

A LOOK AT THE ENGLISH GUILDS

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Our relationship to, and similarities in our organisation with the guild system have been dealt with to a fair extent by overseas writers, but only in a minor way in this lodge and not since 1954. Contrary to my earlier intention which was to deal solely with the similarities, I do not, to much extent, intend to point directly at them but leave it to members to see them for themselves.

Because I have access to more material on the London Companies than those elsewhere, I instance more from London although no doubt there are many quotable and pertinent items in other places.

Origin and early development

The word gild used in this paper, the modern spelling of the earlier *guild* and often referred to as company in the 15th and 16th centuries, refers to a brotherhood in a particular craft or occupation. The craft itself was frequently referred to as a *mystery*, the words taken to be synonymous. A craft guild usually comprised of a fraternity of all the artisans of a particular craft or industry in a limited area. Pre-conquest guilds were few and seem to have been confined to Frith guilds (i.e. guilds for the maintenance of peace, or a sanctuary) or police and certain religious fraternities and Friendly Societies. Merchant Guilds began soon after the Norman conquest when the guild merchants began to appear all over the country. Sometimes this term referred to traders rather than craftsmen, other times to an aggregation of craft guilds, but a transfer of power from the guild merchants to individual craft guilds followed economic development. The greater the prosperity of a town the quicker this subdivision occurred. In the 13th century the number of guilds increased and in the 14th they were fully developed and in a flourishing state.

In the earlier stages of the craft guild, masters, apprentices and journeymen were more or less of one class, "small" men banded together, brother labourers in the shop sharing the same meals. Though poor by modern standards they were a proud fraternity, the skilled men of their trade. Their guild represented their common interest and, subject to the general control of the Municipality, it managed the affairs of the craft within the town, fixing prices, wages and conditions of work to the general satisfaction of masters and men. The apprentices, at the expiry of their indentures, became either masters or journeymen, and most journeymen sooner or later became small masters. The master-craftsman worked with his men. He often beat his apprentices and sometimes beat his journeymen, for blows were common currency in those days. *All Journeymen & Apprentices shall be subject to ye reasonable Chastisement & Correction of the said Master & Wardens.* But there was no marked division of social standard and way of life. Outside the guilds, indeed, there had always been a pool of unskilled labour in the town, ill paid and uncared for. But in the guilds themselves there had been much harmony and content.

In the days of Chaucer these things were changing. The guilds assumed generally the character of corporations, from around this time being called livery companies, adopting distinctive dress or livery. The companies gradually lost their industrial character. Persons became members who had nothing to do with the craft and the rise of the great capitalists and development of competition in trade made the regulation of industry by means of the companies no longer possible. The expansion of industry and trade were bringing variety of functions and an increasing difference of monetary reward. The master was becoming less the brother craftsman and more the *entrepreneur*, engaged in organizing the business and selling the goods. Some apprentices became masters, especially if they "married the master's daughter." But most apprentices could only look forward to becoming journeymen, and few journeymen could any longer look to becoming masters. The distinction between employer and employed was becoming more marked. There was also an increasing difference between the rich trading master and the poor manufacturing master, who worked with a couple of journeymen to make the goods that the great man sold.

The journeymen or yeomen banded together to defend their rights, a conflict between employers or master artisans and workmen. But the latter fell under the supervision and control of the masters' guilds, becoming subsidiary or affiliated to older craft organizations. In smaller

towns aggregation of several crafts into single fraternities commenced, continuing into the 16th and 17th centuries.

Incorporation and Charters

Originally a guild came into existence by the granting of an Ordinance to a group of craft artisans by the Mayor and Aldermen, incorporating them into a mystery or craft, i.e. a fraternity, and granting them powers to control their trade. Usually, but not always, this was followed by the seeking of a charter from the King or by Act of Parliament. In the century from 1316 there were over 50 petitions to the Mayor and Aldermen of London for the approval of Ordinances. Their charter was of great importance to guild members as it set out their legal and enforceable rights and privileges.

In 1503 laws were passed requiring that new Ordinances of "fellowships of crafts or misteries" should be approved by the Royal justices or by other Crown officers.

Incorporation by charters granted by the King, or Ordinances granted to an unsheltered guild by a local authority, although variably in content, usually but not always contained some common clauses. One such was freedom from the normal inability of a corporation to dispose of land. Another, one of great importance to many guilds, was the power of search, of which more later. The first Master and Wardens would be named in the charter.

In return for the granting of charters, the King received his pound of flesh, often a great deal more. It has been commented that some Kings, Stuarts in particular, treated the guilds virtually as banks on which they drew at will.

