

NOTES ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE
 WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF
 LEATHERSELLERS.

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BY

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THE Worshipful Company of Leathersellers, although not one of the most ancient of the Livery Guilds of the City of London, can undoubtedly lay claim to an origin of remote antiquity.

The first Charter of Incorporation was granted in the year 1444, a comparatively late date; but there is evidence of the existence of an association or fraternity of leather producers within the City for some two centuries prior to the date of the charter.

The tanners and producers of leather established themselves about the 13th century or even earlier on the North side of the City within the City Wall towards the east of the area now occupied by Moorgate. In fact, the south side of the street running within the wall became known at a later date as Carriers Row.

The tan yards extended also, but to a limited extent, beyond the City wall into the locality known as Moor Fields, a place selected doubtless on account of the numerous streams and brooks which at that time ran through the district and provided the tanners with an ample supply of water and an easy means for the disposal of the tanyard refuse.

The old Fleet river was also a favourite resort for tanners whose yards and tanneries were crowded along the banks of

the river and the outpourings of whose pits must have added considerably to the pollution of the Fleet.

The Leathersellers' Company appears to have succeeded two earlier and minor fraternities, the Grey Tawyers or Tanners and the White Tawyers or Whittawyers as they are sometimes called. These two fraternities existed early in the 13th century and were of sufficient strength and importance to acquire Ordinances and By-laws for the regulation of their particular crafts.

The Grey Tawyers were a craft more immediately in connection with the Pelterers or Skinners, being the mechanics or piece-workers who flayed the animals, and their By-laws granted in 1365 relate chiefly to their obligations to the Pelterers, the only important and powerful Body. The By-laws provide amongst other things, that no Tawyer should deal in any peltry; nor should he act as a broker between one dealer and another; nor make old budge into new leather, nor cut off the head of any work. The penalties attaching to contravention of the By-laws were sufficiently drastic and took the form of imprisonment as well as a fine, besides confiscation and burning of the goods.

The Whittawyers also are known to have been in close relation to the Pelterers. They were an important Body as far back as the reign of Edward I, for there is an entry in the Corporation Records that in 1275 two persons, Girard de Brie and John de Lincoln, were presented by good men of the Craft to the Mayor and sworn in as Correctors or Licensed Brokers of Leather. Their By-laws were acquired in 1346, and they were therein described as "the good folks the Megucers called Whittawyers."

Amongst the many curious provisions of these Ordinances was one "to find a wax candle to burn before Our Lady " in the Church of All Hallows, London Wall, and to put " money in the Box to support the same." This provision afterwards descended to the Leathersellers as appears by the following entry in the Company's earliest Book of Records under date 1484:

Item—paid for Our Lady	}	ij. s.
light at Allhallows in		
the Wall for a yere		

It is not until the closing years of the reign of Edward III that the Fraternity or Craft of Leathersellers appears as a distinct Fellowship or Community and is expressly named in the records at Guildhall.

In the year 1372 the "probi homines" of the Mistery of the Leathersellers together with the Craft of Pursers came before the Court of Aldermen and jointly presented a Bill, which is in Norman-French, desiring some stringent regulations to be made with a view to the prevention of the making and selling of other than genuine leather.

The two Guilds in their joint petition prayed amongst other things "that no man of the Mistery of Pursers should put to sale leather for other than it was nor should sell leather of Sheep scraped on the back to counterfeit leather of Roe by divers colours stained in deceit of the people." The Bill was granted by the Mayor and Aldermen and the following were appointed as supervisors or correctors of leather:

William Belhomme	}	Leathersellers of Chepe.
John Swanton, junior		
Thomas Gandre	}	Pursers of the Bridge.
John de Leye		

Under their Ordinances the Wardens of the Leathersellers' Company as Searchers in the City after bad leather, and in the course of their duties as scrutineers of leather, were frequently brought into active conflict with members of the Crafts and Guilds that were users of leather as well as with members of their own Craft. The Company's records contain abundant evidence of these conflicts.

