

HISTORICAL SPEECHES

about Livery Companies
of the City of London



Anthony Hodson
Master Mercer 2001-2002

For...

Julian Tregoning

The Lord Luke

Sir Thomas Stockdale

Bruno Schroder

David Brewer¹

Graham Thompson

Nicholas Lund and Brian Shawcross

Jock Russell²

Leslie Weller

Hedley Newton

Richard Saunders

my constant companions over a memorable
year as Master Mercer, July 2001 – July 2002.

¹ Now Sir David Brewer, after a distinguished year as Lord Mayor of London.

² To our great sadness, Jock Russell, Master Salter for 2001/2002 died in November 2010.

FOREWORD

In the course of the wonderful round of dinners by which the Masters and Clerks of the Twelve Great Companies entertain themselves in each others' Halls, it is usually the Master Mercer who replies on behalf of the Guests! Most of the speeches in this little collection were written for this purpose during the year (2001/2002) in which I had the immense privilege to be Master Mercer. This little book is therefore dedicated to my fellow Great-Twelve Masters, who so kindly encouraged me, and who laughed in nearly all of the right places (and in one or two unexpected ones, as well).

I have also included a few other speeches that have a historical perspective, including (as an opener) one that projects from the past into the future. Some were given after having enjoyed bountiful hospitality, as a token of thanks. For the most part, the date-order of the speeches is retained (for no particularly good reason). These speeches often had other objectives, but I have taken the liberty of keeping the non-historical parts.

The after-dinner historian can so easily lose his audience to the general sense of blurred well-being that is induced by amazing ports, wonderful clarets and the other truly spectacular libations with which we have plied ourselves. I have therefore sometimes sacrificed historical precision to the need to entertain and have fun. Although the general historical framework is, I think, accurate, uncertain facts are often therefore presented as definite statements, and, in a few places, I have indulged in pure historical romance. Caveat emptor!

My main historical aim was to give a flavour of London and its Livery Companies, mostly centred around medieval and Elizabethan times - those epochs when the Companies really found their feet - with, I hoped, a new tale or twist (or two)! The broader historical picture is hardly touched on - but my justification is that, as far as possible, the Livery Companies tried - mostly successfully - to keep 'business as usual' despite wars, plagues, famines, and other momentous happenings.

The speeches have been based on fairly extensive reading. Herbert's 'Livery Companies of London' dated 1836 has been a mainstay, as have the official histories of some of the Twelve Great Companies. Other sources include 'Annals of London' (Richardson) and the 'Times History of London', plus many other more specific texts, including several monographs of our Historian at the time, Dr Anne Sutton. I am indebted to Ursula Carlyle, our archivist during my mastership, for pointing me at interesting material and for many helpful suggestions, to my wife Margaret-Anne who helped me cut the more boring bits, and also to Hugo Summerson, who helped my confidence greatly. Ursula, Margaret-Anne, and Hugo - thank you also for sitting through 'dress-rehearsals' - you were all wonderfully encouraging.

Anthony Hodson October 2002

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This edition (2012) includes the Golden Jubilee Masters speech of 21/2/12., and I would like particularly to acknowledge Anne Sutton's impressive book 'The Mercery of London' (Ashgate 2005), which provided some historical insights that I have not found elsewhere.

The Mercers - back to the future³

The 19th Century poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in a well-known short poem:

'... Two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert ...
Near them, on the sand, a shattered visage lies ...
... on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair.
Nothing beside remains ... '

I've left out quite a bit, of course, but the irony of impermanence is clear.

What about the Mercers Company? Will it become a trunkless relic like Ozymandias? Or will the Mercers prove truly timeless?

I'll focus on the next hundred years - a modest period for our property people, who often think of long leases of 150 years or so.

Will we still have work to do? and will we be permitted to function as we would wish?

The management of the Company today has never been so busy, and a quick glance at the work that we do suggests that one cause - ever-present social change - has always led to a need for help from such as ourselves. Charitable work will always be needed.

What about old people? In 100 years time, people may have a life expectancy of 200 years.

Some of you here today may be there in 100 years time, and may be contemplating the role of the Company in helping other old people like yourselves to have a comfortable, fulfilled and influential place in society.

Education will always be important to us. Today's 4-year-olds, like my eldest grand-daughter, are already computer-literate, but by the time she is grown up, it'll be another world technologically.

³ The Mercers' Livery Dinner, Mercers' Hall, 11th October 2001

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We Mercers have a major role to play in school governance frameworks that transcend change. Within them, insightful policies of enduring education must be developed. If we do it right, our young people, decade by decade, will, as adults, prove more than a match for the challenges or change, in personal capabilities as well as in skills.

I must just comment on that other question: 'will we be permitted to function as we would wish?'

I believe that if we are useful, effective, and in tune with the affairs of the day, and if, most importantly, our work is integrated well with what we are - as Howard Truelove would say 'embedded' - we have as good a case for survival as any other body!

Are we useful? effective? in tune? Well, we certainly try to be, but it's always going to take effort and imagination. I believe that our success in staying so will be largely because our Mercer roots are nourished by human principles that are permanent and enduring - and timeless. In sombre times like these, our desire and ability to help others will in itself be a factor in our survival.

We are a fellowship driven by altruism, guided by Christian values, managed by an effective, self-renewing, and enduring system of governance, empowered by substantial and carefully stewarded wealth - and periodically galvanised by a kick-in-the-ass from the external world - or our perception of it!

So we have a case for continuing to exist! Let us now take a light-hearted look at a Livery Dinner of 100 years from now.

We are approaching the end of the dinner, and the Master is preparing to make his speech. His cerebral prompter, hidden in his luxuriant ex-alopeicious locks is just reminding him of the greetings to be made to his audience.

He pats it for reassurance.

The Livery and their guests, most of whom have come from outside London, have deserted their ULTRANET-connected offices for the occasion.

It's all very well to be able to discourse with friends and business colleagues in our daily life in the form of full-size colour images: but the atmosphere of the Livery Hall is a world apart; the dinner is the quintessence of fellowship.

The meal has been an excellent one. A succulent king-lobster dish - the bigger and better successor of the king-prawn - has been followed by an elegant meat creation - but it wasn't meat: the prime ingredient was purchased that very month from the Quorn-Market. The dessert dish is of exotic fruits topped by meringue whose smooth surface is a hologram - you eat some, but the image - of a Mercer theme - is still visible in what's left. Pupils of Thomas Telford School have been busy in its creation.

The Hall staff have despatched their quiet robotic assistants to their kennels in the basement, and are relaxing after a week of attention to every detail of the occasion. The assistants are busy making their own assessment of the evening.

Grace is sung, as it has been for hundreds or years, accompanied by the piano - yes, such acoustic instruments do still exist, as reminders of the craftsmanship of way back, but only a few Livery Companies still have their own, and piano tuning machines are like hens' teeth.

The wines have been superb; the main course was accompanied by a 2075 Etchart, a rare vintage from the Mendoza area of the Argentine, which by 2040 had moved to the forefront of world-class wines.

The production of vintage port has, alas, ceased. Global warming struck Portugal badly. The cellar used to have a fine stock of Taylor 2045, but only two cases still exist. By tradition, just one bottle is brought out each year at a special dinner held to celebrate the year's winners of the Bradbury contest - Bradbury is an interactive game, that slightly reminds the oldies of the archaic game of Monopoly.

It simulates the management of Mercer property and investment portfolios in the highly competitive world of the early 22nd century.

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The dessert wine therefore serves also as the wine for the toasts, it mellows the company as they listen to a superb recital by the boys and girls of St Paul's School, playing charming chamber pieces on real period instruments from the 20th Century.

And so the Master rises. He looks around at the men and women as they turn expectantly towards him, their upper garments forming a pleasing pattern of muted colour and elegant design. After the greetings, he begins:

'A little-known 19th century poet once wrote:

... Two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert ...'

And so on. I hope that the Master, my successor, will then express his own optimistic view of the next hundred years. And that his successors in turn will do so too.

He will then, as I do now, turn to give a special welcome to our guests - the embodiment of our hospitality!

My own guests tap deep into my roots. Adrian Firth and I have been close friends since Oxford days, where we discussed everything there was to discuss, from poetry to theology - and still do so whenever we can! He has been a schoolmaster, but was for much of his career a real merchant-taylor. His children being, of course, grown-up, he and Dora, his beautiful wife of more than 40 years, now live in Haute Provence, where they maintain a shop full of exotic artifacts, selling to travellers on the ancient trail between Northern Italy and France. Both Dora and Adrian have honoured us by coming all the way from Provence to be with us tonight.

Andrew Rowe⁴ is an even older friend, though he still looks - well, perhaps a little greyer - just as I remember him on a shared school bench in Eton days. He also has been a schoolmaster; he was an eminent back-bench MP until the last election, and was the driving force behind the JC2000 Schools Arts Festival that inspired 15,000 British schools and had the support of all the major Faiths. He is now a leading exponent of the National Youth Parliament. His

⁴ Andrew died after a long and valiant battle with cancer in November 2008.

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wife Sheila, a distinguished international worker in child health, is also our guest tonight.

Each Mercer has brought his own special guest. You are, every one of you, heartily welcome. We celebrate you all.

And so. Fellow Mercers, I invite you all to be upstanding, and to drink the health of all our guests,

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The Grocers⁵

The start of this speech needs a little explanation!

Two evenings before this dinner, the Master Grocer and the Master Mercer were with many others at a reception in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral following the Musicians' Evensong. The Master Mercer accidentally knocked the Master Grocer's glass from his hand, with certain untoward effects on his suit and a newly-cleaned tie, and a fragment of glass cut the back of his hand...

The following morning, the Master Mercer sent the Master Grocer a very good bottle of claret, and the following 'press release' for an episode for a 'serial horror movie' (much enjoyed by my generation in our young days):

Ordeal in the Chapter-House

In the dark crypts of St Paul's Cathedral, the Master Mercer challenges the Master Grocer in a trial by white wine. The Master Grocer is bloodied but unbowed, and issues a threat which will strike dread in the heart of every Mercer. In the next thrilling instalment, the Master Mercer ups the stakes by sending a secret messenger with an even more dangerous phial of red wine. How will the Master Grocer and his Mistress handle this daunting situation? Will he carry out his threat? What further tricks has the Master Mercer up his sleeve? Don't miss it!

The Master Grocer referred to this episode in his speech of welcome at the dinner a couple of days later...

It is with considerable relief that I find myself forgiven by the Master Grocer. I have also salved my conscience with the Church, by confessing my sin to the Dean of St Paul's. For

⁵ 2 The Grocers' Masters' and Clerks' dinner, 9th October 2001

some reason, though, before giving me absolution, he required me to show him as soon as possible, with himself as the victim and with glasses charged, exactly how the crime was done.

All the same, a big thank you, Master, for your wonderful hospitality, and also for your lively and entertaining words on social Grocery.

It is always a particular pleasure to be here in this Hall, for, over the years, the Grocers and Mercers have helped each out in lots of different ways, and a great and convivial friendship - in spite of all - exists between our two companies.

The Grocer's patron saint is St Anthony, who was troubled by beautiful women - lucky fellow. It's appropriate, therefore, that it falls to me to tell you a little tale in which a Grocer - a real pepperer - and a beautiful woman helped out one of the most distinguished Mercers, Thomas Gresham.

Way back in 1553, Queen Mary was new on the throne of England - turbulent times! - and Thomas Gresham, then 34, had just been rather precariously re-established as Queen's Agent in the Low Countries. These were then a very prosperous province of the Holy Roman Empire, under Charles V; his son Philip II of Spain's heavy-handed involvement in the area came a few years later.

Gresham had made himself irreplaceable, from the times of Edward VI, as the general fixer of loans and repayments, manipulator of exchange-rates, and much else, in Antwerp, that great trading centre - a role that he played well into Queen Elizabeth's time.

In Edward's time he had lived in Antwerp, but had to abandon that when Mary's new ministers ousted him; now he had to go to Antwerp on his own while his wife Anne stayed with the children in London.

Shortly after he arrived, an old friend, one John Ramsey, a Grocer trading in Antwerp, asked Gresham to dinner, with William Hounsell, another merchant who was an Armourer. Knowing Gresham would be lonely, he also invited his girl-friend, a very beautiful young lady called Anna. The dinner, like this one, was

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delicious. Afterwards, Anna left the three merchants to discuss business.

Gresham told them that he had to export bullion back to England, which was strictly against the law. The Grocer talked about the consignment of pepper that he was just going to ship. Gresham - ever the business-man - immediately suggested a solution to his own problem: smuggle silver rials, in small bags, in the packs of pepper. "But I must first get permission from the Privy Council", said Gresham, "If it works out, I'll arrange for Anna to be sent a beautiful embroidered bodice for Christmas." And so it was agreed, and a letter detailing the plan was sent to the Privy Council by secret messenger.

The Privy Council, under the sour old Marquis of Winchester who didn't like Gresham, agreed: for the Marquis it was a win-win situation: the bullion comes, or Gresham goes. And so a letter was sent back, by not-so-secret messenger.

While he waited for the letter, Gresham was getting cold feet. Indeed, it wasn't just his feet that he was worrying about in those harsh days.

Walking about his business one day with rather a long face, he ran into the Grocer with an even longer one.

"Anna's left me for another man", he cried.

Gresham made the usual consolatory words, but his long face instantly shortened.

"She won't expect that bodice, will she? So we can forget the bullion in the pepper scheme, can't we?" he asked.

And so it was agreed; in truth, the Grocer was also relieved - the cad! Girlfriends are replaceable, one's person is not. "Who did she go off with?" asked Gresham. "It was that knave and varlet that came to dinner with us a few weeks ago", said the Grocer.

Ever the business-man, Gresham thought about bodices - and a new solution to his problems. And so it was that Anna got her bodice; the Armourer gave his services for free, and Queen Mary's bullion requirements were shipped back in the military equivalent - 1000 demi-lance's harnesses - pikemen's upper armour.

The Privy Council was pleased, since these were just what they had wanted, and they also got great value with the falling Euro. (Gresham was good at making that happen when needed.)

Anna was a nice girl really, but it is my painful duty to tell you that she found the Armourer cuddlier without his armour, and they soon had to get married. There were lots of children. The Grocer forgave the Armourer, and he and Gresham became godfathers to the oldest child, a daughter. Who knows? - there may be descendants among us today!

So, hospitality had its rewards, even if not quite as anticipated.

Master, we have all just benefited handsomely from your hospitality, and I know that everyone here will join me in thanks for a superb evening.

The story about the bullion in the pepper is true, as is the nature of the replacement consignment. The remainder is historical romance!

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The Clothworkers⁶

What a wonderful evening we have all had, enjoying your hospitality in this magnificent Hall! It is a symbol, not only of the prudence with which you have conducted your affairs over the centuries, but also of the role of Sheep in the building up of the wealth of this great City.

I suspect that the Mercers of days past looked down their noses at those at the dirty end of the process - all we had to do with cloth was buy and sell it. Even when Mercers had a physical craft, this was carried out, usually by the ladies, in the form of fashioning luxurious clothing from silk and woollen cloth. It is well, therefore, to make amends for such disdain, and I plan therefore to take an interested look at what happened in your corner, Master, of the manufacture of cloth.

It is astonishing how many crafts came into the cloth industry. Shearers and carders, weavers and dyers, burrellers, clothiers and drapers summarise the major subdivisions in a process that dates from the invention of the first loom at least 2500 years ago. Weaving covered a variety of processes; in medieval England, these became highly specialised into the craft guilds that are now familiar.

You, Master, encompassed three, the Fullers, Teasellers, and Shearmen. You broke away from the quarrelsome Weavers, whose practitioners, with Butchers and Shoe-makers, reached the scaffold more frequently, in one century, than any other trade.