In 1613 James I persuaded the London Companies to take over and manage parts of Ulster which had become vested in the Crown. Called "the plantation of Ulster," this territory was to furnish the City "yearly with beef, pork, fish, rye, beer, peas, beans, honey and wax, seals and some store of pearls." It was thus that Derry became Londonderry.

As well as the legal provision of its charter, a guild could enact by-laws to meet its own requirements. The fellowship and Society of Free Masons, Rough Masons, Wallers, Slaters, Paviers, Plaisterers and Bricklayers of Durham, for instance, had seventeen by-laws, each providing for fines in default thereof.

Membership and Administration

Apprenticeship commenced at the age of fourteen, requiring approval by the Court of the Guild. An apprentice was required to have *no maim or defect in his body that may render him incapable of learning the art ...free borne and to come of good kindred and true and no bond man and that he have good Limbes as a man ought to be*. The Cutlers company decreed in 1420 that he was to be 'of free birth and condition, comely in stature and person, and of full age.'

Apprenticeship ended at age twenty one. The apprentice then applied for his Freedom of the Company, in many of them being required to submit a "proof piece" or "master piece," a specimen of his skill, so that the Company could maintain the level of skill desired of its master craftsmen. He remained a Freeman until he was in business on his own when, subject to certain conditions, he might be admitted to the Livery of the Company.

As well as by apprenticeship, from time immemorial Freedom could be obtained by patrimony or redemption. By patrimony every son or daughter of a Freeman could, on proof of legitimacy and membership of their father at the time of their birth, claim their Freedom on payment of a small fee. By redemption strangers could become Freeman on payment of a fee and acceptance by the Company. This may be, and has been, awarded *honoris causa* on persons of distinction, accepted members as it were, when unconnected with the craft.

The normal structure of a guild comprised the Master, Wardens (normally two but of varying numbers), a Court of Assistants, the Livery and the general body of Freemen. The apprentices earlier made a sixth grade. The Master, elected annually, was originally the senior Warden, in some Companies still called the Upper Warden or Prime Warden. The Assistants comprised the governing body.

Administrative functions are also performed by the Clerk and the Beadle. The former is the secretary and the latter is unmistakably our Tyler, having also some of the duties of our Director of Ceremonies.

Livery

The word "Livery" originally meant the distinctive clothing worn by fully fledged members of the Company, a uniform peculiar to it. Later the word came to mean the membership itself who wore that particular livery.

Liveries are not mentioned as having been worn before the reign of Edward I. In the middle of the 14th century distinctive liveries for each company were adopted, gowns and hoods of distinctive colours, the power of granting and regulating them being the province of the Aldermen. The colours were not immutable, many changes being known. After the reformation the colours became of more sober hue than before.

Ordinances of the London Masons' Company provide that *the persones of the saide Craft mistere or science from hensfurtheward ones in every iii years be cladde in one Clothing convenient to their powers and degrees to be ordeigned for by the wardeyns . . . for to wear it At suche tyme As shallbe Requisite for the honeste of the Feolashippe . . .*

Most Masters and Wardens still wear gowns and badges of office on ceremonial occasions, but with a few exceptions, liveries are no longer worn. Liverymen of the Stationers' Company still, I understand, wear caps and gowns when attending Divine service on Ash Wednesday in the crypt of St. Paul's as they have done since 1612.

Wealth and Taxation

The increasing power of the guilds was watched closely by various sovereigns and from the 13th and 14th centuries there is evidence of the progress of the guilds and constant attempts to curb their growing power. Freehold property of considerable and increasing value was acquired, many of the companies had erected their own halls, and muniments of silver and gold were acquired. The members however, were their own enemies as, with the continued division of labour, specialized or wealthy sections of companies split off and formed craft guilds of their own. Their combined wealth formed a ready made source for the King to plunder, at the same time reducing their power.

Requisitions for the equipment and support of a quota of soldiers, of ships and seamen were levied, as were taxes to lay up stores of grain against a bad harvest. In London armed watches on the various gates were to be provided. On many occasions, to provide for this cash, silver plate had to be sold. The greedier monarchs, particularly Elizabeth I and the Stuarts, found a wide variety of occasions and pretexts for unscrupulous and exorbitant calls on the companies for cash, the latter devising the scheme of calling in the charters and making the companies buy them back.

Federation

Aggregation of crafts into single fraternities has already been mentioned. These federations occurred as early as the 14th century but it was in the 16th and 17th that they mainly took place. And it was in the smaller towns where numbers were more limited that this was found to be desirable.