Further By-laws were granted to the Company in 1398, when the Leathersellers applied to the Court of Aldermen for regulations of their Craft and in the first Mayoralty of Richard Whityngton a lengthy and complete set of Ordinances was granted. The Guild was now fairly launched and

quickly became a flourishing and important body, and, in 1445 and subsequent years, became possessed of certain lands and tenements in the parish of All Hallows in the Wall, where a hall was erected for the use of the Craft on land now occupied by Copthall Avenue. The remaining lands and tenements were let and proved a useful source of revenue to the Company.

Between the grant of Whityngton's Ordinances in the year 1398, and the date of the Charter in 1444, several public events relating to the leather trade occurred which may be considered as having tended towards bringing about the Company's petition for a Charter. The first of these, recorded in the Court of Aldermen, was an "Ordinance and Proclamation for assaying and proving tanned hides." The title is in Latin, but the document itself is in French. By this Proclamation, which appears to have been made about the year 1411, representatives of five City Companies interested in leather were appointed as Assayers and Provers of tanned hides, namely, Cordwainers, Girdlers, Malemakers, Bottlemakers and Curriers. How it came about that the Guild of Leathersellers was not entrusted with a share in the duty of searching tanned hides does not appear, and it is difficult to account for the exclusion when all five Crafts, except the Curriers, were makers and sellers of leathern wares. Possibly the Leathersellers were the chief offenders in the production of badly tanned hides, and were the persons aimed at by the Proclamation.

It is true, however, that the Leathersellers were already authorised to search all wares made of Leather, but they sought to extend their power to the material itself in open market, and in the year 1440 in the Mayoralty of Robert Large they obtained further Ordinances, which gave them additional powers in that direction. But this was not enough, and in the year 1443 the Leathersellers determined to make a stand for their own rights of search as established in Whityngton's time, and to obtain legal authority from the Crown

itself for inspection of all leather goods sold within the City and its liberties.

They also sought to extend the right of search beyond the jurisdiction of the City. Accordingly in the year 1444 the chief men of the Craft presented a Petition to the King and obtained a Charter, or more properly speaking Letters Patent under the Great Seal, dated 19th August, 22 Henry VI, by which all their former Ordinances were confirmed and the Leathersellers became incorporated after the fashion of more wealthy and powerful Guilds. This important document, which is in a wonderful state of preservation, is now amongst the Company's archives and the initial letter depicts the King handing the document itself to the Company's representatives of the day, who in the blue Livery of their Guild and on bended knee are receiving the Charter from the King's own hand.

Having been thus duly constituted by the Crown as the legal authority for inspection of all leather and also leather goods manufactured and offered for sale within the City boundaries, it naturally followed that, in the course of their duties, the Wardens and Company's Officers frequently came into direct conflict with tanners and producers of leather as well as members of other Crafts who dealt in leather goods. From the Company's Records it would appear that, as far back as 1479, the Leathersellers experienced no little difficulty in controlling the actions of members of two other Crafts—the Glovers and the Pursers.

The following entry appears in the records of 1479:—

“ And in this (year) we had much trouble and labor with the Purserus and also with Gloverus and with much and great labor had of them our intent against them according to the right.”

The two Guilds, Glovers and Pursers, joined hands in 1498, and being united into one Guild became known as the Glovers-Pursers. These two Guilds having experienced the

benefits of union proceeded four years later to seek further union and this time with their old antagonists, the Leather-sellers.

The amalgamation was accomplished in the year 1502, no doubt to the mutual advantage of all three Guilds. Later on, however, the Glovers appear to have seceded from the association and by Letters Patent granted by Charles I in 1638 they became reconstituted as an entirely separate Guild. Later on the Pursers followed the example of the Glovers and disassociated themselves from the Guild of Leather-sellers.

The Wardens' Accounts for the 15th Century contain numerous entries showing that the Company appear to have taken a full share in the Ridings and Pageantry of the time and it became of importance that they should acquire armorial bearings to enable their representatives to be distinguished from other City Guilds.