Fulling was a process of cleaning and compacting cloth, by stomping on it in a trough of greasy mud mostly comprising fullers' earth in water and urine. Surely, those early Fullers were masters of delegation! One can imagine the scene where the unfortunate apprentice is sent into this noisome mixture – “In you go, lad!” – while the Master Fuller stands on the sidelines, directing exactly where the next foot should be placed. No wonder that the apprentice Fuller's ambitions were fired by the pleasurable life led

⁶ The Clothworkers' Masters' and Clerks' dinner, Clothworkers' Hall, 23 October 2001

by the Master Fuller, and that he would lead one day! And no wonder that the fullers' management skills broadened when the Clothworkers were established as a member of the Twelve Great Companies, and produced many Lord Mayors!

Fullers' earth is itself a remarkable substance; it is highly absorbent, and removes grease and dirt from wool like magic. It was so important to England's weaving industry that its export was forbidden until the early 18th century, a fact, Master, that no doubt helped your Company's coffers to be filled.

It was used in Roman days, and the one-time student of Latin will no doubt remember the 1st-conjugation verb *fullo*, *fullare*, *fullavi*, *fullatum*, with other useful forms like *fullamur* - I am fullered - which suggests well our present state, even if we aren't in white-ties.

The origin of the word *fullo* seems to go back to a Sanskrit word *bhāla* meaning to glisten. Perhaps, therefore, discovery of fuller's earth might have taken place like this.

It is stone-age Britain. Young Ug lives just above the flood-plain of the little river that drains the North Downs just north of modern Nutfield, and one day, he falls, sheep-skin and all, into a particularly horribly glutinous bog where a stream near his home meets the flood-plain. When he gets home, Mog, his mother, smacks him, coating herself with mud. They both go to wash in the stream. Ug's sheep's-skin garment now shines like an angel's raiment, and he is teased mercilessly by his friends. Mog's hands are cleaner, and her skin smoother, than ever before. The incident becomes known, and soon her village becomes celebrated.

Other villages try the same, but their garments remain persistently mud-coloured.

In Northern India, fullers' earth is still used for skin care, as Mog found out.

The Nutfield deposits are now worked out, but Britain is still an important exporter of fullers' earth, which is used in all sorts of ways, from oil-drilling to helping to keep babies' bottoms dry.

Turning now to the shearmen within your craft, we have to carefully distinguish these from shearers of sheep, a distinctly

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disreputable lot. I learned how disreputable they were when in New Zealand a couple of years ago, I watched sheep being sheared, lying comfortably back in cello-position:

There was a young shearer of Dearham
Who learned to hold sheep while you shear 'em.
They said - it lies still:
You can do what you will -
But the ladies won't let shearers near 'em!!

This unfortunate trait explains why today there isn't a single shearer left in Dearham. No, Master, your people practised the much more goodly craft of sheering the nap of teaselled cloth to a uniform length. You will have noticed the amazing shears used for this purpose when we met earlier - these were passed on from generation to generation as highly valuable heirlooms.

I have to say that this must have been about the most boring trade that one could conceive. Imagine John the Shearman going home to his wife. "How was your day today, dear?" "I sheared 50 ells" or L ells as they would say. End of conversation.

It took two shearmen to do a good job - but they must have been professionally solemn - imagine the catastrophic consequences of a good joke - guffaw-shaped undulations on the cloth - or worse.

All the same, the shearmen were a vociferous lot, and evidently more than a verbal match for the Dyers, who were denied the coveted 12th place in 1516, having, it seems, been one or more places ahead of the shearmen at various times in the late 15th century.

The City books of the time identify:

'a grudge that hath lately risen between the fellowship of Dyers and Sheremen by reason of diverse unfitting words surmised to be said by certain persons of either of the said fellowships in reproach of each other' and requesting the fellowships to submit names of the culprits so that they could be punished.

Master, I am shocked even to think about what unfitting words they may have used.

Punishment evidently did no good, nor did the amalgamation with the Fullers in 1528, to become the Clothworkers. (The Fullers, it seems, were nowhere near the Premier League at the time, which must have been particularly galling.)

The Dyers and the Clothworkers didn't resolve their quarrel until more than 400 years later - just a few years before I became a Mercer - but the occasion of burying the hatchet between the two Companies was so momentous that an annual Hatchet Lunch is celebrated each year in each others' Halls.

The Shearmen's craft was mechanised in due course, and watchers of Mr Hart Davies's TV program on Victorian industry will know that the common lawnmower is a direct descendent of your shearmen's craft.

The teasellers, carrying out a vital part of the process, found their way into your crest, but the craft of teaselling - in the form of 'teasing out' seems now to be established as part of the trade of Management Consultants!

Master, I have talked enough about your technological origins, and their modern day diversities. I could say that the success of your trades led to early wealth, some very distinguished members, and an impressive leadership in charitable giving, £1400 per annum in the 1750s; and we will all be aware of your links with Leeds University and other organisations which benefit from your deep understanding of cloth manufacture. You have connections with the Armed Services, particularly the Navy, and many other interests and activities, including, I note, the support of high-tech puffin-viewing. You are indeed a very busy and diverse company.

Which makes us particularly privileged to be here tonight, and I would like to propose very grateful thanks on behalf of all of your guests for your superb hospitality this evening.

The Masons⁷

The Mercers and the other Twelve Great Companies were obliged to fund the Irish Plantations in the time of King James I. The Masons, Cooks, and Broderers were the three companies that were 'associated with' the Mercers in the venture (originally, the Innholders were involved, but they managed to escape). The four Companies have retained a close relationship over the ensuing nearly 400 years, and each entertains each others officers in the course of the year. See also The Associated Companies on page 69.

It's always a pleasure to be a guest with the Masons, and I thank you very heartily. Renter Warden, for the kind way in which you have introduced us all. I am sure that I speak for all my fellow guests when I say that we have enormously enjoyed good food, good wine, and good company in an atmosphere of true hospitality, and we all thank you for what we have received from you tonight.

We all know the history of the Associated Companies, but nobody could tell me why the association consisted specifically of the Broderers, Cooks, Masons, and Mercers. And, of course, the Innholders for a time.

So I have applied team-building theory to this otherwise intractable problem: in short, you evaluate your team against the qualities required for the task in hand. You'll be glad to know that we all come out quite well.

Here, I'm taking our task to be a long and arduous journey to a remote place where a permanent base is to be built. The Cooks, of course, are invaluable at any time. They can manage to cook in the face of adversity, as I found out a couple of years back, when they produced a wonderful dinner - at Innholders' Hall, as it happened - despite the electricity having failed at 4 o'clock the previous morning. I count them in without a qualm.

Now the Broderers. They are wonderful at producing lovely clothing, which always makes travellers feel good. They aren't

⁷ The Masons' Associated Companies Dinner, Mercers' Hall, 5th November 2001

enthusiastic about making ordinary travel-wear, but will at a pinch, and they are a godsend for travellers because they darn socks so well. And they are marvellous company at night, natural songsters⁸.

Consider now the Masons - well, they really are a resourceful lot. Not only can they carve stones, but, when you think about what it takes to build a cathedral or whatever, they can arrange haulage, put up temporary housing and shelter, make picnics suitable for eating at the tops of spires, and they can make ingenious machinery for lifting heavy weights. They can even harness power from treadmills. And no wolf, or even sabre-toothed tiger, would take on a powerful stone-mason with his formidable jedding-axe. What useful people!

What about us Mercers? As merchants, we are experienced travellers, well able to negotiate a good price with the locals for shoes, furs, and other supplies; if the Cooks want 20 fat swans, or a hundredweight of turnips, or the Company needs a hogshead of Malmsey, say the word and it appears! We're even ready to work out in the Mason's treadmills - the medieval equivalent of the Gym.

The Innholders are great at providing a fire to relax by, and good nosh and drink, and their ostlers take good care of the livestock. But we're in a new spot each night, and if the Innholders do find an inn, mine host, hardly surprisingly, tells them to keep their advice to themselves!

The team works well without them. Ann Robinson has no place in these congenial surroundings, so I must just assure the Innholders that we regard them as great friends anyway.

Quite clearly, though, you ingenious Masons are the real practical achievers.

You will gather, Master, that I'm a great admirer of the skills which your Company displayed in medieval times, and still espouses. The achievements were amazing, although some early master-

⁸ A charming feature of Broderers' Dinners is that the Master must sing - solo - the verses of the Broderer's Song; the general company sings the refrain.

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masons thought artistic qualities more important than arranging that the design would actually stay upright!

For example, the original designers of Milan Cathedral say (when their defective design is subject to external audit) that "the science of geometry should not have a place in these matters", and quote Aristotle.

The auditors went for science, and the revised design still stands.

Patrons with funds for major buildings were scarce, and master-masons weren't always able to pick and choose projects or dictate their terms. They were often subject to tough contracts which not only restricted them personally, but exacted penalties for non-performance.

One master mason, William Horwood, was subject to this condition in Henry VI's time when continuing the building of a Northamptonshire church: [Fotheringay]

"And if it be that the said William Norwood makes not end of the said work within reasonable time ... then he shall yield his body to prison at my lord's will, and all his movable goods and heritances at my said lord's disposition"

I sometimes wish that we could stipulate that kind of condition with today's builders!

I don't know if it was William Horwood who, as he contemplated his next assignment, was knocked out by a falling slate. He dreamed that he was knocking at the gates of heaven. St Peter told him that he was a borderline case in terms of virtue, and that he could to visit both heaven and hell and make his choice.

Hell was first. Down the stairs he went, to find, to his surprise, a bewhiskered gentleman in rich garments and tudor hat (that cunningly hid the horns), who assured him that he was just the person to complete the building of a great tower. This would, when complete, reach to Heaven.

The prospective patron showed him solid foundations in a pleasant open area between gently undulating hills; a quarry was not far away, and there were piles of hewn stone and marble, as well as heavy ox-carts for transport. A tracing house was to be

seen nearby, full of beautifully made tools neatly hung up. Industrious people were scribing patterns on the floor, and there was even a young lady who showed the Master Mason a crystal screen on which designs could be seen, and fetchingly invited him to play with her mouse.

The Master Mason was much taken by all this, and only reluctantly left for his tour of heaven.

It was stunning. He walked on gently-sprung cloud, upon which beautifully fashioned gold and silver dwelling places, sparkling with gems, were dotted about. Angels played strange instruments but didn't sound a bit like Stockhausen. The saints were singing, the wild-life was tame, and the place was full of sweetness and light.

But there wasn't a single piece of masonry, and the Master Mason worried about how in heaven you could even make decent footings. So when he came back to St Peter, he was in turmoil. Heaven was wonderful, but he didn't really feel quite at home there. And I regret to say that he rather fancied the maiden's mouse.

So, St Peter, after asking him whether that was his final answer, sent him down to Hell.

Things now looked terribly different. The devil greeted him, but was wearing no fine raiment - indeed, he wasn't wearing anything at all. The drafting house was still there, but it was like a dirty stage set; and the maiden now looked astonishingly like Bill Gates in drag.

Gone was the pleasing landscape - the uneven heaving black terrain was covered by burning knobbly volcanic rocks, and the stench of sulphur was everywhere. The Mason said in horror - it wasn't like this before. "Oh, that!", said the devil, "That was just the Patron's Prospectus!"

No doubt when he awoke our Mason lived to be a wiser man.

Masonry as a craft still lives on, and for Etonians of my generation, this is made clear from the story told by my brother Nick when he was teaching there: a tourist looked up at the beautiful fan-vaulting of the chapel, and said "they don't do that kind of thing

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any more". Wrong - it's modern stone-masonry⁹ which replaced the beetle-infested timber ceiling that I knew as a boy.

I celebrate the hard-won skills. Master, that your Company supports so actively, and I celebrate your Company for all that it does, particularly the St Pauls connection. So I ask the Guests to rise and drink with me a toast to the Worshipful Company of Masons - root and branch may it flourish forever!

⁹ In re-constituted stone, I think.

The Drapers¹⁰

Thank for your kind remarks and for a magnificent welcome in this noble Hall. We have had a wonderful evening, and I have nothing but praise, Master, for your superlative food and wine, and for the hospitality of your great Company.

I can surely conclude from this evening that the Mercers and the Drapers have always been good friends, and my historical quests seem to confirm this.

Our companies were both retailers and merchants, but, by and large, our operations didn't overlap - and I have found few traces of demarcation disputes.

Your role was centred on national and international cloth distribution, trading 'as far as canvas wings would fly', originally with some relationship with manufacture (for many years you exacted tribute from the weavers, fullers, and shearmen). We Mercers also traded widely, but, in retail at least, were more concerned with piece goods, often made from your fabrics, and with specialist fabrics like silk or cloth-of-gold. We did sometimes ourselves supply retail woollen cloth, but only as single items for selling on.

We probably collaborated extensively with you, particularly in Tudor times, when elaborate garb, in wool, silk, and other fabrics, and rich drapery on the walls was very popular. Cardinal Wolsey and his retinue at the height of his power were a walking advertising poster for our joint wares.

By coincidence. Cardinal Wolsey's Gentleman Usher and biographer was George Cavendish, a member of the great Draper family that later was ennobled in the Dukes of Devonshire. George's father, and probably George himself, were among a number of Drapers of the time who were buried in what became Mercers' Chapel. Entrusting us with your dead, Master, seems to point to a very special relationship!

¹⁰ The Drapers' Masters' and Clerks' dinner. Drapers' Hall, 15th November 2001.

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Our London guilds had counterparts in England and abroad, and they were all linked by trade. Mercers, Drapers, Grocers, and others would journey together on national and international merchant business, and in the more important centres the Guilds would often have built their own halls. The delightful medieval Drapers' Hall in Shrewsbury is an example that my wife Margaret-Anne and I stumbled upon a few years ago.

Another surviving example is the Drapers Hall in Coventry, a late Georgian successor of two earlier halls. Interestingly, there was a very strong guild relationship between Coventry and London, substantially because of the location of that city at the very centre of England.

We can directly trace family links with Coventry: the Tate family, for example, were Mercers of Coventry; and inter-married with the Gilbert drapers. The Tates became Mercers of London, and supplied several Master Mercers of the 15th and early 16th century, most of whom became Lord Mayors. The Grocer Mayor Sir William Taylor was also a relation by marriage of the Coventry Tates.

David Tate, a recent past-master, may well be a descendant of these Tates.

It was several days journey between Coventry and London, but what friendships must have been forged between the members of our companies! David Tate's golfing prowess suggests that these journeys were the antecedents of the congenial game of golf between business associates.

The relative precedence of the Mercers, Grocers and Drapers could have been an sore issue when it was fixed in 1516¹¹ by the Mayor and Aldermen, just after John Tate II became Mayor of London for the second time.

I don't know what the collective noun is for Aldermen, but a Punch of Aldermen seems an appropriate term, with rounded and slightly alcoholic connotations. At any rate, although the Mercers, Grocers, and Drapers had a high percentage of Mayors in the preceding years, the Mercers packed a Punch of Aldermen, and

¹¹ Other years are sometimes given - e.g. 1515.

thus achieved top place; the Grocers had the Mayor of the time, and so the Drapers came third.

All the same, the discussions must have been very civilised for at least the top three places, and I have found absolutely nothing to indicate even surprise at the disposition within any of the three companies - further confirmation of our ancient friendships.

In concluding, I found an odd connection between our Companies in the seeming absence of poets in our joint ranks:

A poetical draper
Died and went to his Maker
Who said it's time
You learned to rhyme!!

