules charged on the dexter side with an open book Or, inscribed in letters Sable 'Thy Word is Truth' and in the sinister an Ancient Ship with three Masts Sails Furled also Or'.<sup>28</sup> It has been held that this grant is a recognition of the fact that the bird on the town seal was intended to represent the eagle of St John,<sup>29</sup> but this is no more than a supposition, and certainly cannot be taken as proof.

J. G. Nichols was however on safer ground when he suggested that the reason why the symbol of St John was adopted as the device of the burgesses of Liverpool was because the original Guild of the Corporation was placed under the tutelary patronage of that saint. The Guilds or Corporations almost always had their patron saint. Out of 600 English Guilds, the records of which were examined by a Mr T. Smith at that time, scarcely any were found without one.<sup>30</sup> Although we have no certain knowledge of the patron of the Liverpool Guild, St John was rather a favourite. The fact that there was a chapel or chantry of St John among four chantries in the parish Church of St Nicholas is of no account here, since this was founded by one John de Leverpol, son of Richard de Leverpol, and not by the Guild. It was dedicated to St John the Evangelist in 1324, a century after the seal was fabricated.<sup>31</sup> H. E. Smith was no doubt correct when he pointed out in 1867 that as a burgess of note John de Leverpol might possibly desire to honour the tutelary saint of the town's Guild,<sup>32</sup> but personal considerations are invariably more powerful than public ones, and the probability is that the founder dedicated his chantry to St John as his own patron saint. In passing, there was a church on the site of Liverpool prior to the founding of St Nicholas. This church, St Mary del Key (or

<sup>27</sup> Gough.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Brooke, *Liverpool 1775-1800* (1853), pp. 179-87.

<sup>29</sup> J. Paul Rylands, 'The armorial bearings of the City of Liverpool: with a report thereon by George William Marshall', *Trans. Hist. Soc. Lancs. Ches.* 62 (1890), opposite p. 1; colour engraving of the grant and confirmation of arms to the town of Liverpool, 22 March 1797 (subsequently referred to as Rylands).

<sup>30</sup> J. A. Picton, *Memorials of Liverpool I* (1903), p. 16 n. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Sephton.

<sup>32</sup> Ecroyd Smith.

Quay) persisted into the seventeenth century, and it may well have housed a Guild chantry of St John for which no records remain.

I want now to advance a new theory concerning the meaning of the disputed label, which to my mind is more cogent than any advanced so far, and which supports the identification of the figured bird with the eagle of St John. I have been struck, on examining all the impressions which remain to us, by the crude nature of the letters which comprise the label in comparison with the inscription round the border, quite apart from the unusual treatment of the third and final letters. The third letter indeed is so indistinctly rendered that the copyist who fabricated the present seal mistook it for a D. All which leads me to conclude that the label is secondary to and therefore later than the seal and its inscription. But for what purpose? The clue is to be found in Richard Brooke's original objection to H. C. Pigeon's rendering as long ago as 1848, namely that mediaeval latin was not so much at variance with the rules of grammar as to place a proper name in the genitive case without some other word to give it a meaning, as for example 'the grant' or 'the gift' of John. But, if not a word, why not a figured object in lieu of a word? I suggest that the label in the genitive case has reference to and is descriptive of the bird figured above it, thus (this is) the eagle or bird OF JOHN. It may be that a hundred or more years after the making of the seal the precise significance of the bird was being disputed or in danger of being forgotten (as it is now), and some later engraver was called on to add an explication. The only space left to him, below the bird's breast, was insufficient to allow the writing of JOHANNIS in full, so he compromised by inserting what he intended to be the contraction JOHIS. It is typical of his craftsmanship, however, (or lack of it), that he was incapable of incising into the matrix of the original seal a mirror image of the word such as is necessary to achieve a right-way round rendering on the impression. The result is the botched compromise we see today. I cannot imagine that the original engraver, who correctly rendered all the letters of the bordure, was responsible also for the label.

We now have to answer the primary question, how, and under what circumstances, did this bird, the eagle of St John, become known as the LIVER bird? It is not sufficient to reply simply that the bird on the seal became known in a colloquial sense as the Liver (strictly Lever) bird by association with the place-name written above it; that is, the Liver(Pool) bird, with the second part of the name suppressed. That might have been assumed were there not contra-indications in literature.

