

**‘WALKING IN THE AIR’:  
The Chester Shepherds on Stilts**

*John Marshall*

I first encountered David Mills, ‘met’ is perhaps too intimate a description of the occasion, in Leeds on Tuesday, 10 September 1974, as a long-haired postgraduate (me, that is, not David) attending what became, retrospectively, the first SITM meeting. In the 33 years since, I have had the pleasure of meeting him at numerous conferences and lectures and enjoying his and Joy’s hospitality. In that time I have admired his thorough and meticulous approach to medieval drama research and his uncompromising attention to the tiniest detail of its record. It is in recognition of that admiration and in his honour that I dare to be conjectural, speculative, and even a bit vague in an area in which he is indisputably a world authority.

It is also a delight to return to the subject of the staging of the Chester Whitsun Play which I was about to begin researching in the October following my encounter with David; a coincidental rather than causal connection. I’ve always had a soft spot for the Chester records, not least for the glimpses of humanity and human frailty that lie beneath the surface of its magnificent enterprise. This is particularly true of the members of the Painters, Glaziers, Embroiderers, and Stationers’ Company whose quarrels, insults, and transgressions parallel those of the Shepherds in the pageant that they sponsored. At the time I began my research, REED was in its infancy and Larry Clopper’s edition of the Chester records was five years ahead. Initially, this meant surveying antiquarian transcriptions of the records. It was here that I first came across the cantankerous painter Thomas Poole. Unfortunately, the account that most fully exposes his irascibility is not in the old or new *REED: Chester*, for the very good reason that only in the post-modern sense does it have anything to do with performance:

Thomas Pole dyd say the laste of October att a metyying that he wolde nott come to any metyng at the warnyng of anye Stuerte [Steward] upon an others warnyng no nor with Mr Mayre nether That the same tyme he bade Thomas pentnye being stuerte that he shulde nott come in his house, for if he did ... that that came for the

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one shuld smarte fo ytt Att the same tyme he sayd to our Alderman by these wordes of the name of Halwood thou lies falsleye and thou wyll prove a thousand lyes I have an ... othe to lay againste the. At the same tyme he called the whole Company *Drunken Swallygutttes*.<sup>1</sup>

It seems that the Painters' Company were as fond of the ale of Halton as the Shepherds they played. Poole's outburst had probably been simmering for some time. A year earlier, in 1574, his child was given 4d by the company 'bycose he pled not our god'.<sup>2</sup> Six years before that, in 1568, he himself received 3d as compensation for being 'bated in his parte'.<sup>3</sup> But, I think, my favourite Chester item, for the frustration it reveals and the intrigue it conceals, occurs in the same company's accounts for 1576-7.

Robert Waytt is fyned for that he did promysse the Company that his man shuld goe vppon the Styltes vppon mydsomer eueen 1577 and keptt bothe his man and the Styltes from vs And went in to the Ile of man with them And [...] he [...] caused vs to be at xviiij. more charges vntyll we had neded xijd.<sup>4</sup>

Why Waytt reneged on his promise is not entirely clear, but his temerity in doing so was no doubt compounded by the fact that he was one of two company stewards for the year responsible for, amongst other things, the safe-keeping of the stilts.<sup>5</sup> His 'man', whom he committed to stilt-walking at the Midsummer Show, was probably his apprentice or journeyman. Whatever attraction the Isle of Man might have held for Waytt, it was clearly sufficient to outweigh incurring the wrath of his guild and the penalty of a fine.<sup>6</sup> He was possibly seduced by the offer of a stilt-walking engagement at the famous Isle of Man Midsummer Fair that formed a major part of the Tynwald Day celebrations held on Tynwald Hill in St John's.<sup>7</sup> The Isle of Man may have paid more for walking on stilts than the Chester Painters' Company average of 6d, but no fee was ever likely to cover the cost of travel, accommodation, and subsistence for two abroad as well as the loss of reputation at home. It is possible that Waytt, as a glazier, secured work on the island that he opportunistically timed to coincide with the fair. Although there is no evidence of his active involvement with the Painters' participation in the Chester Midsummer Show after his conspicuous absence in 1577, he remained a guild member and is recorded as processing with their banner on Midsummer Eve 1591.<sup>8</sup>

The registering of Waytt's fine is not the only or, indeed, the first time that the Painters' Company, a glazier, stilts, and the Midsummer Show come together in the Chester records. The earliest explicit reference to