Even that redoubtable angling Draper Isaak Walton [1593-1683] was perhaps just a versifier who preferred to quote Donne [1572-1631]. I add quickly that I can demonstrate that:

Mercer verse
Is even worse!

Now, the 18th century satirical poet John Gay [1685-1732], who wrote the *Beggar's Opera*, was the son of a Draper, but did not become one; curiously, he was apprenticed to a Mercer, and gave that up too.

A 16th-century apprentice draper found out the hard way what the attitude of the Company was to sexual misbehaviour of the young: having been caught 'in naked bed with his master's maid', the Wardens had him stripped and severely beaten as an ensample, for his unthrifty behaviour.

Perhaps, even in Gay's time, our Companies retained a streak of puritanism in this respect. Master, that put off the more uninhibited writers, and certainly Gay's verse is hilariously naughty. The prim Oxford Book of English Verse quotes;

'Were I laid on Greenland's Coast
And in my arms embraced my lass
Warm amidst eternal frost
Too soon the half-year's night would pass.'

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What stamina! There's lots more like that! It was Gay's contemporary, Alexander Pope [1688-1744], another Draper's son, and a mainstream romantic poet, who wrote:

'A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring.'

I fear, Master, that I am leading you all into dangerous waters, no doubt under the influence of the Draperian spring from which we have drunk so pleasantly this evening. I take this as a cue to finish by thanking you, Master, for your splendid hospitality, and for a superb evening.

The Skinners¹²

What a superb luncheon we have had, in what splendid surroundings! I know that each one of us present has nothing but praise for your hospitality today, and for the delightful manner in which you have welcomed us.

A fourteenth-century book of moral tales tells of the beautiful damsel who was to meet her proposed husband, and clad herself, although the weather was bitterly cold, in figure-hugging garments. The young man shunned her as she stood there shivering and blue with cold in favour of her younger sister, fresh and ruddy as a rose, clad in her furs and other sensible clothes. They were married, but, come summertime, he found out what a scorcher he had missed!

The moral, of course, is that a good fur can not only bring fortune, but it also hides the figure well; always a consolation to us Masters and Prime Wardens on ceremonial occasions!

The romantic and utilitarian side apart, your Company, Master, pioneered not only stunning craftsmanship in the use of fur, but also formed part of an amazing trading enterprise, the scale of which can be demonstrated by the reported statistic that in the year Michaelmas 1390 to Michaelmas 1391, no less than 350,960 squirrel skins were brought to London. The wealthy invested in furs - and fortunes were made. Your predecessor Robert Persone was accounted the third richest man in London in 1319.

With wealth came power.

In 1339, the Skinners ranked so high in the Livery that, far from settling for sixes or sevens, they were vying with the Fishmongers for their place (who, as later, were at or around 4th place). The dispute grew so heated that a riot ensued between the supporters of the two companies. Two ringleaders were tried in the Guildhall and sentenced to death. This was a poor show - firstly the magistrates overstepped their powers, and secondly they had the temerity to carry out the sentence outside our Hall. History doesn't

¹² The Skinner's Masters and Clerks Lunch, Skinners' Hall, 14th January 2002.

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tell whether the ringleaders were two Skinners, or two Fishmongers or one of each, so I must settle the matter by calling it a draw, if that isn't too gruesome a term.

The bulk of the home produce in the later middle ages came from the rabbit, or rather the coney, since the term rabbit originally applied just to a young coney. Apparently, the term 'coney' is now deprecated, as a result of tender-minded people who were shocked by the Latin origin of the term - *cuniculus* - a small hole-dweller.

Rabbits are animals of the semi-desert, and were only introduced to Britain in the early middle ages; they produce not only an excellent skin, which originally carried premium prices, but also provide the ingredient for quality felt (as for hats). The home production of rabbit fur became a cottage industry of tawyers - of which your company was at the centre. The uplift of rural incomes by the breeding or catching of coney, and squirrel too, must have been one of the sources of relative social stability in medieval times.

Of course, there were many more exotic skins that were mostly imported. Some of these creatures read like mythical animals from the imagination of Bram Stoker, the great-grandfather of one of your past-masters. There was minever, stradling, foyns, bethes, and even boggs leggs, would you believe, in addition to more expected creatures such as ermine, and the odd biso or two. All these raise a glorious image of your amulet-protected ancestors creeping, bow in hand, through prehensile Transylvanian woods, in search of the strange sirogrillus or whatever, whose belly-fur would adorn a king, and whose lesser parts would help clothe the lesser mortals. I'm sure that, had cockatrices furry bellies, they too would have been sold in London.

The exotic nature of the names is wholly matched by the complexity and far-reaching nature of the trade, in which you wholly participated. Bogg's legges, for example, are actually lamb-skins from Morocco. Minever was originally white squirrel from Northern Europe.

Eventually, the monopoly which you enjoyed in earlier days disappeared, and your latter-day interests in charity and education

emerged as the very important activities that you maintain to this day; your schools carry a fine reputation.

I found it an interesting reflection on educational goals to read the 1828 OFSTED report on Judd's Grammar School in Tonbridge. Here it was stated that the Foundation subjects were Latin, Greek, and (if required) Hebrew. Reading, writing, and arithmetic were additional, and carried a fee of £1 per quarter per child.

However, I note that the size of the school was such as to produce three complete Cricket 11s complete with scorers, and six others to cheer them on. They no doubt helped hone the impressive cricketing activities of Tonbridge School, which were such as to produce Sir Colin Cowdrey, your late and much lamented Past Master.

Over the years, I believe that Mercers and Skinners have been good friends, and we were certainly loyal customers in the old days. I even discovered that we were near neighbours in Ireland, in Plantation days.

All of us in the Twelve Great companies have enjoyed each others' hospitality over hundreds of years, and this splendid feast is in the true spirit of our friendship. Thank you, Master, for your great hospitality.

The Mercers (again)¹³

Welcome to you all - for most of you the second time this evening. It is certainly a great pleasure to have you here, and I hope that you have all enjoyed our humble fare. Perhaps gatherings such as this started at the refectory table of the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon - of St Thomas a Becket. Indirectly we are what we are, I think, because of him.

I'll elaborate.

Medieval Mercers were in general traders in silk, luxury cloth, and piece-goods, typically to do with ladies' fashions. They ranged from the great merchant, through the artisan/shopkeeper to the pedlar-Mercer. Note the Haberdasher overlap.

The early Mercers established themselves as retailers in the area between St Mary le Bow and here, but on the other side of Cheapside. The Mercer Maiden - in the latest fashion mode for their customers - would have been their emblem.

In due course, the Mercers required a meeting place, and here is the start of a fascinating tale.

In 1191, Richard I was on his way to the Holy Land on pilgrimage. He was saved from shipwreck on Cyprus by the miraculous intervention of St Thomas a Becket, who appeared to him and promised that he should come safely to land. Thomas had, of course, been assassinated in 1170 during the reign of Richard's father Henry II, in the wake of a church dispute dating back to 600 AD when St Augustine was Archbishop of Canterbury.

Richard adopted St Thomas as patron for his crusade, and subsequently took Acon in the Holy Land. When he returned to England, the king established the Order of the Knights of St Thomas of Acon, initially to look after poor pilgrims from the Holy Land, and to raise money to pay ransom. The Hospital of St Thomas of Acon became one of the houses of the order, having recently been founded by St Thomas' sister here on the site of her father Gilbert's house.

¹³ The Mercers' Masters and Clerks Dinner, Mercers' Hall, 16th January 2002.

Gilbert had been a wealthy London merchant, traditionally a Mercer. One-time Portreeve of London, he seems to have been the kind of man who did much to establish guild-power in the City.

Thomas a Becket became an incredibly popular saint, and remained so throughout the Middle Ages. The Canterbury Tales, dating to about 1400, are ample testimony to the importance of the saint 100 years after his death. The Church of St Thomas became a vital part of City life right up to the time of Henry VIII and the reformation.

The Hospital of St Thomas of Acon occupied part of the area of our present Hall, but extended nearly to St Olave Jewry (now just a spire to the north), The Church was a distinct building of its own, surrounded by courtyards, and cloisters and by smaller buildings, some owned by the hospital, some not. Its main entrance was a great door open to Cheapside.

The Hospital was an obvious place for the Mercers to meet. A Mercers' side-chapel was established in St Thomas' for their worship, and meetings of the Wardens and the Livery took place in the Hall of the hospital. The Mercers also used other rooms, as later did the Merchant Adventurers, who were founded in 1407, and whose activities largely embodied the international trading side of the Mercers and other Guilds.

The Mercers and the Hospital happily cohabited; the Hospital had its own Master, as well as resident clergy, and ran its own affairs. The closeness was emphasised by the Mercers becoming trustees.

Let us pay a brief visit to the Hospital in 1516. We enter from busy Cheapside into a spacious lamp-lit hallway: in front and to the right is the south door of St Thomas Church; to the left is the Hall of the Hospital and other rooms and offices; a passage leads to the main courtyard. Enter the Church, and it may remind you of St Bartholomew the Great as it then was, with a dozen side chapels; there is a Chapel for the Haberdashers, as well as for the Mercers.

The High altar is dominated by a statue of St Thomas; beside it is a fine painted stone statue of the Dead Christ. Perhaps the Skinners, with their religious connections with the Body of Christ, had something to do with that?

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The North door of the Church is opposite the South door; between the two doors is an open area, screened from the body of the Church, and used as a meeting place. Go through the North door, and you find yourself in a small cloister leading to a refectory where there is open hospitality. The hospital is a good place to meet, and is much frequented by the great and the good. Many find their final resting place under the floor of the Church.

At about this moment in time, 1516, the Mercers were established as Number One in precedence, and felt that they needed a fine hall that they could really call their own. So they acquired the greater part of the Cheapside frontage from the Hospital, and, by 1524, had built the rather remarkable building shown in the Map tapestry downstairs. The Mercers' own private chapel was at street level, together with an area for the Merchant Adventurers, and a silk weigh-house; the Livery Hall itself was on the upper floor, with other rooms and parlours.

In 1517 Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of Wittenburg Church and started the Reformation. Henry VIII subsequently used the movement for his own ends. The management of the Hospital nevertheless remained consistently strong until the Dissolution of the Monasteries, which struck the Hospital on St Ursula's Day 1538.

After considerable negotiation, in 1542 Henry VIII sold the Hospital to the Mercers, who immediately set about re-establishing the Church as the Mercers' chapel. They converted the old chapel, off Cheapside, into a school-room - and it became Mercers' School, probably taking over the nearby Grammar School established in 1447 by John Neil, Master of St Thomas' at the time¹⁴. A new era in the Mercers' Company history began.

Up to this time, the Mercers had had many opportunities to develop their mercantile links. They were closely associated with a prestigious City institution in St Thomas', and they had clearly networked well, particularly over a good meal. They had over the years taken their civic duties to heart, and had provided a

¹⁴ And also Rector of St Mary Colechurch, the church over the arches on the south-east corner of the Hall site - see also page 47 below.

substantial number of Mayors and aldermen. They had gained a reputation for influence and reliability. In 1509, John Colet, Mercer and Dean of St Pauls, founded St Paul's School, and famously put it into the trusteeship of the Mercers saying that "... while there was no absolute certainty in human affairs, he found less corruption in a body of married laymen like the Company of Mercers than in any other order or degree of mankind".

To emphasise this, the late 15th century and 16th century provided many other Mercers whose names are still well known. William Caxton was one. Sir Thomas Gresham is perhaps the best known member of his family, but we mustn't forget his father Richard, who first proposed the Exchange that his son eventually built. One also thinks of Sir Thomas More, William Dauntsey who founded Dauntsey's School, and John Roysse who re-founded the ancient Abingdon School.

I surmise that these influential people were a product of 300 years and more in the sodal hotbed of the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon and its refectory table!

In contrast, the artisan side of Mercery had no comparable nourishment, and so it came about that, aided by the practice of patrimony, by the mid 15th century, that side of the Company had almost faded away, and never came back.

Our later history pivots around the Great Fire of 1666 and its aftermath - a long tale for another time. So I'll just summarise by saying that our colourful and powerful medieval and Tudor ancestors left a lasting inheritance in charitable and educational works - and ethos too - that is still very much alive with us today.

We Mercers certainly inherited from those days an enjoyment of hospitality and good company, and a good party such as tonight's. Thank you all for being with us. So now I invite my fellow Mercers and senior staff to rise and drink the health of the Guests.

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The Vintners¹⁵

The Master Vintner opened proceedings with a hilarious set of verses about each of the Masters and Clerks of the great 12. This was a real tour-de-force!! All I could find in response was this:

If I was to reply in verse
I could do far worse
Than emulate
The dear late Tony Tate¹⁶.
In view of my skill
I think I won't!!

We have had a wonderful evening, wining and dining in your magnificent hall and we have felt luxuriously welcome - a thousand thank-you's from us all.

The wines in particular have been superlative: the result of more than a thousand years in the trade of a product whose pleasures go back into the mists of time.

Your Company has always been the guardian of high standards in wine. In far-off times, quality was relative; we would sniff today at wine of which the best would hardly last from October to April. Even then, though, good wine was to be appreciated: a 1540 book says:

... it must be fyne, fayre, and clear to the eye; it must be fragrant and redolent, having a good odour and flavour in the nose; it must be cold and plesaunt in the mouth, and it must be strong and subtyll of substance.

Your company has been very largely instrumental in bringing to us the near perfection of amazing clarets such as we have enjoyed tonight, although real quality had to await the re-introduction in about 1750 of that Graeco-Roman invention, the humble cork - and the vitally important corkscrew.

¹⁵ The Vintners' Masters and Clerks Dinner, Vintners' Hall, 6th February 2002.

¹⁶ 'Tony' Tate (Francis Herbert Tate) was Master Mercer 1967-1968

The Vintners were concerned in the first instance with the great wine trade with South West France, although they also kept taverns. Vintners have had a distinct trade for more than 1000 years; but seem to have been first recognised as a distinct body in London when your formative company was incorporated under the name 'the Merchant Wine-Tunners of Gascony' in 1365. Even then, there were two kinds of dealers within that body, the Vinetarii, or Vintners, and the Tabernarii, or tavern keepers.

In those days, the living seems to have been relatively easy - Gascony with Aquitaine were English Duchies, and, despite their subsequent loss as the 100 Years War ploughed on, the next 600 years of the Vintners history appear superficially uneventful, with attention to swans being something of a highlight. Indeed, the serenity of the creatures when not being upped seems symbolic of yourselves.

Not for you fighting on the streets over your precedence. Happenings, such as the beheading of 40 Flemings outside St Martin's Vintry, your then parish church, during the Peasants Revolt, or, more recently, a break-in of anarchists into your Hall, valiantly repelled, were not of your making.

Indeed, the only trouble that is reported dates back to 10 years before your original incorporation, when Roger Torold, Vintner, used 'opprobrious words' against Thomas Leggy, the Mayor, and wound up, according to our Archivist, having to give him 100 tuns of wine.

Now quite clearly, he didn't just utter a few 5-letter words (that's four plus the 'E' at the end) - he must have said something unimaginably awful. All the same, 100 tuns is a lot of wine - a complete ship-load or two - and quite apart from anything else, it shows just how strong the trade was in those days. Bad King John used about 300 tuns per annum, so the Vintners at least must not have thought him as bad as all that.

But this was an early exception to the external serenity, although I'm sure that there were Vintner heavies to help regulate taverns, break up barrels of poor quality wine, and generally control trouble, but nobody else seemed to mind about it, unless swept off their feet by a mini-tidal wave from a shattered tun of near-vinegar.

