

## THE CITY LIVERY COMPANIES

**I**N preparing a paper on the City Livery Companies one's principal difficulty is to decide not so much what to say but what to leave unsaid, for the more one delves into the subject the more fascinating it becomes and the more difficulty one has in deciding what to omit. However, in my paper I have attempted to concentrate on, and confine myself to, those aspects of the subject which I think will be of most interest to my listeners.

The origin of these City Livery Companies, or the Livery Guilds of London as they are sometimes called, is lost in the twilight of Saxon antiquity and in the misty age of Athelstan (King of England from 925 to 940 and the grandson of Alfred the Great) and there are indeed even vague references to the Guilds in the Chronicles of Alfred himself, and later of Edward the Confessor. The "middle age spread" so to speak of the City Livery Companies and their greatest prosperity occurred, as one would suppose, in the Middle Ages and particularly between the 12th and 16th centuries. These Companies constitute a vigorous and almost unique survival of institutions which were once general throughout Europe and they have continued for the most part to flourish to the present day, in spite of more than one adverse circumstance.

The term "Livery" is a relic of Feudalism and is derived from the wearing of a distinctive dress or livery by the members of the Companies in the 14th century, when the gowns worn were stated to be parti-coloured in bright hues, until the time of the Reformation, when they became more subdued in colour; but at the present day it is only the Masters and Wardens of the several Companies who are privileged to wear Gowns, and these gowns are of sombre hue and usually trimmed with fur; but some Companies still preserve the old custom, on the admission of a new Liveryman, of robing him with a gown and thus "clothing him with the Livery."

The full titles of the more ancient Companies were derived from the Saints of the Fraternities, which constituted their origin; thus the Grocers Company was referred to as the Fraternity of St. Anthony, the Goldsmiths as the Fraternity of St. Dunstan's, the Merchant Taylors as the Fraternity of St. John the Baptist, and the Saddlers as the Fraternity of St. Martin, and so on; and some of the Companies have adopted the name of some Saint on traditional grounds, as St. Luke of the Painter Stainers, and St. Lawrence of the Ironmongers. The Companies have never entirely lost this religious connection, and most of them hold annual meetings, or attend Church, on their appropriate Saints' days.

The Livery Companies are relics of the civic life of the Middle Ages and it has been said that they stand for the five great points of fellowship, namely, Charity, Citizenship, Commerce, Comradeship

and Conviviality. They were designed to represent the interests of the employer, the workman and the consumer.

The members sought to maintain a high standard of craftsmanship and honest dealing, and to ensure that all newcomers should be well trained and capable workmen.

As the Guilds increased in wealth and power, they started to organize their trades, crafts and "*misteries*" as they were called (from the French word '*métier*'), in such a way as to form complete monopolies and prevent all competition from outsiders, particularly from foreigners, who in the Middle Ages had taken root in London and thrived on imports from Holland and Italy. One famous body, the German Steelyard, out of which grew the Hanseatic League, had been established from an extremely early date in a sort of fortress by the Thames, on the site now occupied by Cannon Street Station, and fought for its existence until it was finally overwhelmed and destroyed. Many Companies made serious efforts to obtain monopolistic powers in the 17th Century, by means of Acts of Common Council, requiring all persons exercising the Trades to join the controlling Company.

The early Companies ruled the Crafts they represented with a rod of iron. The Masters and Wardens began to draw up ordinances, which gave them absolute power in their own house and control over the standard of workmanship, the wages of journeymen and the number and treatment of apprentices, and in course of time the Companies began to petition the Crown for Charters, giving them definite legal powers over their trades, with complete internal autonomy as well as power to acquire and possess landed property.

The earliest recorded Companies are those most concerned with man's primeval needs, namely—food and clothing, bread and wool. The Weavers are mentioned in the year 1130 and the Bakers in 1156; later in the same century we find reference to the Butchers, Cooks, Clothworkers and Pepperers (now amalgamated into the Grocers).