It so happened that about this time one of the Sisters of the Company had married one of the Kings of Arms, John More (or Moore), Norroy King of Arms. This personage was approached by the Master and Wardens for a grant of Arms for the Company, and on 20th May, 1479 he granted his Certificate of Arms, setting out therein as follows:—

“ Trowth it is that the M^r and Wardens of the Crafte of Lethersellers of this Cittie of London hath bene wth me and required me in so much as I had wedded a wife of the same Companie to testifie and affirme the Armes of the same Crafte and at the instance and request of them so doe.”

The original instrument perished in the fire at the Hall in 1819, but, having been produced with other heraldic documents before the Heralds at their visitation of London in 1634, a copy is contained in the great “ Scroll of Arms ” then certified to the Company and a still more exact transcript was made for preservation in the College of Arms.

The Charter of Henry VI was confirmed and the Company's

powers and privileges enlarged by a second Charter, or Letters Patent, granted by Queen Elizabeth in 1559. Unfortunately this document is no longer in the Company's possession having possibly suffered destruction in a fire at Leathersellers Hall in 1819, but a copy may be found in the Pipe Rolls at the Record Office.

The original Hall of the Company was situated on lands lying to the north of the City and abutting on to the City Wall. It was here, in proximity to the dwellings and Tan yards of many of its early members and lands and tenements acquired for the endowment of the Guild's religious institutions, that the Company made its first home.

This property which comprised land and tenements was acquired prior to 1445 and one of the larger houses together with part of the garden was adapted and used as a Hall or Meeting Place for members of the Craft. From a description contained in the Company's records, the Hall appears to have included a parlour, a nether or lower Hall, occasionally let off to tenants, and a kitchen, the latter even in those far off days being a necessary adjunct to the Hall of a City Livery Company.

The land on which stood the old Hall with its garden remains still in the Company's possession, but is now covered with office buildings and shops and forms part of the street known as Copthall Avenue, London Wall.

The Company continued to carry on its affairs and to hold its meetings and feasts at the old Hall until about the year 1540 when the Wardens and Court were looking around for a site upon which to erect a Hall more in keeping with the dignity and importance to which the Company had then attained.

The suppression of the monasteries occurred shortly before this date and amongst those then lately fallen into the hands of the Crown was the Nunnery called "The Priory of the Black Nuns of St. Helen," whose ancient conventual buildings and lands were situated in the Ward of Bishopsgate

and adjoin St. Helen's Church. In fact the north aisle screened off from the rest of the Church formed the Nuns' Chapel.

The site of this beautiful old Priory, with its ancient buildings and surrounding tenements and old world garden having been granted by Henry VIII by Letters Patent, 29th March 1542, to his Ecclesiastical Commissioner, Sir Richard Williams *alias* Cromwell in exchange for other lands and Manors in the County of Huntingdon, passed ultimately and after prolonged negotiations into the possession of the Leathersellers Company.

Brokers were employed by the Company to complete the bargain between them and Sir Richard Cromwell and they were paid the sum of 40s. The Deed of Grant by which the property was acquired and to which is attached the signature and seal of Sir Richard Cromwell is in the Company's possession and bears date 28th April 1543. The Priory is therein described as follows:—" All that site, close, circuit, ambit and precinct of the late priory of St. Helen within the City of London And also the Church once commonly named the Nonnes Chyrche of Saynt Elyns And all and singular the messuages houses Edificies structures yards dovecotes gardens orchards and the land and soil of the same"

For all public purposes of the Company the new situation in Bishopsgate Ward was most eligible. The site of the priory comprised a refectory on the north side of the cloister adjoining the Church, the chambers and dormitories of the nuns and the private apartments of the Prioress with capacious vaults beneath, the nuns' garden and dove-cote and a frontage of houses let to several tenants. Collectively the estate was called " Little St. Helen's."

The nuns' large dormitory, immediately adjacent to the Church was converted into a Hall and the adjoining buildings were adapted for the Company's several requirements.

The Minutes of the 16th and 17th centuries show consider-

able expenditure for adapting, repairing, improving and beautifying the Hall and other buildings in Little St. Helens, especially in 1566-7 when the master (Mr. Richard Pype) gave £10 and others of the Court, Livery and Yeomanry from greatest to least contributed "benevolences to the building of the newe Parler."