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All the same. Master, the truth is completely different. Your Company have always had to struggle for existence, battling against a mountain of complications and adversities that threatened to bring you down at every point, starting with the loss of Gascony. There were wars and civil wars, pirates and French Merchants to contend with. There was competition from Bristol and Southampton for the Gascony trade, and there was competition from Rhenish and Mediterranean wines. There was the loss of monopoly and increasing difficulties in regulating the trade.

The discovery of hops as a preservative led to a major loss of customer base to a new large-scale trade in beer - I'm afraid that the Worshipful Company of Watneys may have something to answer for here.

Kings and governments saw wine as a source of revenue by duty, and sometimes intervened in prices, or traded directly with the suppliers.

On the retail side, a prohibition on Sunday drinking was introduced in 1614, and two Members who ignored the precept were imprisoned.

In Stuart times came the three great trials to which we were all subjected - incessant and excessive demands from the King for funds, the Irish Plantations, and the Great Fire.

In 1785, you had to contend with a calamitous surfeit of Lawyers in your membership, and even had to worry about taverns owned by your members being identified as bordellos.

And so on. A litany of difficulties and disasters to contend with that would have driven a lesser company to drink, although I feel sure that the occasional cask may have been tapped in your Hall to gauge its quality and derive a little therapy thereby.

I say without a touch of irony that your steadfastness in the face of all this is very impressive indeed. You dealt with all these matters with decisiveness and resolution, and success resulted.

As an example, in 1659, you took very serious stock of your financial position, and cut back on almost all discretionary expenditure other than a good party on Election Day and an

almost-as-good party on Lord Mayor's day, and a few other essentials. This restored a healthy cash flow.

A few years later, your radical actions after the disastrous Great Fire gave you a new Hall - this one - and a future full of further ups and downs, but a future nonetheless.

Small wonder that so many distinguished personages, are ranked among your members.

Nevertheless, this excess of wisdom set me thinking, and when I found that some of the buildings subsumed into your original hall were directed to be used for certain 'superstitious purposes', I wondered if you had managed to tap into Harry Potterish resources for guidance. Perhaps the old Hall hid a medieval Hogwarts Academy, and perhaps even now there is a Bin 10¾ in the ancient wine-vaults below us?

So I looked for further evidence. Was Elizabeth I onto something when she called for an inquiry into revenue apparently used for arcane activity? Were the corpses found on the arches above your member's tavern at the end of Old Jewry part of strange practices, or were they just burials in the 'crypt' of St Mary Colechurch upstairs?

Were there occult overtones in the bacchanalian pageantry of ancient demigods presented by Vintner Mayor Sir Samuel Dashwood in 1711? And what about the Hellfire Club practices reputed to occur in the great ball over West Wycombe Abbey, or in its catacombs, under the direction of Sir Samuel's distinguished Vintner grandson Sir Francis Dashwood?

And when the Master Mercer asked for a copy of the fireplace surrounds in your Hall to be made for our Hall about a hundred years ago, was there a concealed panel in it, hiding an ancient secret that was to be duplicated to enhance Mercer deliberations?

Hitler disposed of that particular evidence, so perhaps you and your Clerk, Master, are the only people who know the secret truth?

But perhaps after all this speculation is really the product of a fevered mind.

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All I can say in my defence is: whose mind would not become fevered when subject to the magnificent hospitality that we have had this evening? Master, I thank you on behalf of all your guests for a superb occasion. I would now ask my fellow guests to rise and drink to the health and continuing prosperity of the Vintners' Company!

The Goldsmiths¹⁷

Thank you. Prime Warden, for your very entertaining introduction, and for your truly memorable hospitality in this magnificent hall. We have regally wined and dined, while surrounded by the most beautiful artifacts. In fact. Prime Warden, I'm daunted by the wealth of superlatives that are needed not only to praise the great Company that you represent, but also fully to express an appreciation of your rich history and of all your good works in the Craft, in education, and to many charitable causes.

So I would like simply to take you in time-travel back with me to a particular year, 1433, when King Henry VI was still a boy.

By this time, Prime Warden, your new hall - the second on a site that you have owned for 100 years¹⁸ - has been the heart of a thriving community of craftsmen in various branches of your trade. It has been established for craft regulation as well as for Livery matters: at its centre is the assay house where the quality of gold and silver can be measured, and a stamp of approval given.

Meanwhile, the main business of goldsmithing is carried out a few hundred yards to the south of here, in Westcheap, the western end of Cheapside.

Cheapside is an amazing place. Much wider than any other street in the centre of the City, it is bustling with trade. Goldsmiths' Row is at one end, the Mercers and the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon are at the other. Drapers and Grocers and others trade between. Three conduits provide water-carriers with sweet water piped from Tyburn; there is one at each end of Cheapside, and one in the middle. Street-market stalls surround the conduits, although the centre one, the Standard, is also a place for executions.

¹⁷ The Goldsmiths' Masters and Clerks Dinner, Goldsmiths' Hall, St Valentine's day, 14th February 2002.

¹⁸ According to some accounts, this was just a modification of an existing building.

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To the South of Goldsmiths' Row is Old Change, where the refining side of your business is done, just to the east of Paul's Church, whose great bulk and a spire said to be 500 foot tall are clearly visible over the ecclesiastical houses around it. Cheap Cross stands high in the centre of Goldsmiths' Row, one of 12 crosses raised by Edward I to mark a resting point for the cortege of his beloved Queen Eleanor of Castile, It is surrounded by traders' stalls, and dominates the street-side shops, and houses, the latter typically on two floors. There are perhaps 400 retail units in Westcheap alone, many of them tiny. Shops would for many have served as workshops: the goldsmith works the timeless tools of the trade wearing his leather apron like a bib to collect the precious filings.

Here you are only eight minutes from Dick Whittington's 50-seat public loo, down in the Vintry. Five minutes if you are in a hurry!

Churches stand tall over the dwellings: Three lie to the South of Cheapside, and six to the North, if you count the Church of St Thomas. No less than 14 churches lie within 200 yards of your hall, although it is the church of St John Zachary, (to be later lost in the Great Fire), that has a special relationship with the Goldsmiths.

Religious observances are important, particularly the feast of St Dunstan, patron saint of Goldsmiths, usually marked by a feast of lampreys and other fish washed down with pippins and wine. And, over the years, Goldsmiths have bequeathed property to fund obits - masses for their souls. As you walk Cheapside, the Goldsmiths' almsmen, in black or blue gowns, may be observed going to yet another obit. Your almsmen have to attend them all, and not all poor men will accept a place in your almshouses because of the devotional strain on old knees!

While your people trade, the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths watches over and regulates them, and sees that the quality of the beautiful metals in which you work is maintained. Indeed, the 1299 statute which conferred the right of the Company to conduct the Trial of the Pyx also requires your 'touch' - silver and gold work had to carry the Leopard's head as a proof of purity - or be destroyed.

Goldsmiths did sometimes sell sub-standard work, and sometimes worse sins were committed, like coating tin-ware with silver. The seriousness of such fraud required the Goldsmiths to be proactive and search out wrongdoers, and the periodic sorties by your Company's officers must have been a fine and familiar sight.

The Company's beadle, with all his insignia, marches first, followed by the Wardens in full livery and hoods. Then comes the Clerk, two renter wardens, and a small army of heavies.

This formidable procession, which sounds a bit like an over-dressed version of the 'ram'¹⁹ in the Eton Field Game, may march not only up Cheapside, but also all round the City, demanding to inspect artifacts, and to take them away for assay if necessary. It is also authorised to search for transgressions in fairs outside London.

Religious houses are sometimes visited, because greedy craftsman would sometimes find rooms within them in which to create sub-standard or even bogus artifacts, hoping to gain ecclesiastical protection. Most transgressions are handled by the Court of the Goldsmiths (and it is surprising how lenient the punishments were in those savage days, with fines or public humiliation followed by reconciliation being the order of the day).

The truculent Peter Torold, goldsmith, descendent of foul-mouthed Roger, vintner, is fined 5 tuns of wine for being rude to the Wardens.

Despite the tensions - and occasional violence - between Londoners and foreigners, the Goldsmiths value foreign craftsmen who bring in new skills, and the Company has a significant number of foreign members. It seeks to make them turn native: for example, by swearing allegiance to the King and to the Company, and forbidding any but English apprentices.

¹⁹ The Eton Field Game is a soccer-like game with a curious variation: goals are not kicked but 'converted' by a 'ram' of five or six boys, head-to-tail, in front of the goal, who run together in an attempt to ram the ball through the defenders standing in the goal-mouth with the ball in front of them.

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All the same, showing a foreign craftsman a trade secret is a punishable crime. As many of these people lived across the river in Southwark, the Eton Ram will frequently visit cross the river to see that they are keeping up to the mark.

But the Goldsmith's connection with foreigners has another dimension - related to its ancient association with minting and money. It is too early for Goldsmiths to be directly involved in international finance, but, all the same, wherever money was exchanged, there Goldsmiths were. One particularly important place is Bruges, a great trading centre for London and Continental merchants, particularly in this heyday of export of wool and woollen fabrics. Even in 1433, it is a financial centre where the Medicis and other bankers have correspondents.

English goldsmiths would have set up shop in Bruges with their own assaying capability to gauge the quality of gold and silver coinage, and would have offered their services to Mercers and other Merchants trading through that port.

One coin that would have been particularly acceptable to them is this exceptionally-pure gold florin²⁰ minted in that lovely old walled town Lucca, in Tuscany, in one of the oldest mints in Europe. The Luccans had such minting expertise that in 1278, they were the keepers of the London mint, by the invitation of Gregory de Rokesby, Goldsmith and Mayor for that year.



The Luccans were also traders and manufacturers in silk, eventually farming silkworms themselves, and their relationship with the Mercers, through the silk trade, is well documented.

This being St Valentine's day, I am drawn to speculate about one very specific late summer's evening in Bruges in 1433. I'd like to think that it was an English Goldsmith that asked Giovanni

²⁰ The coin shown and passed around is a modern minting in gold, by the mint in Lucca.

Arnolfini, merchant son of a wealthy Lucca family, with his young lady, Giovanna, to a dinner party with a small group of Mercers, and other London merchants. Giovanna Cenami was the daughter of another Luccan magnate and perhaps she and Giovanni had been summering in their respective family's lodgings in the temperate North.

After an evening of Goldsmith hospitality, it is clear that, that night, one thing led to another. Some eight months later - and I leave you to speculate on the details of those months - their wedding portrait - the Arnolfini Wedding, now in the National Gallery, was painted by Jan Van Eyck.

You will all know it - a richly dressed young man in an enormous hat holds hands rather formally with a very pretty but very pregnant young lady in a bright green silk dress. The broader scene is shown in reflections in a convex mirror. The tenderness and technical perfection go right to the meaning of love, and I am glad to note that there is evidence that the Cenami-Arnolfini marriage was indeed productive.

Whether or not my little romance is true, Prime Warden, it illustrates the power of hospitality. Who knows what serendipities or artistic miracles may flow from this evening? In any case, we have been enormously privileged to be here to enjoy the pleasure of your hospitality and of your company, and I would like to invite all your guests to rise and to drink the health of the Goldsmiths' Company.

The Mercers (once again)²¹

Livery dinners are very special occasions, and are a wonderful way, not only to entertain our guests, but also to re-establish the links of fraternity that are so important, even in this computerised age.

At the last livery dinner, I looked forward 100 years to 2101, in the firm belief that we Mercers will transcend the technological and other changes of a rapidly changing world, because we are a strong fraternity that is focuses altruistically on people - and particularly on those whom we seek to help. At the heart of our existence, though, is a simple question - which people have asked me time and again: "Who are the Mercers? And why are they number one??"

We all know that in early medieval times mercers were traders in fine cloth and in ladies wear, but the scope of their activity ranged from the great merchants, to the itinerant traders, with their huge packs of nick-nacks. And in the middle there were the artisan mercers, whose womenfolk often helped with production while the menfolk kept the shop.

In 12th Century London, the mercer street-traders and shop-keepers used the other side of Cheapside, to the east of the 11th Century church of St Mary le Bow, in the area that came to be known as the Mercers' Row, or the Mercery.

Then, in the time of Richard I, in about 1190, something extraordinary happened near the coastline of Cyprus which was to have an incredibly profound effect on the Mercers' Company. Interestingly, the roots of that happening go back almost 600 years further, to 600AD.

The Roman occupation of Britain is a distant memory. Pope Gregory wished to convert the Saxons to Christianity, and sent his fellow-Italian Augustine to accomplish this. After a few years, he found that Augustine had set up his base in Canterbury on the

²¹ The Spring Livery Dinner, Mercers' Hall, 7th March 2002.

sheep-covered hills of the North Downs, rather in London, which was even then an active port, despite the turmoil of the times²².

Gregory wanted, not unreasonably, an archbishopric in London, and an archbishopric in York. But Augustine (perhaps influenced by his patron Ethelbert) didn't quite see it that way.

One can perhaps imagine Gregory on the blower from Rome. "Augustino, mio carissimo, why are you not with your flocke in Londinio?". Augustine answers: "Mille pardone, Papa mio, but in Londinio non e niente ma ratti, and in the port, Londonwick, non e niente ma marinaii calling out from their ships, notto e giorno, always effing this effing that. Is enough to turn a Sainte from his prayers! I prefer sheepes to shipes". The good Augustine was exaggerating, of course, but all the same, he stayed in Canterbury, and was beatified, and became a very popular saint. His successors stayed too, even though London was important enough for the first St Paul's Cathedral to be established in 604AD.

Hundreds of years passed. Turbulent times gave way to the heavy-handed order of the Normans. By the time of Henry II, the King saw the sense of having the Archbishop for Southern England in London, where a close eye could be kept on him. In 1162, Henry II considered that his worldly and extravagant Chancellor, Thomas a Becket, son of Gilbert, one-time Port-Reeve of London, would be a useful ally, and appointed him Archbishop of Canterbury.

Becket (who had been archdeacon and confidential agent to his predecessor) promptly followed the call of Augustine, and went native. Clearly to the secret amusement of the English, he disagreed on principle with virtually everything that the King wanted, including the move of the Archbishopric to London. Thomas and Henry clearly gave each other massive adrenaline surges!

All the same, Thomas' murder at the instigation of the King in 1170 shocked Christendom, and three years later, he was canonised. His stands against the King made him a very popular

²² Roman London was all but deserted, but the port of Londonwick, which was roughly where the Strand is today, was thriving.

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saint, and the Canterbury-to-London move had to be shelved forever.

Henry II died, and his son Richard I was much more interested in Crusades than sorting things out matters at home. A bit like Tony Blair.

So, in 1191, Richard I set out to the Holy Land on pilgrimage with a company of crusading soldiers from London and elsewhere. And now came the extraordinary event that I mentioned earlier.

Saint Thomas a Becket appeared to Richard in a vision, and miraculously saved him from shipwreck on Cyprus.

In thankfulness, Richard (who had lived in the shadow of the assassination) adopted St Thomas as patron for his crusade, and subsequently took the City of Acon in the Holy Land. When he returned to England, the King established and supported the Order of the Knights of St Thomas of Acon. The Hospital of St Thomas which the Saint's sister had established here, in his memory, became the principal house of the order, and a great church was built for the Hospital some years later.

St Thomas's popularity lasted throughout the Middle Ages, and the Church of St Thomas within the Hospital became a vital part of City life right up to the time of Henry VIII and the Reformation.

The Hospital was an obvious place for the Mercers to meet, and we took rooms for our meetings, and, with other Livery Companies, we had our own side-chapel in the Church. When the Merchant Adventurers were founded, they too established themselves in the Church, and I fancy that the refectory of the Hospital was used as a congenial place to chew over the affairs of the world after Mass. The Hospital was, quite simply, a wonderful meeting place for the Great and the Good, of all Guilds and callings. Many and varied were the personages whose mortal remains were laid to rest in the crypt of the Church.

