

The origin of Livery Companies in the City of London and a modern Livery, The Worshipful Company of Scientific Instrument Makers

By Professor Stephen O'Connor

The livery companies and the City of London have grown up together sharing common goals. Since the earliest beginnings of the City of London, they have both been strong and collaborative.

Some guilds can trace their origins back to the 12th century, with the earliest existing charter being granted to the Weavers' Company in 1155. They were similar to the fraternities and guilds that flourished throughout Europe for many centuries. Members paid to belong to trade guilds with the word 'guild' derived from the Saxon 'gildan', meaning 'to pay'.

Those working in the same craft lived and worked near each other, grouping together to regulate competition within their trade and maintain high standards. The early guilds controlled the provision of services, manufacture and selling of goods and food in the City of London, preventing unlimited competition and helping to keep wages and working conditions steady in extremely unstable times. During these times, any member of a Livery who stepped out of line received 'a visit' from their Beadle. The modern-day Beadle only has ceremonial duties.

As the guilds became more established, many set up their headquarters in large houses or halls. The assay office for gold and silver was housed in Goldsmiths' Hall, which led to the term 'Hallmark'. As well as a meeting place, these became the venue for settling trade or domestic disputes. London street-names today still bear witness to areas where individual trades gathered and flourished. When some guilds introduced their own distinctive clothing and regalia, or livery, distinguishing their members from those of other guilds, they soon became known as 'livery companies'.

The peak period for the formation of guilds was the 14th century when many received charters or ordinances. In 1515, there were 48 companies and the Lord Mayor established an order of precedence for them, finally ending many years of dispute.

Relations between the livery companies were not always fraternal, with disputes over trade rights and precedence quite often leading to violence, especially between the hot-headed apprentices of each company. The City authorities could impose severe penalties, including execution, for particularly serious incidents.

Rivalry over precedence, specifically which company was entitled to be 6th in order of seniority, had been a source of trouble between the Skinners and the Merchant Taylors for some time in the 14th and 15th centuries. Both companies received their first royal charters in 1327. Lethal violence ensued in 1484 during the Lord Mayor's river procession, an occasion which the two guilds treated as their own private boat race. After the administration of justice to some of the offenders, the Lord Mayor, the Haberdasher, Robert Billesdon, mediated between the two companies at the request of their Masters. He resolved that each company should

have precedence over the other in alternate years and that each company's Master and Wardens should be invited to dine at the other's Hall every year.

The Billesdon Award is still celebrated with annual dinners and commemorated with a range of sporting events between the two companies. The change of precedence is marked each year at the ceremony of the 'Gavel exchange', performed by the Lord Mayor with the Masters and Wardens of the Skinners and Merchant Taylors at Mansion House, prior to the United Guilds Service at St Paul's Cathedral. The two companies do not, however, agree on the spelling of the Lord Mayor's name. The Skinners have it as Billesdon whilst the Merchant Taylors as Billesden.

A fixed procession order was laid down in 1516 for the 48 livery companies of the time. That order remains unchanged to the present day, though there are now 110 companies. Lord Mayor Billesdon's judgement was confirmed, with the Skinners and Merchant Taylors alternating between sixth and seventh place*, probably the origin of the phrase, 'to be at sixes and sevens'.

The procession order of The Great Twelve Livery Companies is Mercers, Grocers, Drapers, Fishmongers, Goldsmiths, Skinners*, Merchant Taylors*, Haberdashers, Salters, Ironmongers, Vintners and Clothworkers.

After the 17th century, the livery companies suffered a series of setbacks. With their powers and practices restricted to the Square Mile of the City of London, most were unable to compete with cheaper traders springing up outside its boundaries, while costly wars and political intrigues saw first Tudor and then Stuart monarchs levying hefty charges on the companies. The Industrial Revolution only added to their problems yet stimulated the changes that saved them. As well as broadening their horizons to include new skills, the livery companies became prominent supporters of industry through research funds, excellence awards, sponsorships and other carefully targeted trade support.

From their earliest days, the companies emphasised the importance of good training through an apprenticeship scheme. From the 1870s, this role was extended to include many forms of technical and other education, simultaneously supporting new industries and training young people to work in them. Founded in 1878, the City and Guilds Institute was a notable outcome, which is still prominent in vocational education today and actively supported by the livery companies.

The early guilds were duty-bound to care for their members in sickness and old age. Many of today's companies still support alms-houses throughout the country and maintain their other historical charities, while also broadening their charitable giving into many other areas of modern life, at home and abroad.

Today, there are 110 livery companies, the most recent being the Company of Educators and the Company of Art Scholars in 2014 and 2019 respectively. Whilst trading conditions for the Livery Companies have changed since their inception, their work is as pertinent today as it always has been. Different in size, structure and interests Livery Companies share the same ethos by supporting trade, education, charity and fellowship and working in the best interests of the communities in which they operate. The most recent 'Giving Survey' completed at the end of 2018, revealed that collectively Livery

Companies gave £67m annually in grants and other financial support and a further 75,000 hours to pro-bono volunteering in areas such as governorships, mentoring and administrative support. A further philanthropic survey planned for 2020 was delayed due to the pandemic.