By the year 1500, 25 Guilds were equipped with corporate rights by Royal Charter, and 11 of these, namely, the Mercers, the Grocers, the Drapers, the Fishmongers, the Goldsmiths, the Skinners, the Merchant Taylors, the Haberdashers, the Salters, the Ironmongers and the Vintners (to which were later added the Clothworkers) had the peculiar privilege of calling themselves the Twelve Great Companies and of exercising special electoral powers, but the City Authorities viewed these powers with disapproval and took advantage of an Act of Henry V to call in all Charters for inspection and amendment.

The orderly life of the early Fraternities seems to have degenerated in the 13th and 14th Centuries, for we read of considerable strife and of armed conflicts then taking place in the streets of London between members of the several Companies. On one occasion more than 500 craftsmen were engaged and many were slain or wounded. There was an absurd rage for

precedence as to the position each Company should occupy when there were "ridings in the cheap" on Lord Mayor's Day, and there was a serious conflict in 1340 between the Skinners and the Fishmongers, when the claim to priority was fought out with arms in Walbrook. There was much bloodshed on both sides and the Civic Authorities were compelled to intervene, and the ringleaders were hanged, but the Fishmongers seem to have gained the day and established their claim to the fourth place in the list of precedence, while the Skinners were relegated to the sixth place. But the most serious of these mediæval disputes, which kept the City in a state of turmoil for several years during the reign of Richard II, arose out of the monopolies which had been granted to certain victualling trades, notably the Fishmongers, who were accused by a powerful section of the Mercantile Guilds of having raised the prices of food. The agitation against the victuallers was led by a prominent member of the Drapers Company, who was supported by members of many of the other Companies.

In order to neutralise the quarrels which took place in early days on the question of precedence, an order of precedence was established by a list drawn up by the Court of Aldermen in the reign of Henry VIII and this list has been respected ever since, although the principles on which it was compiled are not self evident.

Since the year 1500 it has been firmly established that the power of recognising a new livery Company rests with the Court of Aldermen. In 1712 the Court of Aldermen resolved that the number of liverymen to be admitted by a newly constituted Company should be limited and this precedent has since been followed in every subsequent grant of a livery.

In the reign of Edward III the Companies had acquired so much power and importance that they claimed the right that the Common Council should be elected from the Companies and not from the Wards; and the number of members sent to the Court of Common Council by each Company depended on the degree of importance attained by that Company. For instance, the Ironmongers had then become such an important commercial body that by 1348 they were entitled to send as many as four representatives to the Common Council. But in the year 1384 the Common Council elections again reverted to the inhabitants of the Wards and the Wards have enjoyed the privilege since then to the present day.

The Guildsmen originally had to use as meeting places their own homes, or the religious house to which they belonged, but the gradual acquisition of funds led to their seeking permanent premises and thus began the erection of the beautiful halls owned by many of the Companies; and at the time of the Great Fire of London in 1666 most of the Companies had their own halls or meeting places, but nearly all of these halls, alas, fell victims to the flames and were destroyed. One notable exception was Carpenters Hall on its present site at the corner of London Wall

and Throgmorton Avenue, although Drapers Hall which stood a few hundred yards further south was destroyed in the Fire ; and the following is a minute of the Court of the Carpenters Company, held on the 2nd October, 1666. "It was ordered that the Company of Drapers, being now destitute of a hall by occasion of the late lamentable fire in London, may have the use of our Hall to keepe their Courts in, and that liberty be given them at their coste to make door and passage from their garden into our garden, through the brick wall on the North side of their said garden, with a lock and two keys only, whereof one key to remaine with the Clerk of the Company of Drapers and the other key to remaine with our Clerk."