So, whatever was going on, the Mercers, based in their rooms in the Hospital, were in the thick of it. Mercers bartered, traded, dreamed up expeditions, and they were also important contributors to London's civic life.

For example, there were no less than 31 Mercer Lord Mayors between 1474 and 1573, when Sir Lionel Duckett²³ was mayor.

When the Aldermen finalised the precedence of the Livery Companies in 1515, the weight of Mercers among them prevailed, so we came out top. The Lord Mayor of the time was a Grocer, and they came number two, whilst the powerful Drapers had to be content with Number Three.

Having been firmly established as Number One, the Mercers felt that it was high time that they had a Hall of their own, and in 1524, they purchased the Cheapside frontage, and created the rather fine building that you see in the Map Tapestry down in the Ambulatory.

The names of the great Mercers of the days of the Hospital resonate even today: Whittington, Colet, Gresham, Roysse, More, and more and more.

In 1538, Henry VIII dissolved the Hospital, not least because he thoroughly disapproved of the anti-king stance of St Thomas, but he sold it to the Mercers. The Mercers converted the Church into Mercers' Chapel, and of course, nothing was quite the same after that. All the same, two Halls later, here we are today, with a firm inheritance in charitable and educational works, as well as a leading role in the Livery Movement.

All of which I put down firmly to the conviviality of friends over the Refectory Table in the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon, and in early Mercers' Hall. Centuries later, Mercers' love of conviviality and hospitality explains why we are all here today, and I bid you all a hearty welcome, as have my predecessors at hundreds of such dinners.

This is a particular time to celebrate our guests, our personal friends and friends of the Company, In this momentous year when the role of women in the Company is uppermost in our minds, I particularly welcome the Ladies who have rejoined us in the Gallery. I have two particular and distinguished guests here

²³ Possibly an ancestor of my guest Bethan Howard, who is introduced later in the speech.

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tonight, both of whom deserve far fuller introductions than I have time for.

Sir Kenneth Warren and I both worked for Elliott Flight Automation in the 60s, he as a senior manager and I as a young systems engineer. We came to know each other well both as friends and near neighbours and also professionally. During those years, Ken's team established a world-leader position, among other things landing a huge sale to the USA, against unbridled domestic US competition.

Ken's interests were turning to politics, and he was elected MP for Hastings in 1970. In his parliamentary career, he became a very distinguished backbencher, and was the Chairman of the Select Committee for Trade and Industry for a number of years before retiring from politics in 1992. A man of considerable culture and energy, he was a successful entrepreneur all the while, and continues at it today. Ken is a liveryman both of the Coachmakers Company and of the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators.

Lady Warren and I both spent much of our time on the same computers in Elliotts at Borehamwood - happy days when computers talked in ticker-tape - she was much the prettiest of the young ladies who were the pioneers of their sex in the nascent field of Information Technology!

Nicky Howard²⁴ and I were both Eton Foundation Scholars in the 1950 election, so we have been friends since we were both thirteen years old. Nicky and I were not only both musicians but were also fellow mathematicians right through Oxford. Our paths separated afterwards, although our friendship remained: Nicky became over a long career an extremely distinguished member of the GCHQ, working on what can delicately be called communications, in Cheltenham and the USA.

I can say nothing of the details, but what I can tell you is that, although his calling precludes civil honours, he was the recipient of the NATO distinguished service medal, the only non-US person to receive it.

²⁴ Nicholas Howard died in February 2008. He was once described by colleagues as "one of the giants" in his field.

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Nicky and Bethan now live and farm in Cumbria, and their house, Johnby Hall, thanks to Bethan's impeccable taste and talent, is acknowledged as one of the finest Manor Houses in England.

Anne and Bethan, a special welcome to you both!!

I would now like to ask all members of the Mercers' Company to join with me in a toast to all of our guests.

The Fishmongers²⁵

Prime Warden, Fellow Masters and Prime Warden, My Lords, Gentlemen.

How could this evening be anything other than the most wonderful experience in both gastronomy and in the supping of superb wines! Prime Warden, I'd like to thank you at once, on behalf of all your guests for a spectacular treat.

To me, this was not unexpected. My dear father, a distinguished old Greshamian was, by your grace, a Governor of Greshams for many years. As a young man, I listened with envy as he described the amazing fishy feasts that he had enjoyed at Holt and in your wonderful Hall. And I feel all the more privileged to be your guest on this occasion!

Poeple ask: why were the Fishmongers entrusted with the governance of Holt Grammar School, as it was originally? Sir John Gresham, the founder of the school in 1551, was a very distinguished Mercer.

Nobody really knows the answer, but only a short while earlier Dean Colet had entrusted us with the governance of St Paul's School. And the Mercers were also busy with Mercers' School, which had come with the acquisition of the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon from Henry VIII.

So Sir John was clearly looking around for a worthy alternative: perhaps the Fishmongers came to mind because as a prominent merchant adventure he had had associations with their own international merchanting activities, and he'd have noted their distinctive presence in East Anglia, whose ports supported major fishing communities.

If it is a slight surprise to find the Fishmongers so much associated with general merchanting, the open-sea trade in fish carried with it a substantial additional cargo capacity, particularly on return journeys: salt fish comes in, and wool and other export goods go out. As evidence of the breadth of your activities, I note that one

²⁵ Fishmongers' Hall, 13th March 2002

of your members became Governor of the Wool Staple in Middelberg.

But, of course, your trade-routes led inevitably to London. London, of course, was and is an enthusiastic consumer of fish. Fresh fish spoils quickly, and good quality processing was required for decent salt fish. So London's taste for fish was and remains a tribute to the rigour -and vigour too - with which you and your forebears regulated the trade! Fish wasn't cheap - one penny for the best mackerel in Lent in about 1300.

Numerous regulations were laid down in law over the years to maintain the quality of fish, and to control the unloading at wharves or quays, and the selling in markets.

My favourite regulation is the one (dated about 1290) that stated that 'no fish were to be brought in any boat without first being landed at the Chapel on the Bridge. Fresh fish was only to be sold after Mass, and salt fish after Prime'. (That's just after dawn.)

Go back 700 years to a bright spring morning. You are attending Mass in St Thomas a Becket's Chapel on the 9th pier of the 90-year old London Bridge. A small swarm of fishing vessels have with difficulty moored themselves to the protective wooden structure around the pier - a manoeuvre only possible near high water.

This is London's first stone bridge, a magnificent feat of engineering by one Peter, a monk of St Mary Colechurch, the church on the arches on the corner of the site of today's Mercers' Hall. But it constricts the flow of water so much that the tidal race will be used to drive water-mills between the end piers to grind corn.

The ebb-tide gathers speed, and the fishing boats anxiously await the bell for the 'missa est'. Their crews mutter darkly about a regulation that could only have been devised in Brussels.

None too soon, the bell sounds, and the fishing people struggle with the heaving vessels to unload their slippery wares and lift them to bridge-level.

You yourself come out of St Thomas' chapel, newly forgiven and at peace with the world. You are immediately enveloped by fishing people jostling and cursing on their way to market. Your

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mood changes as you are hustled along in a tide of fishy humanity and angry eels.

I am glad to say that, in practice, this silly stipulation soon died, if it was ever put into effect, and the landing places, though restricted, ranged from the fish-wharf west of Queenhythe to Billingsgate. Unloading had to be done openly and by day.

Fish was to be sold in just three markets, the old fish market near Knight-Rider Street, famous, according to Stow, for fish and fish-dinners, the high-class Bridge Street Market, and the Stock Market. This last market, where the Mansion House now is, was literally called so because of the stocks in the centre of your members' stalls. No bulls and bears in this market - more likely plaice and flounders.

The Fishmongers very properly had their own Court of Law - the LeyHalmote - and would often cause transgressors to be put in these stocks. You would also provide, no doubt, handy projectiles. If you were the transgressor, an angry eel used thus didn't bear thinking about.

The Fishmongers were a physically robust lot, as Wat Tyler found out, and they certainly had their share of city fights. Indeed, their early years were marked by a love-hate relationship between their own two branches, the wet-fishmongers and the stock-fishmongers (dealing with deep-sea fish). Marriage and divorce took place between two parties with Hollywood-worthy frequency, but I am glad to say that the most recent reconciliation has lasted for no less than 466 years.

The Fishmongers were certainly very social; their importance was such that they included Royalty in their membership, and, I understand that the office of Master is reserved for the Monarch; hence the need to invent the office of Prime Warden.

Indeed, I am pleased indeed to be seated next to the Prime Warden: I had half anticipated that there would be an empty chair

for the Master, sitting Harvey-like²⁶ between us. Prime Warden, it has been my great privilege that this is not so!!

The Fishmongers' strongest Livery relationship was with the Goldsmiths. The two of you shared the great St Dunstan's feast, and I can envisage the envy of my predecessors, Prime Warden, as they saw your six wardens heading past us at speed on their way to Foster Lane. And the even greater envy as they were seen making their wobblier way back, stopping only for a drink of water at the Great Conduit outside our hall. The only medieval record of our dining with you that I know of was when 'for the continuance of good love' we dined with you at the King's Head tavern in Cheapside, following a dispute, in 1450.

Prime Warden, more recent times have nevertheless been full of tales of wonderful Fishmonger hospitality, of which the personal attestation at the beginning of my little account was one. We are all deeply grateful to the Fishmongers for their superb hospitality this evening, particularly as the venue is most definitely not the King's Head tavern, and I ask my fellow-guests to rise and drink to the Fishmongers Company and the Prime Warden.

²⁶ A reference to a celebrated 1944 play by the American playwright Mary Chase about an amiable eccentric whose best friend is a large but invisible rabbit, for whom a place is always set at table.

The Ironmongers²⁷

It has been a superb evening for your guests; we have enjoyed fine wines and delicious food, interesting company, and a warm welcome. On behalf of us all, thank you for your wonderful hospitality.

I knew that we would have a lovely time, when I learned from the charming History that was kindly pressed into my Lady Wife's hands, that, by 1509, your company 'carried out its duties of regulation and piety with quiet pleasure and efficiency; its members were important and substantial men who played tennis with abandon, and treated their women with kindness and attention'.

Kind works are reported galore, and you even managed to tame the Thorolds! Remember Thomas Thorold, Vintner - fined 100 tuns of wine for making insulting remarks about the Mayor? And later, foul-mouthed Peter Thorold, Goldsmith, fined 5 tuns? But see what happened when still later the Thorolds joined your company: Thomas Thorold, Ironmonger and his successors - all sweetness and light!!

My historical researches threw up some unexpected items. Take for example, your Masters.

We recently enjoyed the bountiful hospitality, first of the Goldsmiths, and then of the Fishmongers: two Companies without a Master - or perhaps just a ghostly one: in contrast, your Company, Master, had at one time no less than three! Why so??

In early medieval days, your important trade was regulated by two wardens and no Master, but your 1462 charter gave you the missing Master. There was also a Court of Assistants of thirteen. Where, then, did the other two masters come in?

Now, moving forward a bit, there is a question that burns in the breast of each Mercer as he marches down Ironmonger Lane: what happened to the Ironmongers? And, incidentally, why is your Hall

²⁷ The Ironmongers' Masters and Clerks Dinner, Ironmongers' Hall, 9th April 2002.

so far from ours - did we Mercers do something dreadful that deeply offended you??

My investigations suggest an answer that also explains the additional Masters.

In the early middle ages, the Ironmongers did indeed ply their wares in Ironmonger Lane. Unlike the nearly-extinct ironmongers of my youth, with kettles, nails, tools, mangles, and wash-buckets your forebears were indeed sellers of iron as a raw material; hence their early name ferroners.

The iron came in bars, nuggets and other basic shapes that had subsequently to be converted into the astonishing wealth of forms that the times called for. Horseshoes, tools, knives, weapons, nails, window frames, and so on.

A particular use relevant to my theme is in the manufacture of ships, which was originally a London craft. Ships and boats of the day of all sizes were clinker-built, with overlapping strakes held together by iron clenches a few inches from each other. There was nearly as much iron in a boat by weight as there was wood.

Ships were very important to you, because iron came to London primarily by boat. Indeed, much of your trade until the seventeenth century was with Spain, Germany, and the Baltic, whose iron and steel you traded in preference to the home product. Overseas trading was therefore an important part of the Company. The loading, weighing, and distribution of iron and steel was dirty work, best done at the quay-side.

So here we had a natural social divide: those who detested the sound of Heavy Metal stayed away from the quayside. The Yeomanry who lived with the noise, like it or not, became separated from the nobs.

By the end of the 15th century, they had a separate constitution, with two Masters. There would have been a Senior Master, who made most of the decisions, and a Junior Master who was a spare in case something dreadful happened in a dangerous trade.

The yeomanry mostly moved down to the Vintry, near the main unloading quay. The Vintners were, of course not far away, but they had their own anodyne for noise.

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Meanwhile, the senior Ironmongers continued living in or near Ironmonger Lane, where they were close to Guildhall. They also clearly liked the warm social environment, and great grub, of the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon.

Some of your members. Master, became Merchant Adventurers, bringing further relationships with the Hospital.

Generally, they stayed well away from the river. As the Seniors ran the show, your original Hall was in Fenchurch Street, almost opposite Clothworkers Hall. This placed it at nearly the remotest point in the City from the quay where iron was unloaded and sold.

The Hall was a delightful place in those unpolluted days - no sea-coal was burned in any quantity then - and it had its own herb-garden. It also had the distinction of having a real Tennis court - supposedly converted from an alley where thieves and robbers hung out. Clearly this was a game at which you excelled, but the cost to the company of the rather fragile balls must have exceeded any possible losses from the pick-pockets displaced from your alley!

Despite the social divide, the yeomanry had an important role in the Company which evolved and grew more unified over the years. There was no large-scale Livery as such until relatively recently.

And so over the centuries, your forebears balanced good fortune and bad; they dealt sadly but wisely with the ravages of kings and unfavourable trade, and enjoyed the successes and endowments of the members.

The Great Fire miraculously left your Hall nearly unscathed, although much property was lost. As there was a large quantity of gunpowder in the basement at the time, this seems unbelievably good fortune. Alas, there was a complete reversal of luck in 1917 when a bombing raid by German biplanes seriously damaged the Hall, as a result of which you upped sticks and came here.

But why so far from us friendly Mercers, or from most of the rest of us, if it came to that? My theory, born of your medieval social history, is that you are true connoisseurs of proper physical

separation. You also knew that you would enjoy a good walk to dinner with us or others of your Great XII friends, and you would like the calmness of mind imbued by a good walk as you roll happily home from a great dinner.

And you knew that we too would appreciate the calmness of mind that we, your friends, would enjoy as we rolled happily home from your feasts. And this bring me to contemplate again the wonderful hospitality that we have enjoyed here tonight. Master - thank you very much for a lovely evening, and I invite my fellow guests to rise with me and toast the health of the Ironmongers!!

The Old Mercers' Club²⁸

Many thanks for your kind toast to the Mercers and your guests, and for a very pleasurable evening enjoying your warm hospitality. You have made all us very welcome - just as welcome as on my very first Old Mercers Dinner, when, as Renter Warden, I came into the buzz of conversation in the Entrance Hall, and was warmly greeted with the words: "Thank heavens you have come! You must be the musician!!"

(Humphrey gave me permission to tell this story.)

In addition, you have given us a great meal, fine wine, and excellent company in our familiar and much-loved surroundings. We are all deeply appreciative!

I've been asked to tell you what we Mercers have been up to. This year I have often emphasised that our deep roots lead into the future, and that's my theme this evening!