The first recorded use of the term 'Liver' as of a distinct species, in English, occurs comparatively late, in the year 1667 on the occasion of the gift to the town of Liverpool, by the Earl of Derby, of a 'large mace of silver, richly gilt, and engraved with his majesty's arms, and the arms of the town, viz a "leaver"'.<sup>33</sup> We may assume therefore that the term was in use for some years prior to 1667. We are at once introduced to a second line of enquiry, namely the armorial bearings or coat of arms of the town, later the city, of Liverpool. The official grant and confirmation of arms was given comparatively recently, on the 22 March 1797, and quite unexpectedly this makes no mention either of the eagle of St John or of a so-called Liver bird. On the contrary the bird there actually figured, named, and described is yet a third species, the Cormorant. The heraldic description is as follows: 'Argent a *Cormorant* in the beak a branch of seaweed called *Laver* all proper, and for the crest, on a wreath of the colours a *Cormorant* the wings elevated in the beak a branch of *Laver* proper'. The present Mayor's seal (though not the Municipal seal) also features, unmistakably, a Cormorant.<sup>34</sup>

How then are we to fit this new knowledge into our scheme of things so far? For if the genesis of the Liver bird is to be found in an Eagle of St John it cannot at the same time be said to have been a Cormorant. The history of Liverpool's coat of arms is therefore germane to our enquiry.

There is a possibility that the town possessed arms prior to 1558, for in a record of February 16th of that year there is a reference to 'The Scochyn, or Common badge of the towne'. There is nothing to show, however, that this was armorial, or that it included the representation of any bird. The first mention of arms as such occurs in certain record books of the Corporation dated c1611, as follows: 'Plate w<sup>ch</sup> is to be bestowed on the Maior marked with the Cormorant, the Townes Armes on it'. That being the case, it is rather disconcerting to read the following in the 10th (1831) edition of *The Stranger in Liverpool*: 'The coat and crest of the town of Liverpool, as by Flower, (No. 2167), who was herald for Lancashire—argent, and in base, water proper, standing in which a *wild drake* sable, beaked gules—crest a *heron* sable, in its beak gules, a branch of lever

<sup>33</sup> T. Kaye, *The stranger in Liverpool, or a historical and descriptive view of the town of Liverpool and its environs* (10th. edn. 1831), p. 5n. In the light of this evidence Sydney Jeffery was surely mistaken in assuming that the earliest allusion to a 'Liver' in official records occurred only in 1758, when the Watch Commissioners ordered 240 tokens of brass or copper 'with the Liver on one side for the use of the watchmen'; lecture printed in the *Liverpool Daily Post*, 16 Dec. 1959.

<sup>34</sup> George Chandler, *Liverpool* (1957), Pl. 105, p. 171; *Liverpool under James I* (1960), Pl. 22, p. 47.

virt'. Now whilst it is true that William Flower was Norray King of Arms in the latter part of the sixteenth century, in his visitation of Lancashire in 1567 (Harleian MS 1549),<sup>35</sup> to confirm and register armorial bearings, he makes no mention of Liverpool's arms, nor is any mention made in connection with the succeeding visitations of 1533, 1613, and 1664-5. Nevertheless, the terms of the 1797 grant and confirmation indicate that an unofficial coat of arms was then in existence: thus 'The arms *assumed and used* by the Corporation of the said town are a Cormorant, in the beak a branch of seaweed called Laver, and for the crest a Cormorant, as in the arms with wings elevated, but that *the same not having been registered in the College of Arms . . .*'. A fair presumption therefore is, that on the revival of the Common Council in 1580, when Flower was Norray King of Arms, he granted the arms and crest to the town, and that the original grant being lost or for some reason not produced, there would be no evidence of arms at the subsequent visitations.<sup>36</sup>