As we have spoken of the strife and struggles that took place between certain of the Companies in olden days, it is pleasant to record the friendly spirit of hospitality and reciprocity meted out by the Drapers Company to the Carpenters Company when the Hall of the latter Company was demolished by German aircraft in May, 1941 ; and the Drapers, by a minute of their Court, dated the 28th August, 1941, placed their Hall at the disposal of the Carpenters for business meetings and office work.

After the Great Fire of 1666 many of the lesser Companies were unable to afford to rebuild their Halls ; but some 23 halls were rebuilt, only for the most part to be destroyed or damaged by German aircraft in the last War. All of them suffered damage of some sort and only about 15 of them are now capable of being used at all.

With regard to the Halls, the late Professor Unwin said : "It is not generally realised that the daily work carried on in many of the Company Halls represents a combination of the activities of a ducal estate office with those of a charity organisation society and a department of technical education."

In addition to their Halls many of the Companies in olden days owned beautiful and ornate barges, which used to take part in the mayoral pageants on the Thames, until these were abandoned in 1856 ; and some of these old barges still do duty as College barges on the Isis at Oxford.

Apart from the Honorary Freedom of the City, which is a definite honour conferred occasionally on eminent servants of the Crown and others, through the medium of one or other of the City Companies, there are three ways by which admission could be obtained to the freedom of a City Company. One is by inheritance from father to son and is known as "Patrimony" and to qualify for this the son must be born "free of the Company," that is to say, the father must have been a freeman of the Company before the birth of the son ; and it is largely by reason of this custom of Patrimony that the Companies have lost their trade exclusiveness. For instance, a Carpenter's son born free of the Carpenters Company, who becomes, say, a Stationer by Trade, is entitled nevertheless to claim his freedom of the Carpenters Company. The Companies made strenuous efforts to overcome this result of the custom of

Patrimony but were never able to succeed. A second way is by service as an apprentice and is known as "Servitude," but this method is rarely made use of in these days. The third and commonest way is by means of purchase and is euphemistically termed "Redemption," and this provided the method whereby the "foreigner" or non-citizen might acquire the freedom and thereby permission to exercise his trade and push his fortunes in the City. By the beginning of the 14th Century the principle had become established that it was only through the freedom of a Company that the freedom of the City could be obtained, but now it is quite possible to obtain the freedom of the City without obtaining the freedom of any of the Companies. One cannot, however, be admitted to the *Livery* of any of the City Companies without first having taken up the Freedom of the City.

Edward III was the first King to become a member of a City Company, namely, the Merchant Taylors ; but since his day every Sovereign, and nearly every great name on the pages of England's History, has been enrolled on the list of Freemen of one or other of the Companies, and the present King George VI is a freeman of several Companies ; Princess Elizabeth, on having the Honorary Freedom of the City conferred on her in 1947, was graciously pleased to take up the Freedom of the City through the medium of the Drapers Company by Patrimony, and the next signature immediately following hers on the Roll of Honorary Freemen is to be that of her husband, H.R.H. the Duke of Edinburgh, K.G.

In the 1870's attacks were made on the City Companies by would-be reformers associated with the Liberal Party, who advocated the desirability of taking back the Charters of the Companies and appropriating their funds for various utilitarian purposes and the Companies were openly charged with spending their income on "gormandising" and with having ceased to fulfil any useful purpose in the Modern State, and as a result of this agitation, Queen Victoria, at the request of Mr. Gladstone's Government, appointed in 1880 a Royal Commission to enquire into the Conduct of the Companies.

The Report of the Royal Commission took four years to prepare and consisted of 2 diametrically opposed views. The Majority Report signed by 12 of the 15 members was antagonistic to the Companies, and took a hostile view of their long-established rights ; but this was regarded, not as the expression of opinion of an impartial Tribunal, but rather as the biased view of certain Liberal and Radical politicians. The Minority Report signed by the remaining 3 members considered that the Guilds had carried out the Terms of their Charters to the best of their ability and that as the control of Trades had gradually disappeared, and the religious functions had been much reduced as a result of the Reformation, the main objects left to the Companies were those of hospitality and charity, also that the Companies' wealth was due to the fact that they had invested their corporate funds in City property which had enormously increased in value. Of the corporate

incomes it was disclosed that, on the average, less than one-third was devoted to Hospitality, and more than one third to Charitable purposes. No action was taken on the Report, but it undoubtedly stirred up the Companies to play a more useful part in the Life of the Country.