I am delighted to say that we will again admit women to full membership of the Company after a gap of more than two hundred years. Women will be able to become members of the Court of Assistants, and we will doubtless have a lady Master in due course.

In doing this, we reflect the non-politically-correct view that women are different, and bring their own wisdom and experience.

This means that I can now visit St Paul's Girls' School without fear of the girls sinking their metaphorical teeth into my ankle!

Which brings us round to schools. The three St Paul's Schools have done very well indeed with exceptional inspection reports.

Abingdon School has a new Head Master, who has made a fine start. We are marking this by helping the School to redevelop its Arts Centre.

Dauntseys is doing really well, and the pupils are enormously enjoying their new library and IT centre. Our two sixth-form

²⁸ The Old Mercers' Dinner, Mercers' Hall, 16th April 2002.

colleges, Peter Symonds and Collyers, have excellent results, and I had the pleasure of opening Peter Symonds' new Sports Centre just a week ago.

Thomas Telford School continues to do wonderfully well under its newly-knighted head-master Sir Kevin Satchwell. Its clone at Walsall, our new City Academy, is progressing, with joint sponsorship from the Company and Thomas Telford School itself. The first Head Mistress of the new school has been appointed.

We are now encouraged to consider sponsoring a second City Academy.

We have been working with our latest Cluster member - the Royal Ballet School - on a revised academic curriculum - essential training for people in a career that will probably not sustain them for a life-time's work.

I could say much more, but for the stopwatch in the hands of Humphrey. But be sure that we try to keep our finger on the pulse of education. As a part of this, we are very actively working on long term plans for the St Paul's Schools.

Humphrey asked me to mention some of the other things that we are doing. First, I'll mention the 28-unit sheltered housing scheme that we are planning to build at the far end of the garden of Trinity Hospital, Greenwich.

Another exciting venture is the Refugees Doctors scheme. We are helping to fund the re-training of doctors coming as refugees from other countries, so that they can gain the necessary qualifications to practice in this country. They will then be able to help their own people over here. Curiously, the State gives no help.

The last Mercer engagement that I had was a concert given by the Orpheus Centre, which helps highly disabled young people who are interested in working in the performing arts. It is run by the admirable Richard Stilgoe.

The young people put on a musical show of more than an hour. Perhaps most notable was the song, performed by an able-bodied performer, which had been written by a young lady who was so disabled she could hardly change a facial expression, let alone speak. She had tapped out the song, note by note on the machine

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that allowed her to communicate. I felt very proud to be part of an organisation that can help with wonderful things like this.

Now for the history bit. I can make a case for our educational roots going back to the medieval church of St Mary Colechurch.

This little church was located over a pub, just on the corner of this site - in fact where our Court room now is. Its rectors were powerful and influential. Some were also Masters of the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon, whose site later became Mercers' Hall. Two remarkable things came out of St Mary Colechurch: London Bridge and Mercers' School.

The first stone London Bridge - the one with the buildings on it - was built by Peter, a monk of St Mary Colechurch, and survived into the 19th century. Its brilliant design shaped London's colourful history.

Many people believe, as I do, that Mercers' School evolved from one of the four Grammar Schools established in 1447 by the rectors of four London Parishes, including John Neal, Rector of St Mary Colechurch. Neal was also at the time Master of the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon, a social and business centre for the whole City, and the Mercers' spiritual and physical home.

Neal's Grammar School was a forerunner of many of England's ancient schools including the five within our Cluster.

After the dissolution, the School was relocated in the no-longer-required Mercers' Chapel. This chapel was part of the first Mercers' Hall, which shared the Hospital's Cheapside frontage with St Mary Colechurch (and the pub). The school became known as Mercers' Chapel Grammar school, and later just Mercers' School.

I have here a little book, dated 1819 entitled 'A Guide to Lyric Verse for the Scholars of Mercers' Chapel Grammar School', and I am looking for a volunteer to translate this gem of text from the book into Latin Sapphic verse: "O God, favorably [sic] hear me when praying betimes in the morning, for I, cherishing no hope, will call upon thy name with holy prayer early in the morning, even before the Eastern beam".

I am sure that such piety is reflected in you all this evening!

Both the medieval London Bridge and Mercers' School lasted well over half a millennium each. Their passings were painful and much lamented, but both led to positive new directions.

The 50-ft wide Victorian London Bridge replaced the 20-ft wide carriageway of the old bridge. City communications improved hugely.

The closure of Mercers School removed a grave financial burden from the Company. We were then able to give closer attention to our other schools.

We invented the concept of the Mercers' Cluster and we developed forward-looking policies of school governance.

Each Cluster school, state-funded or independent, now stands on its own two financial feet. We no longer give any funds to cover normal school expenses.

This allows us to focus our aid on those new buildings and facilities that will do the most for our schools. We cross-fertilise ideas, and our own deep experience allows us to pioneer, as with Telford and Walsall.

When London Bridge was demolished, it yielded the bones of Peter of Colechurch, in the foundations of the Chapel to St Thomas that he built on its 9th pier. Mercers School gave us a living memorial in the Mercers' School Memorial Professorship of Commerce, a post by chance held by my dear brother Daniel.

But for me as well as you this is a moment to celebrate Mercers' School as it lives on in the spirit of its Old Boys. You have always made the Master and his fellow wardens, and all your other guests most welcome, and the buzz of friendship and bonhomie is as strong as ever. It is also a moment to celebrate the part that Mercers' School played as the foundation of all that the Mercers are now doing in education.

The Haberdashers²⁹

On this magnificent occasion, we were guests at the very first function at the Haberdashers' new Hall.

It is a great pleasure and a terrific privilege to be among your very first guests in your magnificent new Hall. It is a wonderful building, and I know that you will be very happy in it! And I'm delighted that you like the table-centre - I know that we are pleased with it, and hope that it will be a great pleasure to you also.

Your Livery Hall fills me with particular approval as an old engineer. I'm a connoisseur of roof-trusses, and the elegant simplicity of the design is very pleasing, with the panelled and braced lattice structural elements.

And thank you very much for wining and dining us so well. The Clerk gave me a preview of the Hall on Friday, and no one is more aware than I of just how much has been accomplished in the last few days - you are particularly to be congratulated for having succeeded in putting on this historic party!!

Master, you have spoken about your halls. Perhaps I may add to this by saying that the matter of Halls is one of many historic aspects in which the Mercers and the Haberdashers histories run nearly parallel. Your first Hall was dated 1478 (a little earlier than ours), and was a few hundred yards away, in Maiden's Lane, which is now Gresham Street. Watch out for that Maiden! Goldsmith's Hall is opposite what is now Schroder House - no coincidence, I think?!

That hall was destroyed in the Great Fire, as ours was. Rebuilding started soon after the fire, and the building was quickly available for use - perhaps too quickly. Herbert, who wrote the 1838 history of the Twelve Great Companies that has been my mainstay, said about this Hall:

²⁹ The Haberdashers' Masters and Clerks Dinner, Haberdashers Hall (the new one), 18th April 2002.

"It has nothing to merit description; indeed it much needs rebuilding."

He was right. In 1820, the kitchen chimney collapsed, just before the Publication Dinner. The day was saved by your friends the Goldsmiths, and there was major rebuilding in the 1850s. A fire in 1864, covered by insurance, gave a further opportunity to put things to right.

Clearly, we used the same cowboy builders. In 1813, the City Surveyor sent the Mercers a letter pointing out that parts of our Hall were 'dangerously defective', and that unless we did something about it, steps would necessarily be taken, unpleasant in their consequences.'

We took the hint, and came very close to knocking the hall down and starting again; in any case, the Hall was extensively rebuilt in the 1880s, but still had problems.

Your Hall, like ours, was destroyed in the blitz. I haven't found how you felt about it, but in our case, the sadness at losing a much-loved building was tempered with a sense of relief that we could forget dry-rot, death-watch beetles and inferior materials, and build a hall to enjoy without being badgered by the City Surveyor.

Financial pressures, I think, led to both of us building our post-war premises to designs that integrated hall and commercial space - in hindsight all too a temporary a solution. For you, the sands ran out a few years ago, and you bravely took the plunge. So here we all are!

We Mercers don't wholly control our own hour-glass, so we don't quite know when our sands will run out. But the moment is a few years off.

There are many other relationship between our companies, but the first that I must deal with our alleged Paternity, so that we can avoid the attentions of the Child Support Agency. It's worse: the Master of the Feltmakers alleged that we Mercers were their Grandfather, with you as the Father. So we're both potentially in the mire.

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We plead innocence! True: the Mercers did originally cover haberdashery. Early haberdashers, that is, until the mid thirteenth century, were Mercers. But with growing confidence, a desire for independence grew.

So you emerged from the Mercers like Eve from Adam's rib. Birth pains had nothing on it - and you emerged as a Terrible Teen. (You probably had even more pointed views about us.)

In later medieval times, we were reconciled and had a closer mercantile relationship. The pre-dissolution Church of St Thomas had a Haberdashers' side-chapel and a side-chapel for St Catherine, showing that your people were often in the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon. At one time, you sought to be called Merchant Haberdashers, but, alas, our friends at Number 6 (or was it 7 at the time?) would have nothing of it.

But it's clear that your real interest was in the supply of the small goods that everybody wanted, from toy whistles to knives to the latest fashion items for ladies, particularly the latter.

Yes, Eve was certainly always on your mind. Just consider that Maiden again!



The Mercer Maiden is thought to have been the sign of early medieval Mercers as they traded



on Cheapside. Her image wore the late fashions.

Now, look at these two rather similar maidens. Which is the Mercer Maiden?

The one in colour is actually the St Catherine on your magnificent Grant of Arms document dated 1446³⁰. The other is transcribed

³⁰ By kind permission of Dr David Bartle, Archivist, The Haberdashers' Company. The image from which this is taken is given as an Appendix.

from the 1425 Mercers' seal³¹, and both reflect current fashionable hair-styling.

Your intuition into Eve's mind was prodigious, which is curious because your post-Tudor forebears were distinctly puritan in viewpoint.

But I suspect that they knew that the tut-tutting that went on about ladies and their use of haberdashery was a shade too enthusiastic.

For example, the widow of a Haberdasher, one Thomasine, married a non-conformist Pastor, causing dismay and later havoc among his flock. Her late husband had clearly indulged her with his wares.

The Pastor's brother did an in-depth study of the situation, and compiled a list of Thomasine's sins.

"First the wearing of a long busk [corset] after the fashion of the world.

"Second. Wearing of the long white breast after the fashion of young dames, and so low she wore it, as the world call them kodpeece breasts.

"Third. Whalebones in the bodies of petivotre [I think this means corset], against nature, being as the Phisitians affirme hinderers of conceiving or procreating children.

"Fourth. Great sleeves sett out with whalebones, which the world call"

[The brother couldn't bring himself to use the word, but it may have had something to do with keeping things up.]

And down to:

"Tenth. The painted Hipocritical brest, shewing as if there were some special workes, and in truth nothing but a shadow, contrary to modesty and sobriety."

³¹ From "I Sing of a Maiden" by Dr Anne Sutton, by kind permission.

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What innocent detachment the Pastors' brother had as he gazed on his sister-in-law's bosom!

Thomasine's eleventh sin points to male fashions, to which the Haberdashers also catered - particularly in caps and hats;

"Bodies [bodice] tied to the petticoat with points, as men do their doublets to their hose."

There is a hilarious picture dated 1450 in the Haberdashers' history, showing men and women in the style of the day.

Permit me the liberty of re-garbing you in the style of the picture.

Off with your trousers, gentlemen. Those among us with long Johns must remove those too.

Off with jackets and shirts, socks and shoes. On with a slashed tunic. It curves elegantly down to join your broad doublet, which flairs out like a tutu.

Now you can put on your leg-length hose, which you tie with points to your doublet, as the Pastor's brother describes. Unfortunately I have no further details for that general area.

You may now put on long pointy shoes and you may - nay, must - cover your hair (or lack of it) with an elegant felt hat. What a stunning sight we now make for the ladies to admire!

The felt headwear, of course, brings us back to the fashion-conscious Feltmakers. To say that their birth from the Haberdashers was uncomfortable is to understate the case. It was B-Movie stuff, with the Feltmakers, alien-like, biting their way out of their mother-company's belly.

Any Child Support Agency person witnessing such a thing would retire in horror, and need counselling. I think you're safe, Master!

Such heady stuff apart, Master, the Haberdashers were reputable and reliable people.

Your puritan zeal led to the founding of schools in such benighted parts of the country as Monmouthshire, Shropshire, and even Hertfordshire, and led to the magnificent establishments that you have today.

Your history makes familiar reading as with, the rest of us, you struggled with royal demands for cash, adverse business circumstances and envy.

Your life, as we would expect, focussed around your Hall, and this leads me to my concluding remarks.

The closeness of our experience gives me as a Mercer a particularly warm feeling about tonight. I am privileged indeed to be the one to lead the welcome to a new era, on behalf of us all.

So I ask all of your guests to rise to drink the health of the Worshipful Company of Haberdashers as it starts its new life in this wonderful Hall.

The Watermen and lightermen³²

Many thanks. Master, for your kind words of introduction. I was intrigued by what you told me during lunch about your part in the Boat Race - the most exciting one that I can remember - and about your warmth towards St Paul's School.

What a splendid way to celebrate St George's Day!! It has been a superb lunch, with delicious wines, and, above all good company. Many thanks on behalf of all your guests for your hospitality. And, of course, it is an enormous pleasure to enjoy your historic hall and all its wonderful art and artifacts.

I feel particularly pleased to be here, as I'm an old sailor from boy-hood, with the smell of salt, tarred ropes, and the varnish of clinker-built boats ingrained deep in my nostrils.

The Mercers, of course, would, as major merchants, have been frequent customers of yours. It's a romantic thought that a Mercer in days long past, on a business trip with his fellows, would perhaps regard a journey in a Waterman's boat as having the social value of today's round of golf.

But the river has always been a tricky place, particularly as a result of the medieval London bridge - the one with buildings on it. So, even on a beautiful day like today, the journey may well not have had the soothing calmness of the golf-course.

Peter of Colechurch, who completed the bridge in 1209, was a monk of St Mary Colechurch, the little church over the arches on the corner of Cheapside and Old Jewry. The place where the Church was is now the Mercers' Courtroom. We therefore have a somewhat paternal view of the bridge.

It was a remarkable construction, but it constricted the flow of water by about 40%. This meant that at low water springs, you could have a difference of water level of nearly six foot between the upstream and the downstream sides of the bridge, and your predecessors, I'm told, used to enjoy frightening customers by

³² The Watermen's and Lightermen's St George's Day Lunch, Watermen's Hall 23rd April 2002.

shooting the rapids. Spectators used to gather on the bridge to enjoy the looks of terror on their faces.

Bolder souls would enjoy shooting arrows at a fixed target from a boat, as it sped through the torrent between the piers. You were the white-water experts of the time!

The bridge actually helped your business by compelling timid customers to take a different boat upstream and downstream of the bridge. Two watermen were employed where one would have been otherwise.

But it certainly required you to be fine seamen (in the skill sense). Lightermen taking loads from downstream to the quays to the west of bridge had to handle - and even harness - the hazards of the bridge.

My verbal pictures are nothing compared to what you will see when you visit the fascinating Docklands Museum after it opens in September, not far from Canary Wharf. I had the pleasure of a preview the other day, and was bowled over by the skill and imagination that has been put into it. The Museum has captured not only the spirit of the Thames as a waterway, as your people would have known it intimately - but also the huge physical scope of London as the busiest port in the world as once it was. An experience for young and old to enjoy!

Master, this museum really brought home to me the historic role of your predecessors, and makes me, on behalf of all your guests, doubly appreciative of your hospitality this afternoon.

