

Guilds, Society & Economy in London 1450-1800

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Ian Anders Gadd

Patrick Wallis

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Nigel Goose

This collection of essays arises from a conference hosted by the Centre for Metropolitan History at the Institute of Historical Research on 13 April 2000 entitled 'Revisiting the Livery Companies'. (1) With its promise to explore the history of London livery companies from a variety of perspectives, employing both historical and interdisciplinary approaches, and the diverse affiliations of its twelve authors, it holds out a very tempting prospect indeed.

The introductory chapter by Gadd and Wallis sets up the volume admirably. London's companies were the subject of contrasting opinions during the seventeenth century and, if the terms have mellowed since, the debate continues through to the present. New interest in the companies has been generated by academic London historians in recent years, but these essays and the conference from which they are drawn also reflect a much broader interest in the companies and their history: an interest that began with John Stow's study in 1598, and which has mushroomed in the last 150 years to produce a 'small mountain' of publications on the subject. All economic historians will be familiar with the seminal work of Cunningham and Unwin, which set up both the debate over whether the London guilds and companies were exploitative forcing houses of capitalism or beneficent social regulators, and the characterization of their history in terms of their 'rise and fall'. But the more fundamental question posed here is how, in the face of successive crises, did they manage to endure at all? Recent academic work has added political and social angles to the economic emphasis of earlier histories of these institutions, as well as offering comparative perspectives, but single-company studies have tended (with the notable exceptions of those by Thrupp, Archer and Berlin) to be what are described as 'house' histories, deliberately limited in focus.

From the early fourteenth century the freedom of London was equated with membership of one of these companies, which in turn also conferred political right. From this date they grew in number and importance until there were as many as 70 by the later sixteenth century, perhaps encompassing as many as three-quarters of the adult male population, a proportion that remained as high as one half even at the end of the seventeenth century. Their forms and procedures were endlessly reshaped and recreated; they were 'in a real sense social structures in motion' (p. 5), and their pomp and ceremony was at least partly a veneer over an underlying sense of insecurity. Nor was there necessarily a consistent relationship between company and craft. They were anything but monolithic, differing significantly one from another in terms of wealth, status and ambition, exhibiting discord as well as harmony, their history being as much about exclusion as inclusion. The excluded numbered among them servants, lodgers, transients, journeymen and labourers (and we might add aliens), but above all women, who scarcely feature in the company records unless they were the widows of freemen. Hence a study of the London companies needs to be read as only one of many possible histories of London.

In a particularly incisive essay, Ian Archer turns on its head the old orthodoxy concerning the companies' transition from an economic to a philanthropic role as the seventeenth century progressed. The period 1560-1640 is identified as the golden age of the London livery companies, as both their membership and wealth increased, and alongside their continuing importance as economic regulators their welfare role expanded too. Measurement of this expansion is, however, quite difficult. The figures available for the Merchant Taylors and Goldsmiths in the sixteenth century do not convincingly make the case once inflation is allowed for, while the tabulated data presented for the Merchant Taylors, Clothworkers and Grocers for the 1590s, 1630s and 1670s suggest that it was in the early seventeenth century that the growth of expenditure was primarily located.

At the same time the companies took new responsibility for managing endowments as trustees, expanded their range of provision to encompass loan stocks and exhibitions to the universities and provided often generous pensions and almshouse places for their members (at least 200 almspeople backed by pensions amounting to £600 per annum by the 1590s). Testamentary evidence from the early 1570s and mid-1630s suggests that the companies were less central to the charitable impulses of Londoners than were the parishes. Yet a tentative global comparison for the 1590s indicates that they may have provided almost 60 per cent of the parish total, and the early seventeenth-century expansion could have boosted this even further, while per capita comparisons for the 1630s suggest that they may have been able to compete with the poorer parishes if not the wealthier ones. Whatever the balance, the later seventeenth century saw dramatic falls in expenditure, as the burden of debt arising from the civil war years was capped by the Great Fire, causing a crisis in company finances that necessitated retrenchment, and which effectively blunted a tool that for so long had sustained loyalty, patronage and religious purpose.