Perhaps the most striking evidence produced before the Royal Commission was that showing the part played by the Companies in the revival of learning. There are six Public Schools which owe their all to the City Companies. They are St. Paul's School managed by the Mercers Company, Oundle managed by the Grocers Company, Merchant Taylors School and Great Crosby managed by the Merchant Taylors Company, Tonbridge School managed by the Skinners Company and Aldenham managed by the Brewers Company. Many other lesser known schools, too numerous to mention, have been founded and are administered by other Companies.

The various Companies have always provided from their funds for the relief of the poor and decayed members of their Guild (and sometimes also of the Trades they represent) by means of pensions, almshouses and gifts of money. These activities are continued at the present day, including the administration of many charities and trusts.

Before the existence of established armed forces of the Crown the Companies always assisted liberally in the defence of our shores and in fitting out of armies. In the time of the Spanish Armada the City Companies furnished 38 ships fully armed and manned, and a force of 10,000 men.

The Sovereigns of England from the earliest times looked upon the Companies as a kind of reserve Treasury, to be resorted to when Treasury Funds were failing or inadequate.

At the present day the Liverymen meet together in Common Hall at Guildhall to discharge their undoubted privilege of electing, on Midsummer Day, the Sheriffs of the City and the City Chamberlain and certain other Officers, and, on Michaelmas Day, the Lord Mayor.

No account of the City Companies could be complete without some slight reference to the part played by them in the Plantation of Ulster.

In 1608 the lands belonging to the rebels Earl of Tyrone and Tyrconnel were confiscated, and it was proposed to re-plant them with a number of small proprietors of English and Scottish blood. The Territory in question consisted of the six Counties of Armagh, Tyrone, Coleraine, Donegal, Fermanagh and Cavan. The Scheme, however, failed to attract applicants for the land, and in 1609 it was decided to make an effort to interest the City Companies in the venture. The Common Council proposed to authorise the formation of a Company by the raising of £15,000 from the City Companies. The assessments made on the Companies were raised with great difficulty and only after some Wardens had been committed to prison for default. Eventually, in 1613, all the land

granted to what was known as the Irish Society, with the exception of the Towns of Derry and Coleraine and some 700 acres reserved for the Society, had been taken up and distributed amongst the 12 Great Companies, who managed to associate in their undertaking such of the Minor Companies as were willing to join. The subsequent History of the Plantation was a troublesome one, but the settlement proved permanent, and in the end the Companies were mostly able to dispose of their holdings on fairly satisfactory terms.

There is no opportunity in this Paper to deal with the individual History of each Company, but a word may be said as to the more interesting characteristics, individual customs, or salient points, of some of them.

The *Mercers Company* has pride of place and is looked upon as being the premier Guild. Its Hall was built on the site of the home of the father of Thomas à Becket, who was born there.

Probably the two most famous Mercers were: (1) Richard Whittington, the traditionally best-known figure in the whole of City history, who entertained at his Mayoralty Henry V and his French Queen, and (2) Sir Thomas Gresham, who founded the Royal Exchange, which is to this day controlled by the Gresham Committee, consisting of 12 members appointed by the Mercers Company and 12 members appointed by the Corporation. By the founding of the Royal Exchange, which was opened by Queen Elizabeth, the commercial Capital of the World, which up to then had been Antwerp, was transferred to London.

The *Fishmongers Company* to the present day still maintains close touch with the Trade from which it derives its name, and sends its inspectors to Billingsgate with power to seize and destroy unwholesome or immature fish.