You eloquently talked about your enthusiasm for the future role that the River will play in London life, and the part that your Company may play in this.

So now I give you the toast to the Company of Watermen and Lightermen of the River Thames, root and branch may it continue and flourish for ever!

The Salters³³

This is the last of the Great Twelve Masters' and Clerks' Dinners, and has a particularly relaxed atmosphere. Anything can happen!

It has been a great end-of-term party! A superb occasion in your beautiful Hall, with great food and wine, good company, and a wonderful welcoming speech. On behalf of all your guests, many thanks for your splendid hospitality!

Master, you started your speech in verse. I'm afraid that I have to reveal far too dark and awful a secret for me even to attempt to respond in kind.

It all starts, appropriately enough, with a party. In 1547, we are told, your predecessors held one of the dinners for which you have been justly noted. Being a rather sober-minded company, though, it was the custom that the Beadle would remove the flagons of ale, claret and madeira from those tables within your Hall (then in Bread Street) when he judged that the yeomanry had had enough. The following morning, one of the young men working in the Hall was found not just stoned but dead. He had evidently been testing the returned flagons to see if they had any liquor left in them - and they had!

The Beadle advised the two Wardens (the Master was a subsequent refinement), who sent word to the poor lad's widowed mother. She arrived at the Hall very distraught, and begged the first person she saw there, by chance one John Robson, Salter, that the Company do all that it could to restore her son.

Robson was a friend of Dr John Dee, alchemist, cartographer, philosopher, and Mercer, who became a trusted adviser to Queen Elizabeth I. He was the son of Roland Dee, a senior Mercer.

Now Salters were practical souls, and didn't have much truck with alchemy, but in his long talks with Dee, Robson had previously become convinced that the Salters were mystical keepers of some of the dark arts of preservation. After all, 'sal sapit omnia'.

³³ The Salter's Masters and Clerks Dinner, Salters' Hall, 23rd April 2002.

And then this incident came along.

Of course, nothing could be done for the lad, but Robson persuaded the mother that her son's body could be preserved, and there was a possibility that, although it was beyond the current technology, future alchemists could perhaps revive him. And he persuaded the Wardens to let him go ahead with the action that followed.

The young man's body was placed in salt in a large barrel that was then placed behind other barrels in the cellars of the Hall, awaiting future resuscitation. An explanatory parchment was apparently pinned to the top of the barrel.

All this was kept pretty quiet, and most of the protagonists died, except Robson and Dee, who, we know, died in 1607. Years passed, and the whole affair was forgotten.

Unfortunately, in 1598, Salters Hall was completely destroyed by fire. The famous barrel was charred, but undamaged, although a piece of parchment on its top was illegible.

It was decided to open up the barrel, and the result was rather a horrid surprise. Of course, Robson, who was then about 70, heard of this, and without letting on his own part in the matter, suggested a quiet burial as for other ancient bones. The Salter Wardens hated fuss, and concurred.

Now, there was a small graveyard to the north side of Mercers' Hall, which had been the graveyard for the monks of the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon. It lay on the south side of what is now Frederick's Place, and was overgrown with weeds, pending sale by the Mercers.

It had traditionally been used to re-bury the occasional human bones that were exposed in nearby building excavations, as happened from time to time. There was also a rumour that it was the place where the Church of St Thomas' magnificent Corpus Christi – a statue of the body of the dead Christ - had been buried following its mysterious disappearance half a century before. Dr Dee would have known all about this.

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At any rate, the mummified body was carried the few hundred yards from Salters Hall to Mercers' Hall to be buried in a weedy corner, and apparently no one's suspicions were aroused.

The plot was sold, but re-acquired by the Mercers in 1949, following destruction of the Hall. Subsequent excavation for the new Hall resulted in the discovery of the magnificent Body of the Dead Christ that now rests adjacent to our Chapel, and also turned up many old bones, including one with a strange efflorescence.

It was only when the life of Dr John Dee was being investigated in recent years that the probable sequence of events, as I have described it, came out.

And now for the dark and awful secret. It is this. Everything that I have told you in this speech is a complete fabrication, including this statement.

This gives me enough leeway to emphasise, without inconsistency, that the Salters were - and are - very good at parties. This particular one, the last of Great Twelve Masters and Clerks mutual dinings, is a wonderful and memorable example, and I am glad to say that I am convinced that there will be no gruesome consequences!

So I have great pleasure in asking everybody to rise with me to drink to the Salters Company with its maids, wives and widows, coupled with the name of the Master.

Dr John Dee was a real person, and was indeed a Mercer. The historical framework is, I think, reasonably adequate, but the remainder is, of course, a spoof!

The Associated Companies³⁴

This is the Mercers' dinner given for the Associated Companies (and now attended by representatives of many other organisations with charitable, educational, or business relationships); I spoke at one other, the Mason's dinner (see page 14). In brief, the Cooks, Broderers, and Masons were our partners in the James I's Irish Plantations.

The Map Tapestry in the Ambulatory, shows the 1522 hall, which was built on the Cheapside frontage of the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon. The hospital was at that time the centre of the cult of St Thomas a Becket, and was a social meeting place for the Great and the Good in the civic and mercantile life of the City of London. I'll pick up that thread later.

A curious feature of the hall [as depicted in the tapestry] is the battlements that are clearly evident on its parapet. I think that they may represent a piece of symbolism that still seems to apply: the Mercers are careful about their external relationships, and like parapets to keep their heads behind. At the same time, we Mercers embrace what we do with enthusiasm, and we enjoy warm relationships with those with whom we conduct our affairs.

Under those battlements, there is therefore a very genuinely warm welcome for our friends. But we are not so pleased with direct assaults on our time and energy,

So you can imagine the situation when King James I's Plantation Scheme hit the Hall in 1609.

The Master, William Higges, is sitting in the Parlour of the Hall, enjoying a modest breakfast of cold capon, a lamb chop or two, several boiled eggs, bread and butter, washed down with a light claret, when the Clerk, Thomas Dalby Senior, comes in, beetle browed.

"Master, he has gone midsummer mad." the Clerk says. (This is the bowdlerised version.)

³⁴ The Associated Companies Dinner given by the Mercers; Mercers' Hall, 9th May 2002.

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"Who has?" cries the Master in alarm.

"I beg your pardon, sire: the King. He requires us to go off and farm a huge boggy estate, in Ulster, of all places, using his own countrymen to run it. We will have to subscribe about half of what we own! And they'll put us in prison if we don't."

I can perhaps convey the shock by translating this into the modern equivalent.

The Clerk, bursts in to the Staff Dining Room where I am enjoying a modest breakfast of ... well never mind the details.

"Master," he cries; "we've just had a letter from Tony Blair telling us that we have to buy up and clear most of Burnley, and turn it into an ostrich farm. And we have to use Labour activists to run it. It'll cost us tens of millions."

"They're nuts", I cry. (This is the bowdlerised version.) "They can't make us do that!"

"It's no good Master," the Clerk replies. "They say they'll make us non-executive directors of dodgy companies if we don't."

Master Higges survived his own apoplexy, and a summary of the subsequent tale of the Irish plantations, and our teaming up with the Masons, Cooks, and Broderers is to be found in your menu.

The long and the short of it was that we dragged our feet at first, but, when it came down to the point, we and our team were, overall, kindly landlords, even if we never saw anything like a decent return on a huge investment. Particularly considering the many insurrections, and the anxieties and dramas that turbulent Ulster gave us all.

I believe that it is unique³⁵ among the Twelve Great companies that the relationship with our respective associated companies has survived and is celebrated even today. Our Associated Companies Dinners are unique in the city.

³⁵ Other Great Twelve companies have taken relatively recently to celebrating their "Associated Companies".

I put this down to the unique social environment within which the Mercers Company grew up in its first few hundred years, when we lived within the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon. We rubbed shoulders with the people who were the soul of the city in the Hospital's informal environment, and we learned how to form and maintain deep social relationships.

Henry VIII closed the Hospital in 1538 and the Mercers took over almost all of its property, including the Church of St Thomas, which became our Chapel. By 1609, the memories of the hospital would have faded as one generation succeeded another. But the traditions lasted on, and are still with us in essence, after nearly four hundred years of evolution. All the same, I hope that you'll agree that our cooking is a bit better now. (Wines, too.)

Tonight's dinner is a wonderful way to celebrate not only our ancient associations, but our modern ones also, too numerous to be rehearsed individually. The Associated Companies are well-represented, and they have a very special welcome. But we also have Masters and Clerks from some of the Livery Companies who have been my gracious hosts earlier in the Master's year.

As befits our deep interest in education, we have invited the heads of our schools to be with us, and also the presidents of some of the alumni associations.

Representatives of many of the charities with which we work closely are guests this evening.

We have guests from the Navy, Army and Air Force, to celebrate our special ties with Her Majesty's Armed Services.

I bear apologies for absence from the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, with whom I spent Monday and Tuesday this very week in and around Dungannon, Northern Ireland. They are providing, for a only a few more weeks now, a courteous but firm presence in a beautiful country accursed with irreconcilable sectarian tensions. The Fusiliers showed me just about every aspect of their working life and of their relationships with the people around them. I am deeply impressed with their cheerful professionalism; and the visit was not only fascinating but a strong reminder of the debt that we owe our armed services in these difficult times.

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As I indicated earlier, this is a very special evening for us Mercers, and a way of thanking you for the pleasure that we derive in our relationships with you all. I hope that you have had a most enjoyable evening.

And so, I would ask my fellow Mercers to rise and to drink to the health of the Associated Companies: the Masons, Cooks, and Broderers, and to all our other guests.

The Leathersellers

Many thanks. Master, for your very kind words of introduction, and I know that I speak for all of us when I say that we have all been superbly entertained, with great food, legendary wine, and excellent company. Thank you for a wonderful end-of-term party!

I learned from past Master Mercers that this is a very very special occasion. Indeed, one of my predecessors said that he had arrived at the dinner not knowing what he was going to say, and anticipated saying a graceful 'thank you' and sitting down after the toast. He would probably have been loved for such brevity, but, no! The whole event filled him with such flowing inspiration that humour and wit poured from him. History does not relate whether the tap was turned off in time, but as he speaks of that occasion with pleasure, I am sure that he got it absolutely right.

You have a fascinating history, and are still concerned with a wonderful material whose basic mode of preparation was discovered thousands of years ago, and whose usefulness still continues.

The word 'leather' itself seems timeless. Look it up in Erik Partridge's wonderful book on word origins, and you find only closely related words that extend right back into our linguistic history.

Quite clearly, we Mercers had a lot to do with your wares, not only for personal use, but also in our own product.

In early medieval times, the main commercial area was Cheapside. Your predecessors had stalls in the centre of Cheapside near St Mary le Bow, while we sold fashionable ladies' wear on nearby stalls and shops on the south side of Cheapside. I have no doubt that we chatted and that trade took place on laces, fastenings, and many other matters of haut couture.

Your people worshipped at the Church of St Thomas, and they certainly enjoyed the bustling social life of the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon within which the Church stood. This remarkable and influential establishment was originally set up, with the support of Richard I, as a minor order to honour the popular

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London Saint St Thomas a Becket. It occupied much of the site of today's Mercers' Hall as well as the area around Frederick's Place. We Mercers had rooms in the Hospital in pre-Tudor times, and we would undoubtedly have downed more than the odd noggin of ale with your people in the Hospital refectory.

Our rooms served as a Hall for the Mercers until as late as 1522, when we acquired the Cheapside frontage for our own first real Hall.

Your own first Hall, of course, was just south of London Wall, near Moorgate, and was only a few minutes walk from the Hospital. The area was originally shared with the Ironmongers.

I don't know whether it was the delicate sensitivities of the Monks of the Hospital, or ours, in response to the evil smells of leather-making in the area of your hall, or to the noise of heavy metal from the Ironmongers, but I suspect that we were a wee bit relieved when both you and the Ironmongers moved out to the Eastern part of the city when the opportunity arose.

We acquired the Hospital site in 1542 a few years after it had been closed down by Henry VIII, and we expanded our Hall into most of the site. The Church of St Thomas became the Mercers' Chapel, releasing our previous chapel on the frontage for use as the Mercers' Chapel School.

Your similar opportunity came when the Nunnery of St Helens came on the market after a fate similar to that of the Hospital. You may have been impressed by the possibilities that we had been taking advantage of in the Hospital grounds, but I suspect that your people already knew the Nunnery.

The nuns had been a jolly lot, who had to be rebuked for waving over the screen of the Church of St Helens, or even for kissing parishioners. On another occasion they had to be forbidden dancing and revelling except at Christmastime. How understandable, Master, that your predecessors would have had a soft spot for the Nunnery!³⁶

³⁶ One of the Leathersellers advised me afterwards that recent excavation revealed a tunnel between the nunnery and a nearby monastery!

At any rate, there you set up your second and subsequent Halls, although I have no record of what became of the nuns. Do you include them among your ancestors, I wonder??

With the demise of all the hanky panky, there is no doubt that it became a very nice part of town. My famous predecessor Sir Thomas Gresham, who built the Royal Exchange and founded Gresham College, set up his huge mansion, Gresham House, just across the Road, and when he died aged only 60 he was buried in St Helens church.

Alas, poor Sir Thomas does not now occupy his magnificent tomb: in 1890, the Victorians conveyed his remains, with 1000 other bones, unceremoniously to Ilford. [I learn, Master Merchant Taylor, that St Helens is one of your livings - so perhaps you can help bring poor Sir Thomas back?] And Gresham House, the original home both of Gresham College and of the Royal Society, is no more, courtesy of NatWest.

Meanwhile, your connection with the trade continued.. At this point, I had planned a light-hearted story about leatherselling, but, when I searched the Internet for leather jokes, all I could find was a plethora of tales on what I can delicately call the 'recreational use of leather'.

Then I found something about a member of your Company, admitted in 1623, one Praise-god Barebones. Here I quote verbatim from my source: 'While he attended to the stock and trade common to the broad functional demands made on leather in his time, his substantial property and comfort came from his successes in purveying assorted harnesses and unexpected devices (to be worn by people of a particular inclination) crafted of leather in the service of a certain aesthetic founded in sensual and 'unusual' erotic applications, discussions of which were not included in genteel conversations.'

At this point, I felt bound (if that is the right word, Master) to turn to more main-stream aspects of your Company.

A study of your history, Master, takes us through the roller-coaster ride of bad times and good, with property, particularly from the St Helens estate, being the power-source that kept the wheels turning. The insatiable demands of kings for money, the

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vicissitudes of trade were all ultimately surmounted by wise stewardship, permitting the admirable work that you do today with education and old people, and giving very large sums of money to charity causes, particularly to core funding.

The issue of stewardship of inherited wealth reminds me of the gentleman who decided that it was time to take active steps to avoid death duties. So he settled his property on his son, and set out to live the 7 years necessary to ensure that the gift was not dutiable.

Unfortunately, as the June of the 7th year arrived, he took a summer chill and died, with just three months to go.

The family doctor, a very old friend, who had been there to attend the dying man, suggested a solution to the son and his family. "Put the old boy in your deep-freeze," he said, "and bring him out in October, by which the seven years will have gone by with a bit of a margin. When he has thawed, call me, and I'll sign the death certificate."

So that is exactly what they did. Unfortunately, the old doctor also died in the course of the summer, but it was too late to do anything other than pursue the original plan.

October came, the body came out of the deep freeze, and the necessary ingenuity was used to thaw out the old man. The young partner of the old family doctor was called. An autopsy was carried out, and all was pronounced satisfactory.

