

This note is one of a series placed in the Almanac for the guidance of livery masters, wardens, and their clerks, especially new ones, seeking advice on a particular topic. They are not prescriptive, and how individual companies choose to conduct their affairs is, of course, entirely up to them. Most are written by a past chairman of the Livery Committee, of whom you may read more at the foot of the Contact page.

## **The ceremony of the loving cup**

The ceremony of the loving cup is a City tradition that dates back to Anglo-Saxon times, when King Edward the Martyr was assassinated in 979 while drinking at a banquet. The cup passes round the table with each guest drinking to his neighbour. To this day, it is a popular feature of many formal livery dinners.

Much has been written (often nowadays in menu cards, and at numerous other websites) as to the detail of the procedure, and its history. This note does not seek to replicate that, but just to highlight some of the practicalities, not least for clerks, beadles, butlers, and musicians (if present).

At the appropriate point after dinner has been concluded (and usually after the singing of grace), the cups (containing sack, or as preferred) are in place, and the pianist/musician warned, the Beadle should gavel and announce (without preamble): ***The Master drinks to you in a Loving Cup, and bids you all a hearty welcome.***

At which point the pianist/musicians **immediately** start playing suitable upbeat jolly music, and the Master and wardens (or those in gunner positions with a cup placed before them) rise. The Master may have two cups.

He/she turns to their right, bows to their neighbour (who has also stood up), as does the guest on his/her other side who will normally\* face outwards (ie back to back with the drinker).

Hence only **three people standing**, which remains a principle rule throughout the ceremony.

The first guest lifts the cup lid with their *right hand and holds it aloft*. These two traditional details are on the assumption that everyone was right handed (*I am not!*), and they are showing to all that their dagger hand is occupied (by holding the lid).

Those who lift the lid almost apologetically, and drop their arm out of sight, are rather missing the point of why they are doing it at all!

Drink, wipe, bow, and pass the cup on to the neighbour, who then turns away, and his/her neighbour now stands to repeat the procedure.

If the master has two cups, he now turns to his left and repeats the ceremony to the already standing (guarding) neighbour, who will need to turn inwards – hence the master drinks twice.

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Otherwise, he simply turns around and guards the back of the second drinker, as do all others once they have drunk.

A few moments after the Master has started the ceremony, the wardens/gunners do the same – whether to right or left is dependant on table layout and butler's instruction. There is no rule (unlike port).

Note for Clerks - be aware that the ceremony will significantly add to the running time of the evening. This can be reduced by increasing the number of loving cups in circulation.

Note for butlers and catering managers. It is your important role to oversee this ceremony, helping as necessary, especially eg if the cup reaches a corner or end of table, or as sometimes can happen, two cups are in danger of colliding!

\*One or two companies have their own variations on the ceremony. Mercers pass the Cup back and forth across the table. A few liveries (including Merchant Taylors) have their guarding neighbour facing inwards.

Hosts may usefully explain the procedure to their guests (especially those nominated to look after company guests) during the reception before dinner. There are really only two things they need worry about: if in doubt, bow; and only three standing at any one time.

The most common error is that the diner seated next to the person lifting the lid, and awaiting their turn next, also stands. They should not. The three are the drinker, the lid lifter, and the previous drinker who is the guard. ie one person standing either side of the drinker.

The most important principle is to enjoy the ceremony – it is for FUN!

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Was this note helpful? Do you have comment? Email [nrpullman@btinternet.com](mailto:nrpullman@btinternet.com)