The Fishmongers Company also administers the Trust in connection with the annual race on the Thames for Doggett's Coat and Badge, which was established by the Will of a Drury Lane Comedian called Doggett in the reign of George I. This race is rowed in single sculling boats by watermen (all of whom must be freemen of the Watermen's Company), from the Swan at London Bridge to the Swan at Chelsea, and is stated to be the oldest boat race in England. Except for the War years this contest has taken place annually for well over 200 years under the auspices of the Fishmongers Company.

To the *Haberdashers Company* falls the credit of having introduced pins to the English Market.

Before the import of pins from Italy and France, it is reported that the ladies of England were forced to employ skewers, made from thorns, to fasten their dresses. This new commodity became an instant success and was sold at a high price; and it is said that only the ladies of the Court and the wives of City Merchants could afford to use them; and in order to provide them with this new and expensive luxury, indulgent husbands began to give their wives a special allowance, called "Pin Money," a phrase which is preserved to the present day.

Coming from Pins to Needles we find that the *Needlemakers Company* enjoys the unique distinction of having obtained its first Charter during the Commonwealth, and one of the Company's cherished possessions is this document signed by Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector. Another distinction enjoyed by this Company is that Queen Mary honoured it by accepting its Honorary Freedom, in view of the great interest which she took in the Needlework Guild.

The *Ironmongers Company* is the only one of the City Guilds that has no Court, as distinct from its Livery, and the Governing Authority consists of the whole body of the Livery, which numbers something slightly over 30.

As far back as the reign of Edward I the Ironmongers were established in a Lane off Cheapside, which to this day is called Ironmonger Lane, but when their forges came to cause offence to the citizens of that trading locality they migrated to Fenchurch Street, where their first Hall was built in 1587, and escaped the Great Fire, although the Hall which stood on that site fell a victim to German aircraft in 1917; but the Hall built on the new site off Aldersgate Street was one of the few Halls which escaped destruction in the last War.

It is the proud boast of the *Vintners Company* that they entertained to dinner in their Hall, at one time, in the year 1363, no fewer than five Kings. The custom of drinking the toast of Prosperity to the Vintners Company, with five cheers, is said to be observed in memory of the visit of these five Kings, who were Edward III of England, David of Scotland, John of France, and the Kings of Denmark and Cyprus. Any Company wishing to attain fame by emulating the Vintners at the present day would have some difficulty in *finding* five Kings to entertain.

To the *Coopers Company* belongs the credit of having broken the tradition that no one could serve the office of Lord Mayor unless he was a member of one of the 12 Great Companies, for in the year 1742 Robert Willimott, on being elected Lord Mayor, broke through this practise and declined to be translated to one of the 12, and served the office of Lord Mayor as "Citizen and Cooper."

The *Merchant Taylors Company*, or, as it was anciently called, "the Taylors and linen Armourers," seems to have been very picky in the matter of dress, for in the year 1579 a member of the Company was committed to prison "for that he came to the house of one of the Wardens in a cloak of Pepadore, a pair of hose lined with taffety, and a shirt edged with silver, contrary to the ordinances." It is interesting to note that the name of the street wherein this Hall is situated, Threadneedle Street, was derived from the presence of the Taylors in that part of London.

The *Scriveners Company* in 1805 produced a Lord Mayor, one Sir Thomas Shaw, who had a dispute as to precedence with no less a personage than George IV when Prince of Wales. Shaw claimed that in the City the Lord Mayor took precedence over everyone,

except the Sovereign himself; and his claim was upheld by George III.

The *Founders Company* claim their descent from Tubal Cain, "the first artificer in metals." They settled first near where the Bank of England now stands, which in those early days was an open area watered by the Walbrook. They were probably allotted this sparsely occupied part of the City on account of the nuisance caused by their primitive foundries, which made a loathsome noise and caused passers-by, disdainfully, to call it "Loathberrie."