In 1567-8, the garden between the east end of St. Helen's Church and St. Mary Axe, was laid out and surrounded by a wall. In 1573-4, a house was built for the clerk. In 1608, the Hall had a new roof and other repairs and alterations were made, and, in 1610, the Hall was ordered "to be newly floored with spruce deale," the windows were freshly glazed, and the upper part of the Hall was wainscotted and the ceiling decorated.

"The Armory," whose contents are from time to time curiously described in the Minutes, was altered and a "Court House" was erected in 1615. These and numerous incidental notices of the buildings occur in the Company's Minutes together with accounts of the purchase from time to time and storage of corn and gunpowder. The latter appears to have been kept in large quantities and in a somewhat perilous position for an inventory made in 1594 comprises:—

"Item vi barrels of gunpowder weighing 643 pound of powder which lieth over the Parler where the Maysters doe keep their Courts."

The activities of the Leathersellers continued to increase, and in the early years of the reign of James I the Company found it necessary to apply to the Crown for additional powers. A further Charter was granted on 24th July, 1604, by which the Company was reconstituted as "The Wardens and Society of the Mistery or Art of the Leathersellers of the City of London." This Charter, bearing the Great Seal of James I and embellished with a coloured representation of the King seated on his throne and with full length portraits

of the Master, Wardens and certain members of the Court in the full livery of the Company, is considered to be one of the finest examples of its kind. It is by virtue of this Charter that the four Wardens (the uppermost being termed the Master) and twenty four assistants hold office, as did their predecessors in the reign of James I.

In common with the City Corporation and the other livery Guilds of London the Company experienced a succession of vicissitudes of fortune commencing with the reign of Henry VIII and extending to the close of the Stuart period embracing exorbitant and in some instances unscrupulous calls for financial aid under colour of declaring their privileges and powers illegal and void.

The early records and Minute Books of the Company contain many entries recording the Crown's demands for money grants described as " Loan subsidies "—" The King's Great Charges " and " Benevolences "—the result of these demands as well as others of a similar nature was that towards the close of the reign of Henry VIII the Leather-sellers' Company, never at any time a wealthy Guild, became reduced to something like straightened circumstances. In fact it became necessary for the members of the Livery themselves to subscribe towards payment of the Company's debts, and this appears to have been done on more than one occasion, though at long intervals of time.

These entries in the early Minutes recording the Company's troubles and difficulties in this direction make very sad reading; but the most pathetic of them all is an entry of the 13th January, 1544, wherein it is recorded that, in order to meet the charges of the King, the Company was compelled to sell its collection of plate.

At this time the Company had only just entered into possession of the old Priory buildings of the Nunnery of St. Helen, and it is not difficult to understand with what pangs of regret and feelings of dismay the Wardens of the Company felt themselves compelled to adopt the drastic course of disposing of the Company's collection of plate.

The collection comprised silver cups, macer bowls, salt cellars and ornaments, all fully described and enumerated in the Minutes—plate that had been presented to the Company from time to time by former members, and some of which was in the Company's possession as far back as 1470. The following entry in the minutes is of sufficient interest to be quoted at length:—

“Memorandum that the XIIIth day of January anno 1544 yt was grauntyd and agreid at a Court then kepte at the Lethersellars Haule by the wholle assent and consent of the Master and Wardyns then being Thomas Kendale the Elder, Master—Robert farmer Edwarde lloyd and John butlar Wardyns with alle the Court of Assystance and alle the whole lyvere ther being present in consideracions of the gret charges at dyvers tymis sseting forth of sodiers in harnis to serve Kyng Henry the VIIIth in his warris into skotlande and also into Fraunce and to serve hym upon the sye and lande in other partis and for payment of Lone Subcydes and benyvolence with other great charges yt ys graunted and agreid that alle the plate belonging to the halle shall be sowld for Redy money to Paye these great charges and to be accomptid therefore in our yeris accompte as maye aper hereafter folloing by partigular passels what was soulede as here after followyth.” The items are set out in detail with full descriptions and weights and the amount realized by the sale was £93 8s. 2d.