How then did the later confusion of the cormorant with the wild drake arise? I believe, almost certainly from a misreading of a work by the third Randle Holme in 1688. But first note that Harleian MS 2,167 (Personal folio 68b), which is one of Randle Holme's collection, dated c1679, and which has no connection with Flower's visitation of Lancashire (*pace The Stranger in Liverpool*), contains a drawing of 'the coat and crest of the Town of Leverpoole in the Com. Lanc<sup>r</sup><sup>37</sup>: Argent, standing in water in base proper, a bird, close Sable, beaked Gules. Crest: on a wreath a similar bird close Sable with a branch in the beak vert'. Note that neither the species of bird or branch is specified, and that the description is almost identical with the arms and crest now borne by the city, the only difference being that in Randle Holme's drawing the bird in the arms is standing in water, and that in the crest is close, instead of having the wings elevated. This drawing is doubtless the one alluded to in the footnote from *The Stranger in Liverpool*, and I believe that the mistake there arose from a confusion between Randle Holme's drawing, as represented in Harleian MS 2,617, and a work by the same author printed some nine years later, in 1688, at Chester, and titled *The Academy of Armory, or, a Storehouse of Armory and Blazon*.<sup>38</sup> In

<sup>35</sup> BM Harleian MS 1,549; visitation of Lancashire 1567 by William Flower Norray. MS 6,159 is a copy of the same made in 1598; quoted in William Enfield, *History of Liverpool* (1774), p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> This view was first advanced by G. W. Marshall. See note 29.

<sup>37</sup> See *Trans.Hist.Soc.Lancs.Ches.* 62 (1890), p. 4, for a facsimile drawing.

<sup>38</sup> Randle Holme, *The Academy of Armory, or, a Storehouse of Armory and Blazon, containing the several varieties of created beings, and how born in coats of arms, both foreign and domestic* (Chester, 1688; edn. used ed. I. H. Jeayes, 1905), I, chapter xii; engraving (89 items), p. 257; no. 22, pp. 265-6; no. 26, p. 266.

chapter XII of Book II Randle Holme lists in order a great variety of birds, and describes how they are borne 'in Coats of Arms, both Foreign and Domestic'. Each individual description concludes with several examples of the creature's occurrence in actual coats of arms. No. 22 (of 89 in all) begins as follows: 'He beareth G (Gules) a *Shoveller*, Argent. . . . In Heraldry, antiquity hath drawn this fowl with a hair's tuft behind its head, and a like tuft hanging down from the middle of the Breast, with a loose drooping and falling Tail; which proportions we do keep for a *Shoveller* to this day: though I do confess naturally they have none of the foresaid things: but do in shape and proportion, very much resemble the *Common Duck*'. There follows a detailed description of the common duck, followed by four instances of its appearance in coats of arms, the last of which reads: 'A a *Shoveller* B (Blue) Beak and Legs G (Gules) born by Lever or Leverpole'. A *Shoveller Duck* might properly be termed a wild drake, but the anonymous author of *The Stranger in Liverpool* (and many both before and after him) is mistaken in thinking that Randle Holme here refers to the town of Leverpole; on the contrary he refers to the personal family name of Leverpole (as also of Lever), and the proof of this is to be found on the very next page, under no. 26 where the town is specifically mentioned: 'A a *Lever* B (Blue) the Coat of the Town of Leverpole'. The confusion was no doubt further confounded by the first line of this section which reads: 'He beareth Azure, the head of a *Lever* couped proper, of some termed a *Shoveller's head*'. The context, however, makes it plain that Randle Holme did not himself identify the Lever with the *Shoveller*, despite the similarity of their names, though Barron Field evidently thought he did. 'The bird of the seal', he wrote in 1828,<sup>39</sup> is 'sufficiently like the lever or shoveller duck of Randal [*sic*] Holme'. So strong did this comparatively late tradition—that the Lever was a *Shoveller Duck*—become, that some authors read back the likeness of a duck into earlier representations of the town's arms, notably on a spout of St Peter's church dated 1711, and a similar crest dated 1718 on the spout of a house in Aughton Street, Ormskirk.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, H. E. Smith stated in 1867 that until that date he had regarded the bird of the seal as a wader—'possibly a *Shoveller Duck*, the original of the mythical Liver (formerly Lever) now conspicuously placed upon all the public erections of the town, whether Corporate palace or lamp post'.<sup>41</sup>

It seems probable that the *Shoveller Duck* was chosen as a rebus for the personal name Lever or Leverpole by transposing

<sup>39</sup> Barron Field.