Typical of federations of what might be grouped as "soft" and "hard" crafts were those that took place at Ludlow in Shropshire. Here the "Stichmen" included Tailors, Mercers, Drapers, Cappers, Hatters, Glovers, Haberdashers, Staymakers, Bookbinders, and other trades. The "Hammermen", or Company of Smiths in 1575 entered into a mutual indenture setting forth their Ordinances to be submitted to the Justices of Assize for approval. The federation was cited as "Fellowship and Brotherhood of the Said Art, Mystery, Trade and occupation of Smiths, Fletchers, Bowyers, Goldsmiths, Ironmongers, Cardmakers, Saddlers, Coopers, Cutlers, Pewtereres, Braziers, Nailers, Armourers, Plasterers, Masons, Carpenters, Plumbers, Joiners, Tyles, Slaters, Heyers (*i.e. thatchers*), makers of Sieves, or Tugars, and Hawkers or Bend Ware, united and conjoined as part and parcel of the said Fellowship and Brotherhood of Smiths."

Examples of several other incorporations of crafts appear in Fred Pick's inaugural address in AQC 56 of 1943, such as the Carpenters, Masons, Joyners, Glaciers, and Paynters of Exeter in 1586; and in 1694 at the same place the Carpenters, Free Masons, Masons or Bricklayers, Glassiers and Paynters . . .

Right of Search

Ordinances of London Masons' Company of 1521 contain this clause:
Item that the wardeyns of the saide Craft mistere or science, from this tyme fortheward may have the Serce oversight and Correccion with an Officer of the mairs to theym to be Assigned of all maner werkes and thyngs the which Apperteigne to thoccupacion and science of mans within the Citee of London and the Suburbs of the same. And suche defaltes as their fynde to shewe unto the Chamberleyn for the tyme being. And so correccion to be doon.

The important right of search was protection of the livelihood of members as well as maintaining a standard. Work of an inferior quality could be burnt or destroyed. The records of the London Masons' Company of 1696 show, for instance, *Landed on Hammerslys Wharf (on the Thames) for Mr. Woolfe as followith, viz: of Purbeck 2900 foot and 200 foot of channel. Broke 30 foot as bad and deficient.* The Wardens were empowered to visit the workshops of their trade, search for and condemn all work that they deemed bad and an offending trader could be subjected to public humiliation. A baker, for instance, might be dragged through the streets with his inferior loaf around his neck. As insurance against short weight bakers introduce the "baker's dozen" which many of us can remember until recent times. It is said that for bad workmanship a member could be expelled from his guild thus being prevented from working in London and having to journey to another town for work - hence the expression "sent to Coventry".

This right also prevented the practice of a craft by any without the freedom of the guild. Through their Ordinances remedies were available through the Courts. It also brought in useful monies: *Fined Thomas London for taking stone unsearched, 6s 8d*; the London Masons Company received 9.16.6 in 1621 from search for Purbeck stone.

Quality controls are still exercised by some Companies, notably the Goldsmiths and Fishmongers. The Gold and silver Wyre Drawers, whose business is maintained making cords and braids for military uniforms, ecclesiastical and masonic regalia, still have power of search but no longer use it.

Religious and Moral Duties, Relief and Charity

Cogent comment on this topic was given in AQC 32: 'It must be remembered that in the medieval period the one element which was common to all classes of such fraternities was the religious one, for in those days there was a very vivid sense of the essential closeness with which Divine and human affairs are interwoven . . . '

Guilds formed before the Reformation had a patron saint. Early charters were a blend of religion, trade, piety and service. For example the 1501 charter of the London Cooper's Company said: *To Citizens of the Art and Brotherhood of Coopers of our City of London to found a Brotherhood or Guild to the honor of God and of the Blessed Virgin for the governing and superintending of the said Mystery . . .*

Miracle plays, based on religious themes, were a regular expression of piety. The Ancient Guild of Masons of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, constituted in 1581, took part in the Corpus Christi Plays, being allotted *The Burial of our Lady Saint Mary the Virgin*, absence from which entailed a fine of half a crown. According to Condor, it is still impossible to trace any direct connection between these plays and masonic ritual, though there is a suspicion of "borrowing" on the part of our forefathers. The Whitsun or Corpus Christi plays were still being performed in the reign of James I, not so long before the earliest appearance of speculative masonry.

In practical terms, their religion was expressed in relief of their widows and orphans, and in meeting the cost of funerals. Also from AQC 32, of the Palmer's Guild of Ludlow: In the old guild life the attention of the fraternities was very forcibly directed to the contemplation of this mortal existence, *Services for the dead shall be duly attended by all the brethren and siteren . . .* Masses or prayers were said for deceased members and the funeral of a brother was an event of special importance, attendance of all members at which was a duty, on penalty of a fine. Guilds commonly possessed a mortcloth or funeral pall, an impressive cloth for placing on the hearse or coffin. The London Saddlers' Company had, for instance, "a magnificent pall of rich crimson

brocade interwoven with gold thread." Mortcloths were likewise a normal item of lodge equipment, known as early as 1624 in Aitcheson's Haven Lodge.