At a later date the Company suffered grievously from the rapacity of Charles II who, alleging their Charters to be void and having enforced by a Writ of *Quo Warranto* a complete surrender of the Company's ancient rights and privileges, proceeded in 1685 for valuable consideration to grant an entirely new Charter curtailing many of the Company's ancient privileges and much of its former power and moreover making it abundantly clear that the Master, Wardens and Assistants held their respective offices merely by permission of the Crown. True it is that the Charter

itself bears an excellent and striking portrait of Charles, but however complimentary this may have been to the Leather-sellers, who indeed paid in full measure for the picture, it was poor consolation to the Company for the loss of many of its ancient rights and privileges.

From a perusal of the Company's Minutes of this period a feeling of intense hostility is seen to have existed towards the King, and not unnaturally. This feeling culminated shortly after the accession of William III and Mary, in the Company openly repudiating the Charter of Charles II. The act of repudiation was performed with due solemnity at a meeting of the Court of Assistants in 1689, when by order of the Court the Charter was brought into the Court Room, the Great Seal was torn from its foot and was broken into small fragments.

By an Act of Parliament passed in the 2nd year of the reign of William and Mary, Charles II's Charter was rendered void and by the same Act the Company was restored to its ancient rights and privileges.

The Company continued to carry on its work in Little St. Helen's, with its old Hall and surrounding buildings and gardens occupying the positions of the old Nunnery buildings, down to the end of the 18th century, when it was found that very considerable repairs were required; in fact the old Hall was in such a condition of decay that entire rebuilding seemed to be the only solution of the problem with which the Company was faced at that time. Owing, however, to the heavy cost of rebuilding or even carrying out the necessary repairs and to the difficulty experienced in letting the houses and tenements in Little St. Helen's and to the rather awkward lay-out of the estate with its narrow winding lanes and small courts, the Company at length decided that the old Hall and buildings should be taken down.

However beautiful to the eye of the antiquary these old buildings may have been or interesting on account of their historic associations, it is difficult to say with any degree of

certainty that they ought to have been retained, because perusal of the Minutes of the period will give a fairly accurate idea of the difficulties which beset the Court of the Company towards the end of the 18th century. Indeed it was only after very careful and prolonged deliberation that the apparently drastic step of demolishing the old Hall was decided upon.

In October 1795 the Court of the Company met "to consider the state of the Company's Hall"—their deliberations continued during the following three months, when the advice of their surveyor was taken upon the best mode of repairing or in the alternative of rebuilding the Hall.

In January 1796, it was agreed that the Hall was capable of repair but that the old parlour or Court Room would have to be taken down and buttresses put up to support the old Hall.

Plans were produced in July following, with estimates showing that the cost even of the necessary repairs apart altogether from rebuilding was entirely beyond the Company's means.

These facts show that the Company did not suddenly or wantonly rush to the conclusion that the old Hall should be demolished; but it would seem that the necessity for so great an outlay upon their Hall while the surrounding buildings remained inconvenient and formed an intricate group of houses at length induced the Court to undertake a scheme for the general improvement of the property with the resultant increase in the Company's permanent revenue.

In 1799 the old Hall and surrounding buildings were demolished, the entire site was cleared and Little St. Helen's, which for more than two centuries had formed a picturesque part of the City, ceased to exist.

The opening years of the 19th century saw St. Helen's Place, with its fine residential houses arising out of the dust, and the demolition of Little St. Helen's. Twenty houses, used at first for residential purposes, were erected around the Place

besides the houses and shops fronting Bishopsgate Street. And now a century later these in their turn are giving place to buildings more in keeping with the requirements of modern times.

The Company are trustees of a large number of charitable and educational trusts under its administration which have been handed down from mediæval times. These trusts comprise almshouses and pensions for the poor of the Company—exhibitions at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and formerly charitable gifts for prisoners for debt in the various London prisons.

Chief amongst its educational trusts is the Colfe Grammar School at Lewisham, a school for 325 boys founded in 1652 by the Rev. Abraham Colfe, Vicar of Lewisham, who endowed the School with property at Lewisham and at Sydenham. This trust has benefited largely by the generosity of the Company who have rebuilt the School out of their own private funds.