

## New light on Thomas Usk

The recent publication of the Wardens' Accounts of the London Goldsmiths' Company (1334-1446) has revealed some new information about Thomas Usk, author and political activist in London in the 1380s.<sup>1</sup> Usk is referred to twice, possibly three times, in these accounts but, on the first occasion, the editor has read the name as Vok rather than Usk and so failed to recognise the notorious London scrivener.

Early in 1382 (before May of that year) Usk, by the common assent of the whole company, was appointed as clerk to the company, and sworn to office. He was to receive his clothing each year and one mark (13s 4d) for loyal service to the company in their affairs.<sup>2</sup> This appointment occurs during the first year of the mayoralty of John of Northampton and it is a matter of speculation whether the Goldsmiths' Company chose to appoint Usk as their clerk because of his known association with Northampton, or whether it was Usk who drew the company into alliance with the radical mayor. One mark was not a living wage, so Usk must have worked for others as well as for the Goldsmiths.

The second reference to Usk occurs in the accounts for 1383-4 when he received 20s from one of the wardens for unspecified expenses, but in association with the goldsmith Adam Bamme who was sheriff during the second year of Northampton's mayoralty (1382-3).<sup>3</sup> It is clear from Usk's later Appeal (summer 1384) in which he gave evidence against his old 'radical' associates, that Adam Bamme was the goldsmith most closely associated with Northampton's activities.<sup>4</sup> An understanding that Usk was the clerk of the Goldsmiths' company helps to illuminate several passages in Usk's Appeal.

There is a final, possible, reference to Usk in the accounts. The wardens for the year May 1384 to May 1385 recorded the receipt of 6s 8d (half a mark) 'de Johan Walsham pur le executrie de la femme de Thomas Skeveyner'.<sup>5</sup> Although this might refer to a scrivener other than Usk, it seems

most probable that the reference is to the Goldsmiths' own clerk. If so it would suggest that Usk had been married and that his wife had recently died. The fact that Thomas Usk may recently have lost his wife when he wrote the Testament of Love (1384-5) could have some bearing on our understanding of this complex work.

Since Thomas Usk wrote his Appeal (which survives in the National Archives) 'with myn own honde' it should be possible to trace his hand among the surviving records of the Goldsmiths' company and to see when he first began to write for them and, indeed, when he ceased to do so. The employment of Usk by the Goldsmiths' company, and the involvement of that craft in Northampton's activities will lead to some re-assessment of the politics of London in the 1380s. That Usk may well have been recently bereaved when he wrote the Testament opens up new possibilities for understanding that work. Finally, Usk's employment as a company clerk in London serves to highlight, if that were needed, the very different career patterns of the 'over-ardent' Usk and the more detached Geoffrey Chaucer.<sup>6</sup> It is proposed that these, and other, themes will be examined in a discussion of Thomas Usk at the New Chaucer conference to be held at NYC in July 2006.

### Notes

1. Lisa Jefferson ed., *Wardens' Accounts and Court Minute Books of the Goldsmiths' Mystery of London 1334-1446* (Woodbridge, 2003). The accounts for the late fourteenth century are written in French. Jefferson prints the original text and provides a translation.
2. *Wardens' Accounts*, p. 198
3. *Ibid.*, p. 208
4. Printed in R. W. Chambers and Marjorie Daunt eds., *A Book of London English 1384-1425* (Oxford, 1931), pp. 22-31, esp. p. 27
5. *Wardens Accounts*, pp. 212 and note 251, 213 and note 122. The editor admits that the exact meaning of the passage is obscure.
6. See Paul Strohm, 'Politics and Poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380s' in Lee Patterson ed., *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990), pp. 83-112.

## Report from Executive Director

DAVID LAWTON

Washington University

This is the first report from Washington University. The Society is now in a reasonably settled state, but I should report some initial difficulties in the administrative transition from Rutgers. There is an unseen cost to such upheavals, and I have some ideas for making it as easy as possible when the day comes for removal from here. Everything we have seen testifies to the Society's good fortune during its time at Rutgers under Susan Crane's leadership. We aim to continue in similar vein.

The financial outlook is strong. The endowment has just passed the \$200,000 mark (up from \$171,310 in January 2003), and the current account is in credit to the tune of \$23,000 (with travel subsidies and SAC compositor bills to come). Even in a depressed economy, assets have grown at 8% or more. Thanks are due to Washington University, which has covered all costs of staffing, and all recurrent expenses except those associated with SAC - which we have also managed to subsidize to the tune of \$3,000+ from WU sources. It is clear from the accounting figures for SAC costs that this level of subsidy ensures that the Society come close to breaking even on its publication. The total WU subsidy comes to about \$25,000 annually, excluding the ED, and absorbs all Newsletter costs.

