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The London Livery Companies, their Masters and their Halls

History

The history of the City of London Livery companies

Based on an extract from 'Sheep over London Bridge - The Freedom of the City of London' by Caroline Arnold, produced and published by the Corporation of London and reproduced here with the Corporation's kind permission.

Trade and craft associations known as guilds or livery companies flourished all over Europe for centuries, but the City of London companies, now collectively known as the Livery, are unique in their survival, number and diversity. Today's livery companies are not picturesque leftovers of history but living institutions, whose activities have been commended by successive Royal Commissions and whose liverymen assemble in Common Hall to carry out important functions in the elections of the City's government and certain of its officers. The word "guild" derives from the Saxon word for payment, since membership of these fraternities was (and is) paid for. The word 'livery' refers to uniform clothing as means of identification. Today, new companies in their formative years are usually referred to as guilds.

From mediaeval times until the middle of the 19th century the Freedom of the City of London and the livery went hand-in-hand, although not always harmoniously. Liverymen had to be freemen of the City, and in this way the Corporation of London managed to exercise a degree of control over the livery companies.

MEDIEVAL TRADING STANDARDS

The early companies protected customers, employers and employees alike by checking standards of work, quality of goods, weights and measures, and imposed severe penalties on those who broke the rules. They controlled imports and immigrant labour, set wages and working conditions. They trained the young and looked after members in sickness and old age. At a burial of a member (attended by every member of the company) the coffin would be covered with the company's own coffin cloth; vigils were kept and prayers offered for the soul of the deceased.

Livery companies still maintain the structure of organization shown, and the tradition is adopted by the new guilds. In certain companies the officers are known by different titles, for example, the Fishmongers have a Prime Warden instead of a Master, and the number of wardens may vary between two and four according to the size of the company. A small company might have about 100 members in the livery; a large company might have 400. Each livery company is governed by an annually elected court, typically composed as follows :

The Master (elected from the Wardens)

Upper Warden, Middle Warden, Lower Warden, (elected from the Court assistants)

Between 10 and 20 Court Assistants (elected from the Livery)

In attendance: a Clerk to keep the records and a Beadle to keep order!

Progress through the company remains much the same as it has for centuries. The initial stage is freedom of the company followed by the obligatory freedom of the City before full livery status is attained. A liveryman may expect to be elected to the court of assistants and ultimately to be master, but the likelihood of this happening and the number of years it might take depends upon the ordinances (written rules and regulations) of each company and its own traditions and customs. The ordinances of companies vary greatly in number and details. Typically, ordinances might govern the numbers of livery members permitted, the ratio of members directly involved with a company's trade/profession, the election and duties of officers, benevolent obligations and financial matters. Any proposed changes in ordinances have to be petitioned the Court of Aldermen.

Historically, most companies have used a system known colloquially as "Buggin's turn". Senior liverymen who have attended functions regularly and are known to members of the Court are invited to join the Court. Once there, they can identify how many other members of the Court have not yet served as Master, and they will know that it will be their turn after that. So, after some years on the Court, their turn comes to be elected first as Renter Warden, then the next year as Upper Warden, and the following year as Master.

However, many companies are now moving away from this system since it tends to result in people becoming Masters in their 60s or 70s. For example, the Tylers and Bricklayers now appoint 3 members of the Livery of more than 5 years standing to serve on the Court for three years and then revert to the Livery. The junior Warden will be selected, in no particular order, from among those who have served their 3-year term on the Court.

The nomenclature of these offices varies from one company to another. Instead of a Master, the Basketmakers, Blacksmiths, Dyers, Fishmongers, Goldsmiths and Shipwrights have a Prime Warden, and the Weavers have an Upper Bailiff.

Election dates too vary from one company to another. Some are fairly fixed (e.g. the first Thursday in November) while others are more variable (e.g. Ash Wednesday, which can be as early as February 4 or as late as March 10, depending on the date of Easter)

LIVERY HALLS

As the companies grew and prospered in the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries, so they acquired halls as permanent meeting places. These halls were the places to settle trade disputes, bind apprentices, elect masters and wardens, discuss business and to socialise. The few

mediaeval halls that survived the Great Fire of London in 1666 eventually succumbed to Victoria re-building or the bombs of World War II, although of the 38 halls in existence today, several were rebuilt on original mediaeval sites. In mediaeval times religion played a very important part in guild life and each company had its own patron saint and adherence to a particular church. The original titles of some of the older livery companies are a reminder of this, for example, the Society of St Simon and St Jude (Shipwrights); the Fraternity of Corpus Christi (Salters); the Brotherhood of St Clement (Founders).

After many years of fierce dispute, an order of precedence for livery companies was finally settled in 1515, starting with Mercers at number 1 and so on down to number 48. Merchant Taylors and Skinners, however, continued to be numbers 6 and 7 in alternate years, following inclusive are known as the Great Twelve. Through choice, the companies of Parish Clerks and Watermen & Lightermen remain City Guilds without grant of livery. The total numbers of companies fluctuated down the centuries, with the formation of new ones and the demise and amalgamation of others. At times the City livery companies were a mighty power in the land, organising trade and commerce; supplying cash to finance wars, the monarchy, colonisation and merchant venturers; founding schools, almshouses and hospitals. Logically, the Industrial Revolution, explosion of population, expansion of overseas trade and the Reform Act should have sounded the death-knell for the livery companies and, indeed, several went under around this time. With the original functions and influence removed, interest in the Livery dwindled throughout the remainder of the 19th century but the 20th century revival brought new companies representing the modern professions. In 1992 the Company of Information Technologists was granted its charter and letters patent and became the 100th City of London livery company.

Application for membership of livery companies is purely a domestic matter for each individual company. Some only accept trade or trade-associated members, others embrace a wider membership. It is not uncommon for a person to be a member of more than one livery company, but the first one joined, or the company through which the freedom of the City was obtained, is the 'mother' company.