The oversight of apprenticeships until recent times included a watchful eye on their moral upbringing and character development. I have a small book presented to its apprentices by the Worshipful Company of Talow Chandlers on their being bound. This copy, dated 1869, contains fifty one pages of exhortations under such headings as obedience, diligence, religion, prayer, cleanliness, sobriety, idle talking, gambling and moral dangers, as well as sundry prayers and hymns. Appended to these is a list of recommended reading, of an uplifting nature, in all a modern version, as it were, of the clauses referring to apprentices' conduct we are familiar with in the old manuscript charges and surviving even into our own Constitutions today.

Our three grand principles were, and still are, of equal importance to Livery Companies. Pensions to aged Freemen in need and to indigent widows, assistance to orphans and maintenance of almshouses have always been high in priority. In modern times when membership is not so likely to need this sort of charity, donations or endowments totalling enormous sums have been made to many educational foundations.

Marks

Several guilds had, and some still have the privilege of controlling quality of products by stamping acceptable items with special marks. Ordinances existed preventing the counterfeiting of marks. The best known of these, of course, are the Goldsmith's Companies who still have world wide recognition of their hall marks, the London Company having had this privilege since 1327. The London Founders' Company may stamp weights with its mark of approval and the Gunmakers' Company proves and stamps gun barrels. Similar Helmetmakers, Blacksmiths, Blademakers, Coopers and others had regulations concerning marks.

The Pewter's Company had a mark known as the "touch," a registered and distinctive mark of each maker. This was stamped by the maker himself and not at the Company's Hall, the practice still being in use until well into the 18th century.

Decay of the System

By the Reformation, and increasing in the 16th and 17th centuries, signs were appearing of a breaking down of the guild system under influences of new economic forces, especially the emergence of new industries organized on a more modern basis.

Eric Ward, commenting in AQC91 on the London Masons' Company, said that by the 17th century, and probably from the beginning, it was not the kind of democratic institution which set out to embrace masons of all classes, but rather consisted of men who had advanced beyond the status of the manual worker and were themselves for the most part contractors. It was therefore much more like a present day employers' association than a trades union.

The great fire of London in 1666 spelled the beginning of the end for many guilds, extinction for others. At a time when this narrow area contained most of the wealth of the kingdom, its destruction far surpassed in degree the ravages of the 1939-45 blitz when the country's wealth was more widely spread. Many of the lesser fraternities never recovered and a century after those that did still felt its effects. Several lost their halls in the fire, no doubt representing the majority of their assets.

"Foreigners", workmen who were not free of companies connected with the building trade were, by a statute passed after the fire, permitted to work anywhere in the city for seven years from its date. Several guilds joined in a petition to the Court of Aldermen seeking redress for this intrusion into their rights but without any apparent success.

Thus the guilds gradually lost control over the regulation of industry. Some survived in the second half of the 18th century but their usefulness in the hitherto traditional manner had disappeared.

Attempts have been made to find in the guilds the progenitors of the trade unions, but there appears to be no immediate connection between the latter and the craft guilds, in spite of some superficial likeness.

City of London Government

Livery Companies are closely associated with local government in the City of London. Aldermen are elected solely by liverymen and the Lord Mayor, a figure of great temporal power, is elected by the Aldermen from their own number, that is, the Lord Mayor and Council are liverymen.

Modern Livery Companies

Today the Livery Companies are involved in educational and charitable enterprises, with ceremonial and social functions drawing their members together at intervals when ancient and sometimes curious customs are carefully preserved. They have little or nothing to do with the regulation of their original crafts but conversely they do retain a connection with them through directing their efforts towards their named craft or trade. It would be difficult to gauge the total extent of their benevolence as it is not made public but it is unquestionably munificent and bountiful.

Their order of precedence is of great importance to the Companies, the first twelve being defined as "great" companies and the remaining sixty nine as "minor." For those interested, the Worshipful Company of Masons is ranked as number thirty. They are not all of medieval origin, four having been formed this century, including the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators which became a Livery Company as recently as 1956.

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In the discussion, attention was drawn to the fact that the membership of guilds was not always restricted to men. There were women members in many guilds. The Lincoln guild of Fullers had a rule prohibiting a man from working at the trough with a woman who was not his wife or daughter. From the 16th century onward more restrictions were placed on women engaging in trade, as the acute shortages of labour of the 14th century were being overcome.

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*Note: sketches accompanied this article were not included.

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