All livery companies come under an element of control by the City of London's Court of Aldermen. To become a new company, a group of people, usually numbering at least 100, must satisfy the Court that they have the resources and willingness to continue their association indefinitely, having already been long and well established. In addition to strong ties with the Square Mile, the potential new Company must have a significant number of members engaged in its trade, profession or craft, which must not overlap or clash with that of an existing Livery Company.

Liverymen still play a pivotal role in the election of the Lord Mayor of London who must still belong to at least one of the City of London Liveries. Liverymen of at least one year's standing are eligible to vote for the new Lord Mayor at the end of September each year at the Guildhall.

The livery companies also play a prominent role in many great occasions. Each year the United Guilds' Service at St Paul's Cathedral sees the livery companies, City of London and the church joining together for a great ceremonial event. The Lord Mayor's Show features spectacular displays by many livery companies, particularly those with close links to the new Lord Mayor and the two Sheriffs.

The Worshipful Company of Scientific Instrument Makers, WCSIM, was formed in 1956, became a Livery in 1964 and received its Royal Charter in July 2022 from HRH Prince Michael of Kent. This Livery shares a hall with the Glaziers and Launderers in Southwark, opposite the cathedral. At its inception, the UK was a large manufacturer of specialist electronic and mechanical scientific instruments including microscopes, spectrum analysers, laboratory test and measurement equipment.

Whilst the industrial base has changed, the UK has retained strong positions especially in research and development, satellites, aerospace, medical / biomedical and leading-edge electronics and electrical components. WCSIM's membership comes from this wide, non-exhaustive list of industries.

The motto of WCSIM is "Going forward, giving back". WCSIM promotes the craft of scientific instrument making through the exchange of ideas and information between members and guests through meetings, visits, webinars and lectures. One of the primary objectives of the Livery is to encourage young people to participate in our craft. This is achieved through traditional apprenticeships, supervised by our Liverymen and our Educational Trust Fund. The latter provides grants, bursaries and scholarships at A level, undergraduate, post-graduate and research fellow levels. The Livery holds an Educational Trust event annually.

The Livery's Charitable Trust has been built up over the years through regular donations from liverymen, endowments and gains on sound investments. The Trust operates under a 'Deed Trust', managed by a group of trustees appointed by the Court, the ruling body. The fund also provides some limited financial support to

Liverymen and Freemen who have fallen on hard times as well as for the widows of deceased Liverymen.

The Court comprises the Master, Senior Warden, Junior Warden, active past Masters, Court Assistants and Stewards. The Clerk and the Beadle also attend the court.

WCSIM has memorandum of understandings with other organisations, including the Institute of Physics and Engineering in Medicine, IPEM, the Institute of Measurement and Control and the Livery of Airline Pilots, to share lectures and webinars for their mutual benefit. The adage "All work and no play, makes Jack a dull boy" is very true in our busy world of today. The Livery therefore has social events through the year which are subsidised for younger members from contributions from more senior members.

WCSIM works with several universities to give annual awards of £2k to selected post-graduates. In addition, two universities have an extra award following a generous donation from a past Master. The Beloe Fellowship is a further award of £5k to a single exceptional candidate each year.

Apprentices join WCSIM from a variety of sources including recommendation from members, from Southwark schools, engineering competitions and Arkwright Scholarships. Each apprentice is allocated a Liveryman to be their Apprentice Master for the duration of their apprenticeship. Apprenticeships are formalised at the Guildhall as well as at our own hall. The Livery has supported the Southwark Sea Cadets for over 10 years with an annual grant. In return, they provide an 'carpet guard' at our major events. The cadets nominate a 'Cadet of the Year' who is invited to a Livery dinner, receives a certificate together with a financial award.

WCSIM supports schools in the London Borough of Southwark either with annual grants, money for specific projects or science related equipment. In addition, the Livery supports a day of science / engineering activities in our hall to encourage young students to take up STEM subjects. The Educational Trust Supper is free to all Apprentices, Scholars and Freeman under the age of 30 supported by funds generously donated by a past Master. This is an informal event with a guest speaker and is a good event for networking.

WCSIM supports three branches of the Armed Services linked to instrumentation with annual awards to the Royal Naval Hydrographic School, the Royal Engineers' School of Military Survey and the Royal Air Force Defence College of Aeronautical Engineering.

Recently, WCSIM and IPEM inaugurated a joint essay prize, open to early career members of either organisation, which is now in its third year. The winner receives an IPEM Gold Medal, a cheque for £500 and an invitation to the autumn awards' dinner of the Livery.

The Worshipful Company of Scientific Makers is very proud of its charitable activities.