<sup>40</sup> Rylands.

<sup>41</sup> Ecroyd Smith.

the letters of the latter part of its name. Both the Latin name, *Spatula Boie*,<sup>42</sup> and the vernacular English name of this creature, the Shoveller, have reference to the distinctive appearance of its beak. It has the peculiar habit of throwing water backwards over its body, a feat for which this portion of its anatomy is well adapted. I have wondered therefore if at any time this bird was also known as the *Laver* duck, from a word which first came into English currency in the thirteenth century, *lave*, to wash, bathe, or pour out (hence *laver* for a baptismal font). Laver could have become Lever or Liver by assimilation to the place-name, but this is intrinsically improbable, and the explanation is to be sought elsewhere.

So much then for the Shoveller Duck, Randle Holme's item no. 22. It is when we examine more closely his description under item 26 that we see plainly recorded the origin of the name Lever bird, and it is well therefore to reproduce the relevant passage in full: 'He beareth Azure, the head of a *Lever* couped proper: of some termed a *Shoveller's* head: this fowl is by Conradus Gefner, fol. 641, called in Latin PLATEA, which he takes to be the WATER PELLECAN or SHOVELLER in England: but in Low Dutch LEPLER or LEPLAER or LEFLER: from the German termed LOFLER, which we more finely pronounce LEVER: yet Mr Ray in the translation of the Ornithology terms this bird a SPOONBILL'. There is no doubt that Randle Holme's head and neck drawing no. 26 is of a Spoonbill, but equally that this bears no resemblance to any representation on Liverpool's coat of arms either before or since. I think that Randle Holme was aware of the anomaly, for although he has unequivocally 'A a Lever B the Coat of the Town of Leverpole', he has said above 'to term it either a LEVER, SPOONBILL, or PELLECAN, it may pass in Heraldry, but no otherwise'. We recall also that when he described the coat and crest of the town of Liverpool, only nine years earlier, he did not specify the name of the bird, nor does his drawing there in any way resemble a Spoonbill.

The curious feature is that already, by this time, c1680, representations of Liverpool's semi-official 'badge' feature what is unmistakably a Cormorant, and it is so named in the work of 1611. An almost contemporary representation appears on a mace of 1668 and on a sword of state first granted in 1685.<sup>43</sup> Significantly, from the beginning, the Cormorant as the town's badge and as later incorporated in the coat of arms, faces to the

<sup>42</sup> David Armitage Bannerman, *Birds of Britain* (12 vols. 1953-63), VII, p. 70.

<sup>43</sup> George Chandler, *Liverpool under James I* (1960), Pl. 21, 'Mayor's Seal with Liver Bird', p. 47; Pl. 23, 'Cormorant on Mace', Pl. 24, 'Liver Bird on Sauce Boat', p. 48; Pl. 25, 'Mace at present in use', and 'Sword of State, first granted in 1685', p. 49.

left, whereas the bird of the seal faces to the right. Strangely, Randle Holme seems to have been quite unaware of the advent of the Cormorant on Liverpool's regalia. Needless to say, with its long neck and legs, it bears little resemblance to the Shoveller, still less to the dove-like creature of the ancient town seal.

Why then was it adopted? We shall never know for certain, but it seems probable that Cormorants were early regarded as symbols of sea power. It would be interesting to verify from contemporary records whether Cormorants did sport in The Pool at the time of their incorporation in the Arms of Liverpool, or indeed at any time. Their presence locally would help to explain why they ousted the dove-like bird of the ancient seal as the badge of the town. With the adoption of the Cormorant, moreover, it became possible to convert the original *fleurs-de-llys* or sprig of foliage of the ancient seal into a sprig of edible seaweed or LAVER, which is the Cormorant's natural food. This latter term was first applied to a water plant by Pliny, and came into English usage (O.E. *laber*) in its present form about the sixteenth century. Its presence in Liverpool's coat of arms is an instance of what the Heralds call a canting or punning allusion to the name of the town, but most writers on the subject are mistaken, it seems to me, in regarding the bird itself in the same light.<sup>44</sup> For if what we have said earlier is correct, the CORMORANT only became known as a LEVER bird *after* it was adopted for Liverpool's badge (later coat of arms), and not before, and that by a false association with another bird, namely the SPOONBILL, already termed by some the LEVER bird. In the circumstances, the mistake was both natural and inevitable.