Ian Gadd's paper on the printed histories of the livery companies is frustrating for both author and reader, for the evidence is sparse and its implications obscure. Does the publication of Stow's brief survey in 1598, elaborated by Munday in 1633, and the production of the first *printed* collection of coats of arms in 1596, really indicate 'increasing public interest in the companies from the 1590s onwards'? (p. 44). Gadd is duly circumspect in his interpretation, particularly as printed broadsheets were so ephemeral and the books so expensive. The apparent lack of concern on the part of the companies themselves to promote themselves through these media is interesting, especially in view of the importance attached to antiquity in general and heraldry in particular before the late seventeenth century. But the fact that such works (albeit often derivative) multiply in number in the later seventeenth century, at the same time as company finances became precarious, is perhaps even more significant, a conjunction that escapes notice here.

In an elegantly written contribution, James Robertson reviews the tensions between the expectations and experiences of aspirant Londoners through the glass of the Dick Whittington myth that was widely diffused in the late Elizabethan period. The importance of obtaining the freedom of the city through service, in order to reap the full privileges of citizenship, is emphasized as a feature singular to the capital. Poor Dick's initial unhappiness and flight before the bells encouraged him to 'turn again' also sits well with what we know of

the failure of such a high proportion of apprenticeships. Having obtained the mayoralty, Whittington's gesture of cancelling the debts of Henry V and his prominent presence at important royal ceremonies underscores the civic pride of the capital, while his generous benefactions – manipulated in the telling to render them acceptable to a protestant city – emphasize an inclusivity that sits uneasily with the local loyalties of most Londoners.

Every urban historian will be familiar with the formal ordinances published by early modern companies and guilds, and equally familiar with the problem of deciding between image and reality. Matthew Davies circumvents this problem for the Merchant Taylors' Company in the fifteenth century by using less formal manuscript records in conjunction with accounts and court minutes. The formal structures of the craft – admission to the livery, freedom and apprenticeship – emerge as central concerns, as do attempts to regulate the activities of English and alien foreigners. In this sphere, a relatively flexible policy was overtaken by stronger regulation and even opposition towards the end of the century, as London began to grow once again. In the realm of quality control, however, the company played a much more limited role, which perhaps testifies to the sophistication of the market and the effectiveness of consumer choice by this period. We are, of course, still left unclear as to how effective the company's measures were, for if repeated levying of fines gives a firm indication of intent, it could also reflect a continuing failure to remedy the problem once and for all.

Company regulation is similarly the topic of Patrick Wallis's essay, which examines the process of search in the wider context of contemporary approaches to law and order. The emphasis, he finds, is upon submission and apology, rather than upon punitive measures, and a process of negotiation and compromise reflected a pragmatic approach to the realities of the companies' powers, as well as an emphasis upon reintegration and fraternity. This refreshingly sophisticated analysis is followed by detailed examination of transgressions in the Apothecaries and Stationers' Companies in the early seventeenth century. These are perhaps unfortunate choices because (as the author accepts) both had special reasons to be more concerned with uncovering abuses than other companies, and may have been more socially cohesive than some larger organizations. Wallis finds that roughly 30 per cent of the members of each were guilty of breaking ordinances at one time or another, while offences were almost equally common throughout the company hierarchies. We are left with two paradoxes. If at least the short-term, moderated costs of offending could be quite substantial, why were offences so common? And if the principle of regulation was so clearly accepted, then why were even senior members of these companies able to transgress without serious damage to their long-term reputation?

Ronald Homer's discussion of the searches and regulation of prices by the Pewterer's Company is largely factual. Only the Goldsmiths and the Pewterers gained the right of search nationwide, through a royal charter granted in 1474 in the case of the Pewterers. The evidence available for the late fifteenth century and the period 1636-1702 indicates that these searches were impressive in their coverage, even national by the later period. Additional local searches by JPs were authorized by an act of parliament of 1503 and these must have helped to fill the gaps between the London searchers' relatively infrequent visits. The main explanation offered for these efforts is financial, though the company may also have been concerned to prevent its prices being undercut by poor quality provincial goods. Prices were closely regulated too, and the Pewterers even gained control over the quality and price of its raw materials. Such regulation drew increasing resentment towards the end of the seventeenth century; by the end of the eighteenth the company had been completely bypassed and its influence was at an end.

