

A FEW NOTES ON THE MERCERS' COMPANY AND THEIR HALL.

Read to the Society at Mercers' Hall, October 27th, 1919.

BY

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THE history of the Mercers' Company goes back to a very early date, and one of the earliest mentions is the record of a grant about the year 1190 of a piece of land, formerly belonging to Gilbert Beckett, to the Master and Brethren of the Hospital of St. Thomas of Acon, and the Fraternity of Mercers were made Patrons of the Hospital. The land granted to the Master and Brethren was part of the site upon which the Hall now stands, and it is interesting to note that in the year 1248, Pope Innocent VI, in a letter to the Bishop of London, gave permission to the Master and Brethren to erect a Chapel, the Bishop at the same time allowing the consecration of a piece of ground for the purpose of a cemetery where the members of the House and others who so desired, could be buried there. In the year 1320, Pope John XXI permitted the burial within the Hospital of all who by will desired to be buried there. This was taken advantage of by considerable numbers of the Fraternity and members of the Mercers' Company, the last burial recorded being as late as 1824. I might mention that on two or three occasions when the ground in the Ambulatory has been disturbed, bones have always been found, sometimes close to the paving.

The first Charter was granted to the Company in the year 1393, and the Company paid the sum of £87 8s. 8½d. After the granting of the Charter, the Company used to meet in the Hall of the Hospital, and in 1413 they purchased a small room and a Chapel from the Hospital, this small room

becoming known as "Mercers Hall." About 1517, the Company enlarged this Hall by purchasing and rebuilding the Ironmongers House adjoining, at a cost of £2,735 16s. 1d.

In consequence of the Reformation, the Hospital, together with all other Institutions, was in 1538 surrendered to King Henry VIII, and in 1541 the Company obtained, by a grant from the King, certain premises, including the Church of St. Thomas of Acon, the Chapter House and Cloisters, and the Rectory and Church of St. Mary Colechurch, at a total cost of £969 17s. 6d. At the same time, the Company covenanted to find three priests and chaplains to say Masses for the King in the Church of the Hospital, which was thereafter known as Mercers' Church, and also, in every Sunday in Lent, to provide a learned man to preach a Sermon in the Church.

The property then acquired extended from the corner of Old Jewry and what is now Frederick's Place to Cheapside, then along Cheapside nearly to the corner of Ironmonger Lane, down Ironmonger Lane to Church Court, along the Court and turning to the south by the west end of Frederick's Place, and running at the backs of the houses on the south side of Frederick's Place to Old Jewry. In fact, it is practically identical with the block of property the Company now holds, and of which the Hall forms a part, except for the premises at the corner of Ironmonger Lane and Cheapside, which were purchased by the Company in the nineteenth century. It was at this time that the Company also entered into a covenant with the King to find and keep a Free Grammar School within the City of London, and also a sufficient Master to teach 25 children, which was the origin of the Mercers' School.

Mercers' Church at that time covered the site of the present Chapel, but extended much further westwards, probably to the end of the present Ambulatory, and it was also probably considerably wider. The Chapel was said to have contained a great number of monuments, but only one, that of Richard Fishborne, survived the Great Fire. This monument is now on the North side of the Ambulatory.

In 1666 the Great Fire of London destroyed the Hall and the Church, and the Company were in very serious straits as their sources of income were burnt down, and even their plate melted. The Royal Exchange, St. Paul's School and the Mercers' School were rebuilt, and then the Company commenced to erect their own premises. The Clerk's House was rebuilt in 1672, and the Hall and Chapel were finished in 1682 from plans prepared by their Surveyor, Mr. Edward Jarman. The Chapel was completed shortly afterwards. In the rebuilding, the Chapel only occupied a small portion of the original site of the Church, but the Hall was built on the first floor and carried on columns, thus leaving the old site of the Chapel open as an Ambulatory. The cost of the rebuilding then carried out was £11,881 3s. 4d.

The main staircase to the Hall at that time was out of the Ambulatory, and there is still in existence the old portcullis in the doorway at the bottom of the main flight of steps. The Hall, Court Room, Chapel and Ambulatory are very much the same now as they were when rebuilt, except that, of course, modern fireplaces have been put in, and some forty years ago, the large windows in the Hall were slightly altered and the present stained glass windows were placed in them at the time when, owing to the widening of Cheapside by the commissioners of sewers, the whole of the front to Cheapside had to be pulled down and rebuilt.

About ten years ago, the Clerk's and the two Beadles' houses, as well as the offices, were pulled down and the Company's new offices were erected on a portion of the site, but care was taken to preserve, as far as possible the general appearance of the entrance and courtyard from Ironmonger Lane, and the gate and the grille over are actually those which were in the old building.

I might mention that the carving in the large hall, with the exception of two of the panels which are modern, was the work of Grinling Gibbons, and was presented to the Company by a Buckinghamshire squire who had the shooting over some of the Company's estates.

I cannot conclude my remarks without a reference to Mercers' School. In the year 1447 following on a petition presented to King Henry VI by the Rectors of various parishes for the provision of a Grammar School, an Act of Parliament was passed allowing the petition, and a Grammar School was set up in the Parish of St. Mary Colechurch, under the Master of the Hospital of St. Thomas of Acon, the school being carried on in the church itself, in accordance with the custom of those days.

As I previously mentioned, the hospital was surrendered to King Henry VIII in 1538, the Company purchased the property, and, in accordance with the covenant made with the King, the Company in 1542 established a school for the free education of 25 children in the Church of the Hospital, which was then called "Mercers' Church."

After the Great Fire, the Company rebuilt a school in Old Jewry on what had previously been the site of St. Mary Colechurch. In 1787 Old Jewry was widened, and in consequence the School was pulled down. It was carried on temporarily in different parts of the City for some years, apparently under difficult circumstances, as at one time there was only one scholar, but in 1808 it was established in a house in College Hill and the number of scholars was increased to 35. In 1829, the Company rebuilt the School on the same site and the number of boys was increased to 70. Some 45 years later, a capitation fee was imposed on all except the 25 free scholars, whom the Company undertook to teach under their covenant with King Henry VIII. Shortly afterwards the school was enlarged and the number increased to 150 boys.

In 1892, the Company, to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the granting of their Charter, purchased Barnard's Inn in Holborn and erected a new school, under the supervision of Mr. Thomas Chatfield Clarke, where there are now over 250 boys.

I should mention that the old Hall of the Inn, now used as

a dining hall for the boys, dates back to the sixteenth century. The Inn escaped the Great Fire, but was very badly damaged in the Gordon riots at the end of the eighteenth century, when the distillery was burnt down on the site now occupied by Messrs. Buchanans'. The original buildings in the Inn were preserved and incorporated in the new school.