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## REPORT, from page 1

We have now put a membership directory online, using only institutional addresses, emails and information already publicly posted. It will be updated regularly by the department's webmaster. In the next membership round, we shall ask people how much additional information, if any, they wish to post. I would suggest that this may dispense with the need for a universal posting of hard copy directories, which are expensive to produce and hard to update; we would be glad to send hard copy to members who request it, and can send the directory as an electronic file to all members with email access.

Given the extent of current financial and administrative support for NCS, we would hope to enable more national and international activity to promote Chaucer studies, studies in the age of Chaucer, and literary and historical work in the humanities. I recommend that the Trustees should solicit and promote ideas for such activity, not necessarily linked to the regular cycle of biennial congresses. There is now an opportunity, and perhaps a need, for the Society to develop more public promotional (or proselytizing) enterprise.

President Pete Wetherbee completes his term at the end of this congress, to be succeeded by David Wallace. Trustees Julia Boffey, Anthony Edwards, Stephen Knight, and Toshiyuki Takamiya also step down, to be succeeded by Elizabeth Archibald, John Fyler, Lisa Kiser, and Helen Phillips, who will join Christopher Baswell, Rita Copeland and James Simpson. Jessica Lawrence steps down as graduate assistant, to be succeeded by Susan Lowther. Frank Grady remains editor of SAC, and Emma Lipton Reviews Editor. Rick Godden has looked after the NCS website. To all, my sincere thanks.

Finally, check out our new look website at <http://artsci.wustl.edu/~chaucer>. Suggestions for further development are cordially invited.

# The Next Congress: NYC '06

The program committee for the 2006 Congress has sketched a preliminary shape for our meeting in New York City in July 2006. Susan Crane will deliver the Biennial Lecture, and David Wallace will give the Presidential Address. We are planning to hold plenary sessions examining the role of peasants in late-medieval culture and the important links between cultural institutions in our host city and the field of medieval studies. We have also scheduled an opening business meeting of the Society and a closing session to discuss issues raised in the Congress and suggest directions for our next meeting.

Most of our planning for 2006 has been directed by proposals for paper sessions and panels submitted directly by members of the Society. In our reading, many proposals seemed connected by a common thread. We have organized sessions around such topics as methods of interpretation, textual culture, ethics, medieval institutions and objects, and emotions. We also plan to have sessions on Lydgate, Gower, Julian of Norwich, Usk, the Bible, Chaucer's language, electronic resources, late-medieval humanisms, and the

"Abstrolabe." We have reserved space on the program, too, for open sessions to accommodate topics outside these groupings that emerge from the call for papers.

One new initiative deserves particular mention. The Congress will include a forum for secondary school teachers. We hope the forum will discover some ways in which the Society and its members can be of use to teachers in the schools. We need to work effectively with these colleagues, who teach our future students and colleagues.

The program committee is composed of Robert R. Edwards (chair), Florence Bourgne, Christopher Cannon, Alexandra Gillespie, Corinne Saunders, Vance Smith, and Paul Strohm, with David Lawton (NCS Executive Director) and David Wallace (NCS President) ex officio. Maryanne Kowaleski will coordinate local planning for the consortium of New York City institutions hosting the Congress. The committee and session chairs look forward to receiving your proposals. A call for papers with a complete listing of sessions will appear in the Spring 2004 Newsletter. The deadline for submitting abstracts will be July 1, 2005.

## A look back at the Glasgow Congress

The Glasgow Congress was generally judged a great success, with high attendance, great local organization by Graham Caie and his team of helpers, consistently good sessions, and a major scoop in the form of Linne Mooney's utterly persuasive disclosure of the identity of 'Adam Scriveyn' as Adam Pynkhurst. No other NCS congress has ever earned us a page in *The Guardian*. The closing session yielded many good suggestions from members, which will be listened to carefully in framing the next Congress. Thanks to Graham Caie and to Alcum Blamires. Highlights of the Trustees' meeting comprised:

- the Executive Director's report, an abridged form of which is printed in this Newsletter;
- Mark Allen's report (see elsewhere in the Newsletter);
- Frank Grady's report as editor of SAC, and his demonstration that with Washington University's 100% subsidy of compositor and copy editing fees, the Society's increasingly healthy and important main publication is paid for from the membership fees, without further subvention;

- recommendations for constitutional change from Tony Edwards, which will be considered by the trustees and submitted to the members in 2006 if supported;
- the decision to place the membership directory online, and send a hard copy to any member who requests it - this will save the Society money, and allow for continual updates;
- and the choice of New York as the 2006 Congress venue.

## Bibliography Award

Mark Allen, NCS bibliographer, reports that the 2002 bibliography is now available online; and also that MLA biennial award for a Distinguished Bibliography is coming our way this year. The volume that Mark did with Bege K. Bowers with U of Notre Dame P in 2002—*Annotated Chaucer Bibliography, 1986-1996*—will receive the award at the upcoming conference in Philadelphia. Bowers and Allen have agreed that since the volume is the work of so many people they will donate the cash award to NCS—\$1000 in honor of John H. Fisher and Lorraine Baird-Lange, their predecessors in producing annotated Chaucer bibliographies. This is a great honor, and thoroughly deserved. Most of us who work in Chaucer studies use these bibliographies, and the service they perform is so essential that we may be in danger of taking it for granted. Warm congratulations to Mark Allen and Bege Bowers, and heartfelt thanks from an appreciative New Chaucer Society.