I said earlier that the official grant and confirmation of arms made no mention of a so-called 'Liver bird'. An examination of a manuscript in the possession of the College of Arms in London,<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Thus Joseph Edmondson, *The Complete Body of Heraldry* (1780), I, under 'Liverpool'; 'The allusion is to the name of the place, either in the bird, the branch, or both these objects'. Another part of the same work (II, Glossary) informs us that the Cormorant itself was sometimes denominated a *lever*. See also II, Pl. xii, fig. 32. C. Boutell, *Heraldry* (1963 edn.), p. 78; 'The Cormorant is termed a Liver-bird in the arms of the city of Liverpool'. H. C. B. Rogers, *The Pageant of Heraldry* (1955), p. 148; 'City of Liverpool—Argent, a Liver (Cormorant) with a piece of Laver (seaweed) in its beak proper. Both the liver and the laver allude to the name of the city'. The word 'Lever' was also early applied to a species of water plant and thus passed into Heraldry, as the following quotation will show; 'Note *Holland's* paper on the Antiquity of Motts etc. in England, A.D. 1600, printed in Hearne's "Curious Discoveries", vol. i, p. 265, edition 1771; "Levermore, of Devonshire, bore for his Armes, argent, a bunch of *Flagges* or *Lavers* vert, according unto his name".' (Hamper).

<sup>45</sup> 'Additional Notes on Materials in the Beltz and Pulman Collection, v.17'. There is here also (p. 331) an intriguing if mistaken letter from Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society, to Sir Isaac Heard, of the Herald's

'bearing on the Corporation's application for a Grant of Arms for the Town of Liverpool', has turned up a letter dated 20 July 1796 from Alderman Clayton Tarleton, to Ralph Bigland, the Richmond Herald, applying for a Grant of Arms, and another letter from the same, dated 1 August 1796, with the following note: 'The blazon of the arms of the Corporation of Liverpool, Argent, a *Lever* or Sea Cormorant sable, holding in its beak a bunch of Laver or sea weed vert. *Crest*. A Cormorant with wings elevated, sable, holding in its beak a bunch of sea weed as in the Arms and asking for a grant of supporters'. There is also a pencilled memo: 'The Committee approve of No. 4'—that is of six designs for Arms submitted, Clayton Tarleton's additional design no. 2 being for Supporters. The 'Lever' bird therefore almost made it into the official description of Liverpool's coat of arms, but for some reason the alternative name was dropped in the final draft. There is no doubt that the prime mover in this application, the then Mayor, Clayton Tarleton, believed that the Liver and the Cormorant were one and the same creature. There is ample evidence in the literature that a stuffed cormorant was actually procured to serve as a model for the Mayor's designs, that it was for many years accorded a place of honour in the Town Hall, and that it was later banished to the cellars. I wonder, does it languish there still?

The earliest extant example of what is evidently a long-legged Cormorant in a coat of arms (albeit unofficial) of Liverpool, prior to 1797, occurs at the head of a monochrome printed certificate, in latin, sealed with the mayoral seal, by William Squire, Mayor of Liverpool, on 16 October 1716, signifying that on the 13 October 1716, Francis Foot Esquire had been admitted and sworn a Free Burgess of the Borough of 'Leverpool' before the said Mayor and the two Bailiffs, Edward Ratchdale and Samuel Richardson. Examined and entered by Ralph Peters, Common Clerk of the said Borough. The original, together with a photostat copy, is to be found with the early seal impressions in the safe already mentioned, in the City Museum. More

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College, on the etymology of Liverpool. It is dated 11 Aug. 1796, and reads as follows:

'Pennant in his *Zoology* (v.2, pp. 465 and 468), speaking of the Petrel, describes one under the name of Sheerwater, a name well known to sailors and says this species inhabits the Orkney Isles where . . . it is called the *Lyre*. These birds are dispersed over the whole Atlantic Ocean and are frequently noticed by seamen at all distances from the land which they visit only once a year for the purpose of breeding.