The young doctor later called on the son and said: "Well, that was OK, but there was one thing that puzzled me. When we opened him up, we found fresh asparagus in his stomach." "Oh, that's easily explained," said the son, "we do have a deep-freeze, you know!"

It remains for me only to thank you again. Master, for a wonderful evening, and I ask all my fellow guests to rise and join me in a toast to the Leathersellers' Company and its Master!

Welcoming the Ladies³⁷

A special welcome to all of you ladies who have been admitted today to this wonderful fraternity of ours. And a welcome, too, to all sponsors and fathers who have been an important part of this happy and historic day. And a special thank you also to the staff who have orchestrated the day with such precision!

One great sadness is that John Ounsted, a senior and very distinguished Mercer, is not with us on a day which has seen three of his four daughters and his niece admitted. John is recovering from a mild stroke that occurred 10 days ago, and we wish him all best wishes in his recovery³⁸.

If you new Members read all the material that you have been given, you will have some clue as what the Mercers are all about. But perhaps I can start you off with a little historical sketch.

In early medieval days. Mercers traded on the other side of Cheapside. The Mercer Maiden in our crest was, I believe, the emblem of the fashionable women to which our retail trade catered. Women provided many of the skills that created the products sold in our stalls.

Our forebears took rooms to serve as a meeting-place, on this very site, in the Hospital of St Thomas a Becket, that popular London saint. The hospital became an important social centre for the great and the good of London, and, with their connections. Mercers became a brotherhood of powerful merchants. The artisan and street-trading side continued but declined, although women still became Mercers if their husbands died, so as to protect their livelihoods.

Henry VIII dissolved the Hospital in 1538, but sold it back to the Mercers, who had, sixteen years before, built their first hall on the Cheapside frontage, complete with 'ladies' chamber'.

³⁷ Welcoming speech given at lunch following the historic admission of 24 women as Mercers on the 8th July 2002.

³⁸ John died on 2nd December 2007.

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By the time of Elizabeth I, the artisan side of the business had almost vanished, but the Mercers had become wealthy through the benefactions of their wealthy merchant members.

The old concept of fraternity balanced mercantile interests with interests in the Church, education, old people and other good works. These benefactions substantially came from a concern for their souls - probably quite justified - but in many respects, the ethos of the Company as it now is began then.

By the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign, there were six Mercer schools, of which all but one still continue within our care. Demands by Kings for money, the Great Fire, and other disasters brought the Company low by the 1750s. But the imperative to survive pulled the Company through.

By 1800, the Company had recovered. Alas, women had little part in civic life in those days, and the last active woman member before today was admitted in 1797. You may say that male chauvinism reigned - but perhaps, more charitably, the Mercers simply reflected the attitudes of their times.

The mid-19th century brought more acute social sensitivity, and the Livery companies had to adjust to new responsibilities. Renewed interest in education brought about the creation of the City and Guilds Institute, and, closer to home, led to the foundation, in 1904, of St Paul's Girls' School, that bastion of highly-educated women!

The issue of inclusion of women in the Company surfaced from time to time in the 20th Century, most recently in 1977, when the Court of Assistants turned down a proposal to admit women on a single casting vote. It was only a consideration of the size of the Company that caused the proposal to fail.

This year, the Company voted overwhelmingly to admit women, with equal opportunities to become members of the Livery, members of the Court of Assistants, and eventually Master.

We know that the Company will grow, but we all welcome the special skills and talents, and the renewed vitality, that women will bring to the Company. Unlike the Politically Correct, we recognise the different qualities of women.

The growing size does mean that there is a price to be paid: the livery - that is those with full membership - cannot increase indefinitely in size, so members – men and women alike – will now have to go through a selection process for the first time before they can become liverymen. There will be pain, but we think that we 'are worth it'.

The expansion of the Company will call for new social arrangements, and new methods of working; I think that Information Technology will be increasingly relevant. The Company will change in lots of ways - some beyond our today's anticipation.

You are thus fore-runners in a new age for the Company. There are exciting times ahead for all of us. As Master Mercer, I wish each one of you good fortune and happiness in every aspect of your membership of this great Company of Mercers, the Premier Livery Company of the City of London.

I have asked my dear aunt [and godmother] Mana Sedgwick, a Member as of today, to say a few words. Mana is daughter, niece, sister, mother, aunt and great-aunt of Mercers - who more appropriate to speak for you?

And so she did! Mana, who was 93 at the time, spoke brilliantly, without a note, telling of her childhood awareness of the Mercers' Company, and her purchase as a present for her father (my grandfather), of a 9d plate ornamented with a Mercer Maiden (on 2d a week pocket money), and speaking of the honour and obligations of a Company of which she had never conceived of being a member!

Mana Sedgwick died on 11th December 2007.

Appendix 1 - The Mansion House Speech³⁹

The Mansion House Dinner given by the Lord Mayor to Masters and Clerks of all the Livery Companies is a major event in their year. It is a very grand occasion, in which the after-dinner speakers (first the Lord Mayor⁴⁰, then the Master Mercer in response, and finally the Master Grocer) are announced by fanfares of trumpets. The Master Mercer's speech is traditionally on a serious note - in this case, whether Livery Companies are moving with the times in their social responsibilities! It isn't really a historical speech, but it seemed to be worth including in view of the occasion and the historic background of the subject matter.

My Lord Mayor, Masters, Prime Wardens, Upper Bailiff, Aldermen, Mr Recorder, Sheriffs, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is a memorable evening for all of us: we have been entertained magnificently, and we are most grateful for the gracious way in which you have proposed the toast. It is a very special moment for the City Livery Companies: a rare occasion for us all to sit down together and enjoy the feeling of fellowship that a wonderful dinner engenders, and I would very much like to express our thanks to you at once for having us with you tonight.

It is a perhaps a moment to reflect on how the Livery is moving with the times.

A few weeks back. Lord Falconer visited Draper and Mercer Almshouses in Greenwich, with some of his senior civil servants. He was, I believe, impressed by what he saw, and commented that each resident to whom he had talked referred to the sense of community that he or she enjoyed.

We must do all we can to accommodate changing housing needs for our old people, but our commitment to community on our provisions for old people is precious. As a part of fulfilled old age it seems more important than a cold inventory of physical

³⁹ The Lord Mayor's Dinner to the Livery Companies at the Mansion House.

⁴⁰ Alderman Michael Oliver (now Sir Michael Oliver).

trappings - and this point did, I think, rub off on the Government representatives that morning.

Afterwards, I was talking to one of the civil servants, and she asked me what I did when I wasn't being Master-Mercer. "I'm an Information Technologist," I replied. "Goodness," she responded: "I thought that the Livery Companies were full of old fogies!"

I should have been delighted, but then I remembered an incident at Mercers Hall a few months previously. One guest asked what I did when not Mercering, and when I replied that I was an Information Technologist, he looked me up and down carefully, and said: "Aren't you a bit old for that sort of thing?"

We must all attune to the modern world, but are our ancient City Livery Companies too old for that sort of thing? I think not. Like our work with old people, they do indeed move to keep up with the times.

Now, the Twelve Great Companies do indeed apply their wealth to modern causes. But it has been a particular pleasure to discover in my modest travels around the city how actively other livery companies take on the challenges of today, in charitable and educational directions as well as professional ones.

For example, the Dyers not only support the modern equivalent of their ancient industry with funding of students and lectureships, they also support King Edward VI Grammar School in Norwich; they have almshouses, give pensions, help selected charities, and have several Armed Services relationships.

Consider also the Bowyers, my hosts of a few weeks ago. Their concern for archery as a sport with their sister Company, the Fletchers, extends to an active interest in disabled archers. I have a young disabled friend, now a Fletcher, who was helped by these companies to take part in the Atlanta Paralympics five years or so ago - winning bronze. It was a wonderful experience for her. I might add that this young lady, Rebecca Gale, is a graduate of Lord Mayor Treloar College, and is a very talented glass engraver.

At number 100 are the Information Technologists. Modern in their art, they support the traditional ethos of the City Livery

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Companies, not only in education, but also by charitable work with severely ill or disabled children, among many other causes.

I could go on and on and on. So I'll sum up by using figures from the Livery Database. In 1999, the non-Great-12 companies averaged over £100,000 each in charitable giving, and nearly 40% of these companies were involved in education. Nearly 90% have active links with modern trades.

These are encouraging statistics, and I'd also point out that many of these Companies support their good works with money that comes in from living members, rather than from ancient benefactions. I believe that modern giving will be of increasing importance to each of our Companies - whether or not already well endowed!

We all support City and Guilds, a wonderful institution that was founded in the late 1800s to emphasise that the Livery really had a commitment to modernity.

Its new Director general, Chris Humphreys, is energetically keeping it at the forefront of the certification of skills relevant to today, with more than 1M certificates awarded in 104 countries during 2000/2001. At the recent City and Guilds Annual Meeting, two particular themes struck me. Firstly, the work on social qualifications related to carers and working with the disabled or disadvantaged. Secondly, the emphasis on computer technology, not only as a skill to be qualified in, but also as a delivery mechanism for other skills.

This takes me to my final statistic: well over 50% of the City Livery Companies are supported by web-sites, vital tools for telling the world what we're up to. Many of us will be looking to IT as a tool not only to streamline our charitable activities but also to reach out more effectively to our Livery.

Now, nobody knows better than I about the social sterility of IT in itself: it is a poor substitute for face-to-face contact. Our wonderful feast of tonight shows how important physical togetherness is, however realistically future technology may conjure images out of screens.

So, here we all are, enjoying your bountiful hospitality, and I would like to close with a little moral comfort. A while back, I attended sung Evensong at St Mary le Bow, and afterwards introduced myself to the celebrant, who was not Father Stock that night. I confessed to him that I was about to undo the benefit of attending the service by committing the sin of Gluttony at our Livery Dinner that evening at Mercers' Hall. "Oh that's all right," he said: "I'm just off to the best fish restaurant in town!" I enjoyed our dinner the better for his words!

Fortunately, My Lord Mayor, we do not have to worry quite so much about our self-indulgence tonight. I can thank you again on behalf of all of your guests for your magnificent hospitality, secure in the knowledge that we can make amends for our Lenten feasting when we attend the United Guilds Service with you tomorrow.

Appendix 2 - The Haberdashers' 1446 Grant of Arms

A part of an image of this beautiful document was included in the speech to the Haberdashers' Company (see page 58). The full image is supplied below, by kind permission of Dr David Bartle, Archivist, The Haberdashers' Company.

It is interesting in its portrayal of lady's fashions in the medieval period.



Appendix 3 - The Golden Jubilee Masters Speech⁴¹

It is a great pleasure and honour to have so many of you here tonight in Mercers Hall. Michael [Messent] and Raymond [Cousins] suggested that I tell you about the Hall and the Mercers, so here is a whistle-stop tour of some fascinating history.

As I passed the Mercers' Hall the other day, a photo-shoot of a young model, in elegant clothes and an exotic hairstyle, was taking place just outside. It reminded me of the Mercers in early times, when their most visible activity was the supply of luxury fashion-wear to the royal or rich. That connection is still symbolised by the Mercer Maiden, on the Company's crest and as an adornment of many Mercer properties, including this Hall: a young lady of high medieval fashion, with her head in the clouds.

The London Mercery was the powerhouse of this kind of medieval activity – manufacture and retail of luxury fashion-ware – and it primarily lay in the great market street of Cheapside – wide and full of stalls belonging, not only to mercers, but also to many other craftsmen and guilds. You can imagine that women were an important part of mercery activity – and some women were recorded in history for their skills.

This side of Mercer history is an important but superficial aspect. To get a fuller view, consider mercery trade in early medieval times – part of an activity that even then was very large-scale and geographically distributed – even as far as China.

Mercery in its widest sense was trade in everything except the heavy bulk commodities such as victuals, wool, and metals. Although in London it came to focus on silk, linen and other quality cloth, and, of course, articles made from these, the international merchants who fed the demand for these were much more broadly based.

The Great Fairs of Northern Europe were the official events that were the powerhouse of long-distance trade of all kinds in early

⁴¹ This speech was made, as host, to the well-supported Guild of Golden Jubilee Masters' Dinner held in Mercers' Hall, on 21st February 2012, in the year of the 10th anniversary of the formation of the Guild.

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medieval times. For example, at the 4-week St Denis Fair in Paris, mercery and other merchants negotiated trade, arranged credit and loans, and generally relied on consistent weights and measures and other services, paying tolls for the privilege.

England also had its Great Fairs, such as the fairs in St Ives in Huntingdonshire, Boston, and Winchester, which acted as major distribution points. There were thousands of smaller Fairs.

London was a natural centre for distribution and trade, and there the guilds as we know them gradually formed and formalised. By the 14th century London (and regional) guilds became powerful enough to provide their own trading infrastructure. Deals were done directly with suppliers, such as the silk merchants of Lucca, and the Great Fairs gradually declined. All the same, the evolution of guilds was slow and sometimes painful, and at times even prohibited by Royal Decree.

Mercery traders ranged in wealth and social stature from the Great Merchants, to the traders in luxury cloth and artefacts, and ultimately to the back-packing itinerants who sold in local fairs. Now, trade was considered immoral by the Church at the time, and traders were under suspicion as usurers. So the Mercers, as they were becoming, sought the higher social status and power that brought respectability. Backpackers, for all their cultural value were out. The Mercers became major players in London politics, quite able to hobnob with members of the other great trading companies. They were chartered in 1394.

Some wealthy Mercers, such as Dick Whittington, often thinking of their souls in after-life, gave legacies to be used to support the poor and needy, or to set up almshouses – benefactions still in place today. Others bequeathed property that became the source of Mercer wealth and the means of our benefactions.

Not content with their Cheapside stalls, the Mercers took meeting rooms in the Hospital of St Thomas of Acon, a minor order with chapel and school set up by the sister of St Thomas-a-Becket, here, near his birthplace, with support from Richard I. The chapel of St Thomas was popular with many guilds, and the Hospital would have been a great place to network. Good thinking by the Mercers! In 1516, Mercer aldermanic power carried them to number one in precedence, and it occurred to them that they

should have a real Hall of their own. So they bought some of the Cheapside frontage, and in 1522 converted it to a small Hall.

Henry VIII dissolved the Monasteries, including St Thomas' Hospital in 1538. The Mercers were able to purchase the property and buildings, and thus we found ourselves with a new Hall, complete with chapel – and a school!

The whole site was destroyed by the Great Fire of 1666, and a new Hall wasn't rebuilt until 1687. This Hall was truly impressive, but, perhaps as with other contemporary buildings, structural problems were always an issue. A 19th century Livery Ball had to be closed down when the dancers realised that the building was swaying in time with the music.

The great door of that Hall still exists – visit the Town Hall of Swanage in Dorset, and there it is!

In some ways it must have been a relief when the 1687 Hall was destroyed by a German incendiary Bomb in 1941, happily sparing the wine-cellar. The new Hall was opened for business in 1958, and I was one of the first freemen to be admitted that year. And here we all are in it now.

I have no time for more than a précis of the work of the Mercers. Association with the original trades was lost hundreds of years ago – but, as you can see, our mind even then was on broader activity. Like many other Guilds, fraternity tempered with good works was our formula, just as it remains today. We look after elderly people in almshouses and housing associations; we have or share 8 church livings, we give money to a large number of charitable causes, often small-scale and sometimes start-up. Education is really our speciality, and there are now 18 schools or educational establishments in the Mercer Family, most of which are in the public sector, the latest entrant being the brand new Hammersmith Academy that we opened with the Information Technologists in September last year.

I can feel Michael's beady eye on me, so it is time to close and say again how pleased I am to have you all here in our Hall, and to give you the toast to the Golden Jubilee Masters, coupled with the name of our distinguished Chairman William Shand, who will now respond.