

## Merchant Taylors': one of the 12 Great Livery Companies

### What is the Merchant Taylors' Company?

#### The Worshipful Company of Merchant Taylors'

The Merchant Taylors' Company, or to give it the full name by which it is described in the Royal Charter of 1503, the Gild of Merchant Taylors of the Fraternity of St. John Baptist in the City of London, is one of the Twelve Great City Livery Companies surviving from Mediaeval times.

### Who were these companies?

Medieval trade *guilds* were created by Royal Charter. They were called Livery Companies, this name coming from the distinctive dress (livery) of their members. Each is known as "The Worshipful Company of ..." the relevant trade or profession.

The Liverymen were not artisans or but the controlling elite of their trades. They regulated conditions of apprenticeship and standards of work. They also elected the local government of the City of London and had the sole power to confer on members the "freedom of the city". They still elect the Lord Mayor of London (now a ceremonial office). Only liverymen take part in the election of the Lord Mayor of London.

There are 12 "Great Companies" – The "Great 12". In the Middle Ages the dispute was who was number 6 and who was number 7 in order for the procession – Merchant Taylors' or the Skinners – this gives rise to the English proverb of "being at 6s and 7s" – meaning everything being confused. This was later resolved (against the Merchant Taylors') by the order of precedence established in 1515 under Henry VIII, but the companies still take it in turns to be sixth or seventh in the procession – MT is sixth in odd-numbered years, the Skinners in even-numbered years:

1. The Mercers
2. The Grocers
3. The Drapers
4. The Fishmongers
5. The Goldsmiths
6. The Skinners
7. The Merchant Taylors'
8. The Haberdashers
9. The Salters
10. The Ironmongers
11. The Vintners
12. The Clothworkers

### Tailors and Linen Armourers

The Guild was originally a religious and social fraternity founded before the beginning of the 14th century by an association of citizens who were Tailors and Linen Armourers. The Linen Armourers, an allied craft to the Tailors, made the padded tunics or *gambesons* worn under suits of armour. By virtue of various Royal Charters commencing with that of Edward III in 1327, the functions of the Gild were extended and by about the end of the 15th century it controlled the trade.

A gambeson (or aketon) was a padded defensive surcoat, worn as armour separately, or combined with mail or plate armour. Gambesons were produced with a sewing technique called quilting. Usually constructed of linen or wool, the stuffing varied, and could be for example scrap cloth or horse hair. During the 14th century, illustrations usually show buttons or laces up the front.

The term gambeson essentially means "doublet" (aketon is a loan from Arabic al-qutn "cotton" or algodón in Spanish). Other names were used like jack, pourpoint, aketon and arming coat but all were made of fabric or leather and padded or stuffed with either fabric or natural paddings like tow or horse hair

Use of the gambeson became widespread in the 13th century, and peaked in the 14th and 15th centuries. It was used both as a substitute for armour and underneath mail and plate in order to cushion the body and prevent chafing. It was very uncomfortable because it was insulated and so the wearer became very

Livery Companies") in the order of precedence of the Livery Companies, alternating with the Skinners' Company. The annual switch occurs at Easter. This may be the origin of the phrase "At sixes and sevens". The Merchant Taylors' are normally sixth in the order of precedence in odd numbered years, and at seven in even numbered years, but as the Lord Mayor for 2005/6 is a Merchant Taylor, there will be no change until 2008, unless the Lord Mayor elected for 2006 is a Skinner.



Arms:

resulted from a dispute with the Skinners, solved in 1484 by the Lord Mayor who ruled that one Company should be sixth in one year and the seventh in the next, The two Companies now dine together regularly. A quarrel with the Goldsmiths in 1267 ended less happily. After a pitched battle in which many were killed, the leaders were executed. The City historian John Stow, the cartographer John Speed and Sir Christopher Wren were all members of the Company and Titus Oates a pupil at the School.

The Company still governs Merchant Taylors' School at Northwood, and is interested in Merchant Taylors' Schools for boys and girls at Crosby, Liverpool, as well as Wolverhampton Grammar School. Exhibitions and scholarships are awarded at Oxford and Cambridge and other educational establishments supported. In the Lewisham area are maintained 32 small almshouses, 28 on another neighbouring site and two blocks of housing in the form of self-contained flats. Many grants are made to the needy and financial help given to two London churches. The Livery numbers about 300 but has had no connection with the trade since the 17th century.

### The Merchant Taylors' Hall

The Hall had stood on its present site, acquired in 1331, from some date between 1347 and 1392. It lost the roof and interior in the Great Fire but was restored by Jarman and reopened in 1671. In it James I was splendidly entertained on his arrival in London and it is reputed to be the scene of the first singing of the National Anthem in 1607 under the direction of John Bull.

It was again severely damaged in 1940 but the Library, the Court Room and the Great Kitchen (used continuously since 1425) survived. The reconstructed Hall was opened in 1959. In the Hall itself small sections of the clay 14th century floor, of the tile floor of 1646 and of the stone floor of 1675 have been left visible. Other fine rooms are the Drawing Room and the Great Parlour. Precious possessions include two fine funeral palls of 1490 and 1520 and the Account Book goes back to 1397. The architect of the restored Hall was Sir Albert Richardson and its dining capacity is 250.

The Company's motto is *Concordia Parvae Res Crescunt*, from the Roman historian Sallust, meaning "In Harmony Small Things Grow".

### How do the companies work?

Livery Companies are governed by a Master, a number of Wardens and a Court of Assistants – the "Court": this elects the Master and Wardens. The CEO is known as the Clerk.

Members are either freemen or liverymen. One may become a freeman, or acquire the "Freedom of the Company", upon fulfilling the Company's criteria: traditionally these were "patrimony" (either parent was a liveryman) of the company or "servitude" (one serves as an apprentice for the requisite number of years – the Head Boy at MTS is apprenticed into the Company when he leaves the school) or "Redemption". The Company may also vote to admit individuals as "honorary freemen".) Liverymen enjoy higher status and Freemen generally advance to becoming Liverymen by a vote of the Court of the Company.

## Freemen

Members of the Company, whether men or women, are known as Freemen. The Freedom of the Company is available by:

Patrimony to those whose mother or father was a Freeman at the date of their birth.

Servitude to those who, between the ages of 14 and 21, become apprenticed to a Freeman of the Company.

Redemption to those nominated for membership by four members of Court.

### Livery

Freemen of the Company are eligible for election to the Livery, now approximately 330 in number.

### Who are they now?

The Livery Companies declined with industrialisation but were enormously wealthy and now administer the property, investments and trusts built up over hundreds of years. They are bastions of the city of London and all are benefactors of educational institutions.