'What bird could a herald devise more significantly to typify a town from the harbour of which Sailors proceed to sea and to which they return to the comforts of wives and mistresses. The sailor is the *Lyre* who after wandering over the ocean returns to Liverpool.'

familiar is a rather more elaborate and multi-coloured Burgess certificate, dated the 11 October 1791 (again before the official grant and confirmation), reproduced in postcard form by the Brown, Picton and Hornby Libraries, the original manuscript being in the Binns collection. A very clear impression of the Mayor's seal—not to be confused with the Town seal—in red wax, occurs on both certificates, and this also features a cormorant occupying the whole of the central space.<sup>46</sup>

To draw to a close: We have said enough to show that it is not quite true to claim, with Robert Gladstone, that the mythical Liver bird has in nature the Cormorant as its prototype. No doubt, however, the custom of calling the Cormorant a Liver bird will continue, far into the future. No doubt also its ubiquitous presence will continue to be found in Liverpool's most unlikely places. Doubtless the conviction that this was a mythical bird like the griffon was further strengthened when in 1905 the Friendly Society of that name caused to be erected above its new offices, as the most conspicuous feature of an internationally known waterfront, two gigantic representations of the bird. Their creator, who shall be nameless, has perpetrated an ungainly hybrid creature which bears no resemblance to any known bird, aquatic or otherwise. I suspect that these effigies, more than anything else, have fixed in the popular imagination of visitor and native alike the form that springs to mind at the mention of the name of this mysterious bird, and justified the popular view that the original was a now extinct or fabled bird which inhabited the Pool inlet, from the Mersey, which has long since disappeared. For the record, the Royal Liver Friendly Society originated in a small Inn bearing the title 'The Liver Inn'; the Society simply adopted the name of its first venue.

To sum up, so far as it ever existed, the Liver bird of Liverpool originated in the eagle of St John and became a Cormorant at some time in the early sixteenth century. It was for long wrongly identified by some with the Shoveller Duck, through a further confusion with the Spoonbill. This latter bird was certainly known for a time in English by the alternative name *Lever*, from Low Dutch and German antecedents, hence its attribution to *Lever-Pool*, a place-name to which it bears only a phonetic similarity.

I have no illusions that this controversy is thereby finally settled, for no man likes to yield up his cherished myths. No doubt arguments as to the nature of the beast will continue far into the future, until Liverpool is a habitation and a name no more. Yet the Eagle of St John is surely a far more fitting symbol

<sup>46</sup> See note 43.

for such a proud and ancient city, of whose future citizens it  
might well be said:

They shall mount up with wings as eagles,  
They shall run and not be weary,  
They shall walk, and not faint.

## APPENDIX

### ENGRAVINGS AND REPRODUCTIONS OF THE LIVERPOOL TOWN SEAL

#### PRESENT SEAL

- 1 M. Gregson, *Fragments relating to the History of Lancashire* (1817, second edition 1824), p. 63. Woodcut. (Binns Collection 25:7).
- 2 H. C. Pigeon. *Trans.Hist.Soc.Lancs.Ches.* 1 (1848-9), opposite p. 56. Lithograph facsimile of impression.
- 3 J. A. Picton, *Memorials of Liverpool*, I (1903). Facsimile of impression opposite p. 18.
- 4 Swine's Plan of Liverpool (minus *iodis* and otherwise varied. Binns collection 9:117).
- 5 *Archaeologia* 21 (1825), p. 544.
- 6 *The Stranger in Liverpool* (10th edition 1831), opposite p. 5—caption 'Ancient Seal'.
- 7 No. 6 reproduced in *The Kaleidoscope*, 1828, together with Barron Field's paper.

#### ORIGINAL SEAL

- 1 As no. 2 above.
- 2 *Transactions of the Chester Architectural and Archaeological Society*, I.
- 3 As no. 3 above, undated, no pellets depicted.
- 4 G. Chandler, *Liverpool under James I* (1960), Pl. 21, p. 47 'Scarisbrick Hall Seal with Eagle of St John'. Reproduced also in *Liverpool* (1957), by the same author.
- 5 The *Liverpool Echo*, 18 February 1922. The Croxteth Hall impression.