

Ancient and modern

Livery companies have a venerable and fascinating history, but, as **Charlotte Reather** discovers, many are now reinventing themselves



Words by:
Charlotte Reather
Charlotte is a freelance writer and comedienne who is always on the lookout for adventure

UNLESS YOU HAVE a connection to a City of London Livery Company you'll probably have little idea as to what one is or, indeed, what they do.

From the outside they might seem like secret societies or drinking clubs – both of which may be true of many of the 125 companies that exist today. However, many still have strong connections to the crafts or trades they were set up to govern and others are busy re-forging links and establishing a new, modern relevance.

Historically, livery companies emerged from the guilds, dating back to Saxon times, which controlled the practice of their craft in a particular area, rather like a trade association meets a cartel – if you weren't part of one, you couldn't trade.

During the middle ages, many guilds petitioned the monarch to be granted a Royal Charter, the sole means by which an incorporated body could be formed. When some guilds introduced their own unique clothing and regalia – or livery – to distinguish their members from those in other guilds, they subsequently became known as 'livery companies'.

Sheepish swordplay

"Forming a company gave guilds the ability to regulate their trade, industry standards and training, with particular emphasis on the relationship between master and apprentice," explains Nigel Bamping, clerk of the Worshipful Company of Plaisterers' (Plasterers).

"The apprenticeship was seven years and the youngster would live with his master and be fed and clothed by him until he was trained. Then he'd be released from his indenture to become a freeman, which was freedom from serfdom in the feudal system and Freedom of the City of London."

This honour is still bestowed ceremonially on respected citizens today. One perk is to carry a naked sword in public, another to drive sheep across London Bridge, both handy advantages to have in life.

"After the craftsman's



HISTORIC: City of London Grant of Arms that allowed the formation of livery companies

apprenticeship he would then work as journeyman for a master craftsman. The next step, if he was good enough, was to apply to the court to be considered a master craftsman."

Today, few companies have a really significant responsibility to their trade, with some notable exceptions; gold is still assayed at Goldsmith's Hall, pharmacists sit their exams at Apothecaries' Hall, the Vintners are still involved in wine regulation and The Company of Watermen and Lightermen still control professional standards on the River Thames.

"The killer for us was the Great Fire of London," says Nigel. "There were not enough plasterers so they had to bring people in from outside. When London was rebuilt it spread west – the Company had no rights over the West End, only the Square Mile. We went steadily into decline and, by Victorian times, the Plaisterers' and many other Companies resembled nothing more than gents' drinking clubs.

For the Worshipful Company (WC) of Weavers the industrial revolution was the death knell, for The WC of Saddlers' it was the invention of the combustion engine and motorcar and, for The WC of Butchers', the power of the supermarkets saw great change to the meat trade.

Renaissance period

But, in spite of the low points, the livery companies have always managed to survive and reinvent themselves. Particularly in the 1800s when Prime Minister William Gladstone threatened to empty their coffers, which were and are often still

GRANDIOSE: The heraldry and motto of the Worshipful Company of Saddlers



bountiful owing to a portfolio of prime London real estate (the Mercers' own much of Covent Garden, for example), meaty rents, savvy investments, and wealthy members' legacies.

"In the 1870s, the livery companies established the City & Guilds training schemes in response to Gladstone's threats to take all the livery companies' money," says Nigel. "Everyone had to pull their socks up and demonstrate greater responsibility to their crafts and trades, so a lot of money was invested in the vocational training and still is today."

Philanthropic ethos

Philanthropy became another key tenet in their redefined ethos. The early guilds were duty-bound to look after their member in sickness and old age and many livery companies supported the almshouses throughout the UK.

Those charitable ties remain today, with a combined £40 million given to charity and educational schemes by the livery companies. And, there are now 52 apprenticeships across 30 trades, including the blacksmiths, wax chandlers (which has an apprenticeship beekeeper scheme), dyers, furniture makers and bakers, for example.

"The Plaisterers still have people in trade and we very much encourage them to join. One quarter of our members are in construction, but it's difficult because plastering now is not a standalone trade," says Nigel.

The Company is working hard for the long-term future of the profession and is developing heritage crafts as well as supporting colleges and apprenticeships.

The Saddlers also invest heavily in their trade and craft saddlers. Patrick Burns, trade advisor at the 650-year-old Worshipful Company of Saddlers (WCS), explains.

"We invest £300,000 per year on promoting the trade and training schemes, including the new Level 3 Apprenticeship, the Millennium Apprenticeship scheme and also training craftsmen who make wooden saddle trees still used by saddlers today. There is also a two-year course we support at Capel Manor College, Middlesex, which takes 14 young people per year."

For people looking to get in the industry Patrick's advice is this: "A youngster really needs to find a saddler (preferably a member of the Society of Master Saddlers) to pay and train him for four years. Then he needs to take a week off to go to the Saddlery Training Centre at Salisbury, hopefully with the help of a WC grant. The next step would be to look at the Millennium Apprenticeship scheme, we might provide tools vouchers, and finally they could enter the National Saddlery Competition."



DID YOU KNOW?

Each year, the NFU teams up with the Worshipful Company of Farmers and agricultural kit manufacturer John Deere for the Lord Mayor's show – demonstrating how farming, a very traditional industry, is adapting to the modern world. The event is watched by tens of thousands on the streets of London and covered live on BBC television, showcasing the sector to new and unfamiliar audiences.

I ask him how someone in the industry might join the WCS. "Join? You don't join the company; you must be invited to become a liveryman," he says with surprise. "Or you are accepted by patrimony (if your father or mother was a member) or if you are a saddler of repute with outstanding success in the field."

Mind the generation gap

However, Jeff Mason at the WC Butchers' says his shop's definitely open for business. "We really want to bring youngsters into our industry and our Company. To become a liveryman of certain companies you have to be invited to join, and perhaps there are people in the meat industry across the UK waiting for a phone call, but we encourage them to apply for membership via our website or to pick up the phone.

"Young people are particularly encouraged as an increasing number of our liverymen are getting on in years and older members don't tend to engage as much in what's going on. We have a great network of people from 'end to end' – farmers, catering butchers, butchers from large and small companies, meat processors and slaughtermen – who can all help and promote emerging talent."

Jeff says that although the Company is based at Butchers' Hall in London (with its renowned carvery luncheons), they are not London-centric. "Events are in the City but members and training schemes are all over the UK. At the moment we are refocusing on the apprentice levels of our industry and are introducing Level 2 and Level 3 apprenticeships as part of the government's Trailblazer scheme.

The weavers and plaisterers have an open-door policy too, as do many of the livery companies keen to connect with craftsmen and women up and down the UK. So why not see if your trade or craft is represented by visiting the website below. The livery companies have a moral and civic obligation to ensure the survival and development of their crafts and trades. And what's more, a significant number have sums of cash to spend and great halls to dine in! 



ORNATE: The brightly illustrated heraldry of the Worshipful Company of Butchers

To find a livery company relevant to your trade or craft, visit cityoflondon.gov.uk/about-the-city