



The Furniture Makers' Company the furnishing industry's charity

So what do Livery Companies do?

The perception of Livery Companies as secret societies with special handshakes, or stuffy institutions full of self-important old men perpetuating a dynastic role, should be laid to rest in an instant.

In 2006, around 100 Livery Companies in the City of London gave away over £40 million to charitable causes, the great majority of this going to welfare and education, the beneficiaries of which are in large part outside of the particular industries the companies represent.

Although 75 per cent of the Companies have active links with their trades and professions, the Livery affiliations connect them with:

- almost 200 units of the Armed Forces
- about 60 air, sea and army cadet units
- nearly 70 church establishments, and
- about 40 almshouses providing 830 homes to those in need.

In education, primary and secondary schools, tertiary and FE colleges and city academies, all receive direct support in finance and kind from the Livery Companies. These relationships are long established and will continue to grow as Livery Companies expand their activities and more Companies are established.

Many people are surprised at the size of the charitable outreach whilst the Livery remains largely invisible to the City and its workers, but the Companies continue to work for and meet their goals in an unostentatious way.

So how did Livery Companies come about?

The origin of the Livery Companies is lost in the mists of antiquity but their descent can be traced from the medieval “misteries” or guilds which were to be found in many of the leading cities of Europe. The Great Twelve, as the oldest of the City Livery Companies are known, and probably the next 40 companies or so to be founded, started life as Craft Guilds formed to regulate particular crafts and trades. They were a cross between employer’s associations and trading standards officers.

The Guilds strengthened their power and exclusivity by building their own Halls and wearing ceremonial uniform gowns, the “Livery”. Any trade or organisation could form a Guild but Companies were and are regulated by the Court of Aldermen of the City of London.

Since their members were engaged in and controlled most forms of trade and commerce, the guilds were wealthy and, as a consequence, they came to exercise considerable power and influence. The Guilds and Livery Companies of the City of London were no exception. There is also a significant number of Guilds outside London.

The social and economic conditions which gave birth to the old guilds have long been superseded by the development of industry and commerce in modern form, but it says much for the inherent vitality of the Livery Companies that they have survived these changes and the loss of most of their former privileges and powers.

Their survival has been achieved by

- fostering their trade or craft in a wider context
- acting as patrons
- involvement of their members
- increasing their power for good by service to the community, and by introducing modern skills and professions to their ranks.

Their role today varies from Company to Company. Some such as the Goldsmiths and the Fishmongers still have a regulatory or statutory function, whereas others whose original callings have substantially disappeared concentrate on their charitable work or support the modern equivalent of their past trades. Thus the Horners now support the modern plastics industry.

The “modern Companies” cover trades and professions not existing or recognised in earlier times such as the Air Pilots and Navigators and the Information Technologists.

A Guild cannot call itself a Company until it has received its “Letters Patent” from that Court. In the next phase, people prominent in the new industries founded their own Livery Companies mainly for charitable purposes but also with an eye on enjoying each other’s company. (It’s called networking now.)

Why Worshipful?

History records no explanation.

The founding fathers of the Guilds presumably thought Company sounded more important and then searched for an adjective to make the word seem more than just any old company - like “HRH” even though royal princes are not abnormally (nor often) high.

Why Makers?

The Guilds' titles described their activities as well as their trade or craft. Hence the Glass Sellers but the Basketmakers. (Odd fact: we are one of only three Livery Companies with Makers as a separate word.)

We, at no 83 (out of 110 at the last count), are one of the “modern” Companies which all take “Makers” as embracing every aspect of their industry.

For us, designers, makers, manufacturers, retailers, specifiers, interior design journalists and PR people, academics and museum curators - we are all part of The Furniture Makers' Company.

Why the City of London?

London, the capital, was where the forming of Guilds overwhelmingly happened and in mediaeval times the City was the whole town. The remit of the Court of Aldermen, the “licensing authority”, did not and does not extend beyond the City's boundary so a Livery Company can only be located within it.

There are Companies in the Livery sense outside London; the Society of Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol and the Company of Merchant Adventurers of the City of York are two, but they are not Worshipful.

What does The Furniture Makers' Company do?

The Livery undoubtedly delivers life-changing enhancement to a greater number of individuals than is apparent. The Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers was founded as a guild in 1951 and granted Livery status in 1963, becoming the 83rd Livery Company of the City of London and only the sixth to be formed since the reign of Queen Anne ended in 1714.

It aims to support the highest standards of design, manufacturing, marketing and retailing of all types of furniture and furnishing throughout the United Kingdom.

It achieves these aims through a variety of means, such as

- educating the next generation to create a skilled and talented workforce for the future, working with schools, colleges, universities and companies to create learning and training opportunities
- helping those from our industry in times of need, whether retired or of working age
- the award of its own highly prized Guild Marks and Awards recognising excellence

Bespoke for the finest commissions of craftsman made furniture

Manufacturing for the highest standards of production process in furniture manufacturing companies, and

Design recently introduced for designers of manufactured furniture

The **Claxton Stevens Prize** awarded to the most outstanding piece of Bespoke furniture of the year

The **Sustainability Award** for excellence in manufacturing sustainability

Membership of the Company as a Liveryman or Freeman is restricted to men and women employed or having been employed in the furnishing industry. Thus individuals are able to contribute to the industry and its work outside of their employed function, and even after formal retirement.

We are authorised to have 300 Liverymen and unlimited Freemen at any time.

There are vacancies in both categories and anyone within the industry willing to pay the annual fees and make an annual donation to the charitable funds may apply to join.

The normal progression is firstly receiving the Freedom of the Company, and then receiving the Freedom of the City and being installed as a Liveryman.

What are the Benefits of becoming a Freeman or Liveryman?

- Opportunities to contribute to the UK furniture industry
- Supporting the charitable activities of the Company
- Continuous professional development opportunities
- Access to industry information, including the members-only pages of the website
- Networking across the entire British furnishing industry
- Social events at a variety of prestigious venues in the City and elsewhere, including a glittering annual banquet at the Mansion House in the presence of the Lord Mayor and the Sheriffs on the annual Installation of the Master
- Opportunities for early involvement in relevant exhibitions
- Prior information on Guild Marks and other awards
- Social and fundraising outings at home and abroad such as golf days, clay pigeon shoots, vineyard tours and historic building visits, often with privilege status
- And so much more...see our website to find out more about us
furnituremakers.org.uk