

Chapter 7. Conclusions

A thorough examination of these four post-monastic liberties and their relationship to the City of London suggests that the traditional historiographical view of the liberties requires substantial revision. Although the liberties were linked by their claims to jurisdictional exemptions, it is incredibly difficult to generalise about them accurately. The status of each liberty's franchises differed from those of the other liberties, but they also varied over time according to ownership, the status and interests of its residents, and the concerns of outside authorities that might seek to undermine (or bolster) those exemptions. When considered carefully, it is obvious that a given liberty was both dynamic and distinct from other liberties. All too often, however, this fact has been overlooked, and the liberties have long been spoken of as a coherent group of districts within the metropolis.

Historiographically, the liberties have also been approached as tangible and binary entities—they existed or they did not. If an area asserted its jurisdictional independence to the annoyance of neighbouring jurisdictions, it was a liberty. If it cooperated with neighbouring jurisdictions or allowed its rights to fall into abeyance, it ceased to be a liberty. Logical on its face, this historiographical paradigm is too blunt an instrument to be helpful in the examination of the fine distinctions in jurisdiction that affected the liberties. It cannot accommodate the notion that the residents of a liberty might staunchly defend their privileges in certain cases (or against certain authorities) while cooperating in other circumstances—that it might be in a liberty's interests not to assert all of its franchises constantly. In reality, conflicts between liberty residents and outside authorities were complicated by a variety of considerations on both sides, and the resolution of those conflicts was rarely a straightforward matter. The Minories, for example, battled mightily for its ecclesiastical franchises, while in secular matters it caused few problems.

Liberties were in most cases reactionary; they only asserted their rights when pushed to do so, and even then only under certain circumstances. Conflicts normally began with the unwelcome interference of an outside authority. It must be stressed that interference was not universally unwelcome (another concept that the traditional view of the liberties fails to grasp). Outside authorities had a variety of principled reasons to interfere in the liberties; concerns for economic and social stability were the two most important. But the immediate cause of interference was generally more practical,

grounded in a desire to share a tax burden more widely, to protect the outside authority's own franchises, or to address a perceived lack of authority within the liberty. In the face of unwanted interference, certain conditions had to exist (or be expected) for residents to effectively assert their independence. Firstly, they needed an articulated understanding of their privileges. That understanding had to be based on some evidence of the privilege in question, either a positive grant or an established precedent. While individuals of the middling or meaner sorts attempted to invoke the privileges of their liberties on occasion, large-scale conflict depended on the involvement of a person or group of people who could claim a right to defend the privilege at stake (either because of personal eminence, freehold or other interest in the precinct, or by holding an office related to the liberty) and an interest in doing so. The resolution of conflicts was affected not only by the strength of each party's claims, but also by the circumstances surrounding the specific question, the personal or official power of those involved and the sympathies and interests of the arbiter, most often the Privy Council.

While the City of London was only rarely able to exercise full authority within the liberties, it was often able to affect events there. Whether in conjunction with the Privy Council, the justices of the peace or its own companies, the City had a variety of means available to do so. Even when the City was uninvolved, the liberties were never the enclaves of anarchy their critics, contemporary and modern alike, have made them out to be. Both the residents and the proprietors of the liberties worked actively to maintain order there. If they resisted interference by the lord mayor and aldermen, it was in defence of their (often legitimately held) franchises. In many cases, the exempt places in and around London were overcrowded and dirty, but so too was much of the metropolis: City, liberty and suburb alike. They may have lacked the polished and intricately intersecting structures of governance that residents of the City took for granted, but that did not leave them ungoverned.

The differences between the post-monastic liberties were, in many ways, carry-overs from differences that had existed before the dissolution. London's many religious houses were affected by their rules, certainly, but they were also affected by topography, wealth and patronage. Long before the 1530s, Blackfriars had established itself as a royal favourite, a position that was reflected by the exalted status of many of its pre-Reformation lay residents. By way of comparison, St Katherine's had a longstanding alien population—thanks primarily to its waterside location, which had made it an early centre of beer brewing in the capital. While all of the post-monastic liberties studied here could

boast links to the great and the good, the social composition of each had levelled-down by the early seventeenth century. Thereafter, residents of liberties relied on official connections (such as those enjoyed between the Minories and the Lieutenant-General of Ordnance, between St Katherine's and the master of the hospital there, and between St Martin's and Westminster Abbey) for protection from civic meddling. The liberties that lacked such official connections were powerless to oppose annexation by the City under its 1608 charter.

Focusing too closely on the various factors that differentiated the liberties risks obscuring the forest in favour of the trees. Simple though it sounds, one point is worth articulating: the liberties differed in their details because they were different places. While contemporary governors definitely grouped Blackfriars, the Minories, St Katherine's and St Martin's with other precincts under the general title of *exempt places* or *liberties*, they would certainly have joined more common Londoners in acknowledging that individual precincts were not interchangeable: St Martin's could not possibly be mistaken for the Minories, nor could St Katherine's be confused with Blackfriars. The walls that had defined religious precincts for centuries continued to separate the liberties from the surrounding metropolis. The geographical limits of their franchises were closely monitored by residents and civic governors alike; especially in times of tension neither side was willing to concede even minor points to the other. In 1584 Thomas Lord Howard and the aldermen sparred over the City's decision to wall up one of the gates to precinct known as Duke's Place that it suspected had only been constructed after the dissolution of the late Holy Trinity Priory.¹ As late as 1625 the aldermen responded to a report that an innkeeper adjacent to Blackfriars had knocked through his wall 'to make a backe passage through his taverne into the Blackfriars, to the greate annoyance and prejudice of the neighbours there.'²

Despite clear topographic division, however, it should not be imagined that the liberties were off-limits to other Londoners. The City's wall, too, continued to stand; its gates, like those into the liberties, were opened each morning and closed each night. The gates made the walls porous and gave regular (if metered) access between the intra- and extra-mural parts of the City, and to the liberties. We should also remember that the closure of these gates coincided with the nightly curfew, during which respectable people were expected to remain indoors in any case. The Minories was rather out of the way, and its main street only connected to the outside world through a single gate. Hundreds

¹ CLRO Rep 21, fos 89v, 111.

²² CLRO Rep 40, fo 44. 6 Dec 1625.

of godly Londoners nevertheless flocked there weekly to hear its preachers. In sharp contrast, St Martin's had gates at each end of its primary arterial, which doubled as the main thoroughfare from St Paul's and Cheapside northward to Aldersgate. Blackfriars and St Katherine's could both be accessed from land or water, since they stood on the bank of the Thames. In no case should it be imagined that those living in adjacent parts of the City were unfamiliar with their exempt neighbours, or that those in the liberties avoided participation in the economic or social life of the broader metropolis. The liberties were, after all, in the City even if they were not of it.