# The New Chaucer Society Membership Form

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Last Name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(First Name)

Please remit dues for 2005 membership in the *New Chaucer Society*. Your membership entitles you to receive the *Chaucer Newsletter* as well as volume 27 of *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Regular Member \$45 / year
- \_\_\_\_\_ Retired Member \$25 / year (for members having five previous years' membership)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Student Member \$25 / year
- \_\_\_\_\_ Unsalaries/Part-Time Salaried \$25 / year

Members may remit by check, money order, or Visa/MasterCard. Please make all checks payable to the New Chaucer Society. Checks should be drawn on a US bank and be in US dollars.

Contributions to the Society's growing Endowment Fund are especially helpful in the support of new Chaucerians who wish to attend NCS congresses. If you would like to contribute, please note the amount in the space provided.

Endowment Fund Contribution: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Total Amount Enclosed: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Method of payment: \_\_\_\_\_ Check or money order (enclosed)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Visa \_\_\_\_\_ MasterCard  
 Account Number: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Expiration Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

If you would like your membership automatically debited from your credit card each January, please sign here

\_\_\_\_\_

New and renewing members: Please provide the following information so that our records may be kept complete and current.

Mailing/Directory Address:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Phone ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Fax ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

Please return this form, using the envelope provided or another addressed to the New Chaucer Society, Department of English, Washington University, One Brookings Drive, Box 1122, Saint Louis, MO 63130, USA.

## Chaucer in schools: an invitation to Chaucerians

Section IIIe of the NCS Constitution charges us "to promote the teaching of Chaucer and related areas at all appropriate levels of education." At college level we work to keep Chaucer alive as part of a constantly reconfiguring "English" curriculum: but what is happening in our schools and High Schools? Some of us first experienced Chaucer as teenagers; when we got to college, we had studied at least one tale in some depth (and memorized large chunks of it). This proved foundational to the study of other, more difficult Middle English texts; we could then return to Chaucer as more sophisticated readers. Clearly, things have changed somewhat over the last twenty or thirty years. How much, if any, Chaucer is being read in schools today? What support might be given to teachers wishing to teach Chaucer? What especial challenges might they face, and how might NCS help them? I believe that it would be worthwhile to investigate such questions over the next few years and to take stock of them at the 2006 conference.

The most effective way to begin is for individual NCS members to make contact with English teachers in schools and to find out how (if at all) Chaucer gets taught, and what NCS might do to help things along. Some of you already have such contacts, as parents or admissions officers or indeed as teachers; others will be starting from scratch. I would invite all of you to get involved in some way with local schools so that we can assess our next steps; e-mail

your views and experiences to me at [dwallace@english.upenn.edu](mailto:dwallace@english.upenn.edu) and we will figure out how to carry this forward. It might be instructive, for example, for NCS to mount a Forum for High School Teachers at the 2006 conference. It would be particularly helpful for NCS members in the New York area, or those within easy reach of NYC, to take some initiative here: but all members in all countries can make vital contributions.

Such an initiative raises complex issues; I have been alerted to some of them by NCS members John Fyler, Lee Patterson, Claire Sponsler, and Nicolette Zeeman. Public School teachers in the US have limited control over what they teach; textbook publishers, testing boards and state education departments can exert determining force over curriculum. Private or 'prep' school teachers have a little more freedom, and are more inclined and able to apply what they learn at Bread Loaf and in their MA courses. But it would be good if NCS could assist anyone willing to learn about and possibly teach Chaucer, irrespective of socioeconomic circumstances and geographical location. The internet offers important opportunities: teachers are great web-crawlers, and audio files can be especially valuable. But the most important initiative we can mount is for individual NCS members to make contact with local schools and to find out what's up, and how we can help. Please do consider doing this; I look forward to hearing from you. —David Wallace

## Trustee nominations

The nominating committee, consisting of Rita Copeland (chair), Ardis Butterfield, Martin Camargo, James Rhodes, and Wendy Scase, has proposed the following as candidates for election as NCS Trustees from 2006 to 2010 (there are three positions):

Laura Kendrick  
Bruce Holsinger  
Rosalind Field  
Susanna Fein  
Steven Kruger  
Stephanie Trigg.

All have agreed to stand. According to the NCS Constitution (online), any member of the society may also be nominated by ten other members.

The NCS office will wait until January 17 for such additional nominations, which should be sent to David Lawton, Executive Director ([dalawton@wustl.edu](mailto:dalawton@wustl.edu)). Ballots will be mailed to members in late January.

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