Here the Founders erected their Hall and had their Guild Headquarters from 1532 until 1884, when the site of the old Hall was let on building lease to the Electric Telegraph Company.

The Great Fire of London, which, as previously stated, left intact the Hall of the *Carpenters Company*, nevertheless took away from that Company the powers controlling the craft of building in the City. The reason being that the new houses then constructed were largely built of brick, and not as theretofore of wood, and the Carpenters ceased to be the Master Builders, as they had been in the past.

The Carpenters, however, still retain a close connection with the Trade, and maintain their Trades Training School in Great Titchfield Street, where adult and apprenticeship training, and instruction, is given in all branches of the building Trades.

This School was established some 60 years ago by the father of Sir Banister Fletcher, Past President of the R.I.B.A., and Sir Banister still takes a very active and keen interest in it and devotes a vast amount of his time to it.

It is said that the *Stationers Company* derive their name from the fact that the manufacturers and vendors of books had their stalls or *stations* at the crosses in Cheapside, or around St. Paul's Cathedral; and under this title of Stationers the craft was incorporated as an Art or Mystery by Philip and Mary in 1556. The object of the Crown in granting this Charter was to provide a means of preventing the publication of both seditious books against the Crown and heretical books against the Church, and to secure these ends the Stationers were placed under the control of Ecclesiastical Authorities, and to this day the Archbishop of Canterbury is regarded as Patron of the Guild.

The Company has a long and dignified history in connection with copyrights and the printing and publishing of books, but in the year 1632 they seem to have run into trouble, for in issuing an edition of the Bible the word "not" was omitted from the 7th Commandment so that it read "thou shalt commit adultery." This error was considered serious enough to warrant a Star Chamber trial and the unfortunate printer was heavily fined.

The *Fanmakers Company* obtained its Charter from Queen Anne in 1709 and until quite recent times it was the baby of the Livery Guilds; but that position has since been wrested from the Fanmakers by the *Master Mariners*, which was founded in 1926, and to whose first Master, the Prince of Wales, the Livery was granted

at the Mansion House in 1932 ; and later still by the *City of London Solicitors Company* who were granted a Livery in 1944 ; and these two latter Guilds are Craft Guilds in the very true sense, for it is a qualification of the former that every member must hold a Master Mariner's Certificate, and of the latter, that he be a Solicitor practising, or having practised, within one mile from the Bank of England.

The grant of the Livery to the Master Mariners and the City Solicitors seems to indicate a willingness by the City to adapt its institutions to meet modern requirements ; and now it is reported that the *Farmers Company* is making application to the Court of Aldermen for the grant of a Livery.

I have left myself but little time to deal with the statistical aspect of the Livery Companies, but this can be readily obtained from that admirable work, for the annual compilation of which our Vice-President, Sir Cuthbert Whitaker, is responsible. Suffice it to say that at the present day there are 79 Livery Companies and the number of Liverymen in each varies considerably, and ranges from 465 in the Stationers Company to 23 in the Bowyers Company. The total number of Liverymen of all the Companies amounts to about 10,000. Some Companies have very large Corporate and Trust incomes, and some none at all.

To sum up, it may be said that when bows, arrows, vizors, horn lanterns and the accoutrements of old-time life went the way of all human things and the Trades and Crafts heading into the stream of modern organisation and practice, many of the City Companies ceased actively to control those efforts of work by which they had gained their distinctive names. A certain number, such as the Fishmongers, the Carpenters, the Stationers, the Founders, the Apothecaries and the Goldsmiths Companies, continue to exercise a measure of their original trade functions, but *all* the Companies, both individually and collectively, remain as progressive as ever in promoting the social, educational and charitable benefits which ever had constituted a notable side of their labours. Improvements in Industry and Trade, research in many fields, the dissemination of knowledge and the care of the sick and the poor owed very much indeed to the constant foresight and munificence of the City Companies.

In conclusion, it can be said that the story of London, without its Livery Companies, would be Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark.