



The Furniture Makers' Company the furnishing industry's charity

The Origins and History of the Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers

by Edward Pinto, Master 1956-1957

Extract taken from the first Yearbook, published in hard back in 1964, and presented to all Liverymen by the then Master, Keon Hughes

It may well be asked "Why has such an old established craft as furniture making had to wait so long to have its own craft guild?" The answer, perhaps, lies in the following historical facts.

In early mediaeval times, such case furniture as there was, mainly of nailed board and iron strapped construction, came under the joint auspices of the Carpenters and Blacksmiths. But the control or connection was loose and rather nebulous, for members of the Worshipful Company of Turners played an important part in the quality and aesthetics of chairs, as they have never ceased to do; and, indeed, the influence of their craft now extends over a much wider range of furniture.

During the mediaeval period, the Cofferers also attained importance in furniture making, for travelling chests, coffer and chairs, if not of exposed wood, but covered with leather, velvet, or other fabrics, were a branch of coffer making. As a natural sequence, Clothworkers, Cordwainers, Curriers, Weavers, Woolmen and Broderers were also concerned with furniture. Finally, the Worshipful Company of Basketmakers, whose ancestors were plying their craft before Moses was found in the bullrushes, were the principal makers of woven cradles in the Middle Ages, as they are to this day. It is interesting that the coat of arms of the Basketmakers centres on a man and woman leaning over a cradle.

From the 15th century, perhaps slightly earlier, and continuing until the Restoration, furniture making was a specialised branch of joinery; but the Turners and Basketmakers retained their interests and influences, whilst the suppliers of soft materials already mentioned, were continually increasing their range and becoming more important both in the aesthetics and comfort of furniture and furnishing, to which they largely ministered via the Upholders.

After the Restoration

Cabinet making was an introduction of the Restoration period. From 1660, with the Court returning from exile, a demand soon arose, in fashionable circles, for the new and much

lighter continental furniture, largely flush veneered with walnut and other exotic woods and no longer panelled in oak, as most of it had been in England hitherto. The new furniture differed from the old both in style and in technique. In country districts and away from the seats of fashion, joiner-made furniture lingered on for another hundred years; there, it continued to be made in the traditional manner, largely constructed dry, with panels free to move in grooved framing, morticed, tenoned and secured by draw-pegs. The new modish cabinet-made furniture had glued joints and glued veneered, matched, cross-banded, or inlaid surfaces.

The cabinet-makers, largely immigrants escaping from religious persecution on the continent, arrived simultaneously with the demand; the men and opportunity were met together and soon had a fresh call for their new type furniture, when the Great Fire of 1666 swept away so many homes, City Livery Halls, etc.

The second half of the 17th century was a period of great experiment in furniture and furnishing designs and decoration in the homes of the wealthy, who vied with each other in lavish expenditure on both home produced and imported objects, to beautify their homes. Oriental and European influences all flowed into English houses and gradually became assimilated into an English style. During this time, the continental cabinet-makers taught the English furniture joiners much; they also greatly influenced fashionable design. By the commencement of the 18th century, the fusion of the two crafts had resulted in that highly satisfying English style of cabinet-made furniture - Queen Anne.

In retrospect, this would seem to have been the moment for a Furniture Makers' Guild to arise; that it did not do so is probably because, about this time, the upholsterer became much more than the upholsterer he had hitherto been. He moved up to become the co-ordinator and virtually the employer of the various branches of furniture making which were working for the wealthy leaders of fashion. By 1747, a writer who specialised in advising parents on the apprenticing of their children to traders in London and Westminster was able to define the different branches of the trade much as they have remained until recently. He describes the skills required and the wages obtained by the various branches, all of which, he tells us, come under the Upholder's control, who, he states:

'...has not only Judgment in the Materials, but Taste in the Fashions, and Skill in the Workmanship. This Tradesman's Genius must be universal in every Branch of Furniture; though his proper Craft is to fit up Beds, Window-Curtains, Hangings, and to cover Chairs that have stuffed Bottoms: He was originally a Species of the Taylor; but, by degrees, has crept over his Head, and set up as a Connoisseur in every article that belongs to a House. He employs Journeymen in his own proper Calling, Cabinet-Makers, Glass-Grinders, Looking-Glass Frame-Carvers, Carvers for Chairs, Testers, and Posts of Bed, the Woollen-Draper, the Mercer, the Linen-Draper, several Species of Smiths, and a vast many Tradesmen of the other mechanic Branches. The Upholder, according to this Description of his Business, must be no Fool; and have a considerable Stock to set up with...'

Such great names in the 18th century as Thomas Chippendale, William Vile, Ince and Mayhew, were proud to call themselves Upholders first and Cabinet-Makers second. Bearing in mind that they were stockists of furniture, mirrors, fabrics, marble, wall-papers, etc. and that they waited on clients, prepared designs and also undertook the making and installation of furniture, draperies and blinds and hanging of wall-paper, they were retailers, house

furnishers and, to some extent, interior decorators, as well as furniture designers and makers. Some of them employed several hundred workers. The pre-eminence of the upholsterer over the furniture industry lasted throughout the 18th and the first quarter of the 19th century. By then, the opportune moment for forming a Guild was probably lost, for with the separation of retailer from designer and manufacturer, and the steady mechanisation of furniture during and after the Victorian era, conditions were not, until quite recently, again conducive to the forming of craft guilds.

The period between the two World Wars had not the right climate for such an exalted aim. It was largely a time when the trade itself was building a new structure. Small Unions were gradually amalgamating to form one National one. Newcomers to the trade were slowly joining their Regional Associations which, in turn, were coming together to form a Federation. Chain furniture stores were increasing rapidly and retailers were commencing to combine. It was not until several years after the last war that various members of the industry, in different parts of the United Kingdom, had come to know each other sufficiently well for it to be feasible to form a Guild, with high ideals and universal trade enthusiasm.

The Formation of the Guild

The credit for the idea of forming a Guild goes to George Hensher, who first expounded his ideas at a half-yearly luncheon of the London and South Eastern Furniture Manufacturers Association at the Connaught Rooms on 1st November 1949. Mr Jack Beresford, CBE, Mr. Anthony Heal and I were at once enthusiastic and the four of us formed a preliminary committee to explore the matter further. One of our first visits was to Sir Irving Gane, KCVO, the City Chamberlain, who was most helpful in guiding us on the procedure to adopt in forming a Guild, based on the ordinances of a City Livery Company. A point which Sir Irving particularly made, was the importance of our finding the right man to act as Learned Clerk. It is appropriate to say here that Sir Irving's interest in The Furniture Makers has never waned and he has always remained our good friend and wise counsellor.

Following on the above meeting and at the request of my colleagues, I sought counsel from friends in the City, as to where to go to find our Learned Clerk. All consulted gave the same advice 'Go and see Alderman Sir Cullum Welch and try to interest him in your problem'. I saw Sir Cullum in January 1950, and he was not only interested, but also sympathetic and helpful to a degree which has placed us deeply in his debt. This meeting eventually led to Sir Cullum's partner, Mr. Seymour Plummer, DFC, agreeing to undertake the many arduous tasks which were inseparable from the setting up and running of a new Guild. We can never be grateful enough to him for agreeing to become our Learned Clerk, philosopher and guide in the ways and traditions of the City and for the manner in which he threw himself, heart and soul, always with charm and good humour, into so many duties, which greatly eased the work of the Master, Wardens and Assistants of the Court and contributed so much to the smooth running and quick success of the aims of the Guild.

From June 1959, to December 1962, he was ably assisted by Mr G H Day. It was with great regret of the Court and Membership of the Guild, that both these gentlemen felt it necessary to tender their resignations in 1963, owing to pressure of other work. It was felt that a fitting tribute to Mr Plummer's enthusiastic work for, and interest in the Guild, from its

commencement to the stage of its becoming a Livery Company, would be to offer him the Honorary Membership of the Company. It has given great pleasure to all members that he has accepted, and retains his interest in the 'Furniture Makers'.

Although he has only been with us a year, we already know that it is our extreme good fortune that Sir Cullum Welch's son, John Welch MA, has now accepted the position of Learned Clerk to The Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers.

To return to the Guild formation, during 1950 interest in the idea spread and a larger and more widely based committee was set up in 1951, with the result that the Guild was formed in 1952.

The first Master of the Guild was Stanley Wharton. The Senior Warden was Sir Herman Lebus CBE JP and the Junior Warden Alderman Ralph Perring, LCC. This may be an appropriate place to record the considerable debt of gratitude which The Furniture Makers owe to this trio; to Mr Wharton for his patience, time and wisdom in the many interviews and meetings which resulted in the Guild coming to fruition; to the late Sir Herman Lebus for the sponsoring of the Guild's Coat of Arms, and for the work which he undertook in connection with the building up of a framework for administering Guild Scholarships; to Mr Alderman Perring (now Sir Ralph Perring Bt) for his continuous help and guidance which culminated in the Grant of Livery to the Guild in 1963 when he was resident at the Mansion House as the 635th elected Lord Mayor of London.

The first Court of Assistants comprised

Sir Ernest Benn Bt CBE

Macalister Bexon CBE

Harold Elvin

Lucian Ercolani FRSA

Harold Fryer

Cuthbert Greig CBE FCIS

Anthony Heal

Albert Lock

Frank Lupton MC

Brigadier A L W Newth CBE DSO MC TD DL JP

Edward Pinto FRSA

Sir Giles Gilbert Scott OM RA

Alfred Tomkins CBE

Sir Harold Webbe CBE DL MP

The Rt Hon Sir Walter Womersley Bt PC JP

In 1958, the Guild adopted my suggestion of a Guild Mark Scheme, with the purpose of encouraging a high standard of quality by awarding Guild Marks and Certificates of Merit and stamping and recording for posterity, British-made furniture which, in the opinion of an appointed jury, attains an outstanding degree of excellence in craftsmanship, materials, functional purpose and design. So far, 40 pieces of furniture have received this greatly prized award, which will make them the most highly valued antiques of the future. The jury of six includes not only members of The Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers but also representatives of the Council of Industrial Design and the Society of Industrial Artists. Two members of the jury are also Royal Designers for Industry. Guild Marked furniture is already in Windsor Castle, Marlborough House, a Dominion Parliament building, etc.

All the work of the Guild has been accomplished during 11 years, many of which have been bad ones financially for the furniture industry. The performance has only been possible because both its founders and those who have joined it since, look on membership as a privilege and all are imbued with the common purpose of giving, in time, thought, energy, service and money, to forward the splendid aims of the Guild.

The affairs of the Guild are conducted by the Master, Senior Warden, Junior Warden, sixteen Assistants of the Court and the Past Masters. So far, 74 meetings of the Court have been held and many of its members also serve on one or more of the following Committees - General Purposes, Scholarships, Finance, and Guild Mark. With the exception of the first Master and Senior Warden, each Master has served first as Junior Warden and then as Senior Warden.

The Grant of Livery

In 1962, before application was made to the Court of Aldermen for Grant of Livery, the Guild, in accordance with custom, was required to ascertain whether certain of the older City Companies, which in former times had been concerned with furniture, would raise any objection to the Petition of the Guild. The four Companies who it was felt should be asked were the Worshipful Company of Carpenters, the Worshipful Company of Joiners and Ceilers, the Worshipful Company of Upholders and the Worshipful Company of Turners. It is pleasant to record that none of them raised any objections and, on the contrary, wished us success in our petition.

So we come to Thursday 29th March 1963, the proudest day in the history of the Furniture Makers Guild: for on that date, in an interesting and colourful ceremony at the Mansion House, the Lord Mayor conferred the Grant of Livery, which converted the 11- year-old Guild into the Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers. The City of London zealously guards its honour, dignity and ancient privileges. It speaks very well, therefore, for the prestige which the Guild's attainments had won in such a short time, that it should so quickly have become the 83rd City Livery Company - only the sixth new City Livery Company to be formed since Queen Anne's reign.

What added particularly to the pleasure of all the members is that, by a happy chance, Alderman Sir Ralph Perring, the Lord Mayor who performed the ceremony, is not only a prominent and highly esteemed member of the furniture industry, but also a Founder Member and a Past Master of the Guild. How appropriate, therefore, that it should have been he who actually presented the Letters Patent which transformed the Furniture Makers' Guild of the City of London into the Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers.

Mr Douglas French has had the distinction of being both the last Master of the Guild and the first Master of the new Livery Company. Mr Keon Hughes was the last Senior Warden of the Guild, and not only the first Master of the new Company to be installed, but also the first Master to have the privilege of being installed in the historic Mansion House of the City of London in June 1963.