John Forbes examines the regulatory practices of the other company that came to have national rights of search – the Goldsmiths – granted by a series of royal charters between 1327 and 1505. The extensive records of searches conducted and goods seized is taken to indicate that 'the company carried out its duties conscientiously during these centuries' (p. 116), but no threshold for a clear definition of what might constitute conscientious behaviour is offered. Challenges to the company's authority came earlier than for the Pewterers, for it was being questioned in both London and the provinces by the early seventeenth century, which encouraged the company to wage a long and frustrating campaign to seek endorsement of its powers via an act of parliament. Uncertainty increased as the century progressed, with evident disharmony within the company, and the last recorded search took place in 1723. During the sixteenth century alien

goldsmiths had been required to take an oath of obedience to the company, but here too regulation proved more difficult with time. Despite the wave of complaints against aliens from company members in the later seventeenth century, an act of 1700 and subsequent legal decisions further undermined their power. Only its control over hallmarking was retained, which at least provided it with an active role in the government of its craft that few other corporate bodies sought or achieved.

Perry Gauci, like Archer, turns conventional wisdom on its head by emphasizing the continued relevance of the livery companies to London's mercantile elite during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, despite the decline in their regulatory powers in the face of suburban expansion and their well-attested financial difficulties. For if historians have long recognized their political importance in qualifying their members for the parliamentary franchise, they also retained a socio-political role as one of the various city forums for informal association between members of the mercantile elite. While in general companies were struggling to attract members from the mid-seventeenth century, a clear majority of a sample of 850 merchants active in the 1690s took up the freedom, and at least 38 per cent became liverymen, figures that rise yet higher if only native-born merchants are counted. They were to be found in 27 companies, but heavily concentrated in the most prestigious, with some exhibiting a familial or ethnic bias, or attracting traders with a particular geographical interest. If the companies did not play an overt role in the politics of overseas commerce, it is likely that they provided informal forums for discussion of these issues, as well as providing opportunities for networking and conviviality. It would be interesting to examine further samples from the eighteenth century to determine how long this association between merchants and the companies continued.

The final essay, by Giorgio Riello, analyses the relationship between trade, guild and family in the eighteenth-century Cordwainers' Company. The weakness of the company as a political force by the eighteenth century is striking, while suburban growth and the costs of prosecuting unfree craftsmen diminished its ability effectively to regulate the trade. Apprenticeship declined too, but only from 1710, decadal enrolments falling from their peak of almost 800 in the late seventeenth century and settling down at around 170-190 by the 1740s. But, it is argued, there is a qualitative aspect to the question of apprenticeship too. While increasing numbers of apprentices were drawn from London itself or the immediate locality, there was also a high degree of continuity within the trade as well as a pronounced familial dimension, its unusual degree of occupational homogeneity being explained by the trade's relatively lowly status. Nevertheless, in cordwaining as in other trades, redemption and patrimony became increasingly common means of entry, and despite some attempts to come to terms with changing realities via the institution of special licences and certificates of the right to trade, by the 1770s a dissociation between membership of the company and the practice of the trade had become evident. With fewer apprentices completing their terms, the shortage of skilled labour in an expanding market was filled by permanent journeymen. Women, always formally marginal to the company, disappear completely from its records, their continuing contribution taking place in the domestic rather than the public context. These symptoms of and responses to the challenge to the regulatory powers of the Cordwainers add some nuances to the conventional story of decline without subverting it, while in the long term neither the regulatory nor the familial framework could contain the burgeoning English shoe industry.

The essays are followed by three 'responses' from discussants at the conference upon which the volume is based. Mark Jenner quite correctly notes that there is no firm agreement between the various authors on either the timing or even the notion of the 'decline' of the companies. This is in part explicable in terms of their very diversity, although patronage and political favour need to be taken on board too. The need for a combined social and intellectual history is well made, for in so many spheres – such as attitudes to foreigners – these two branches of the discipline have long been strangers to each other. Derek Keene emphasizes the importance of the livery companies as institutions which express aspects of that uniquely dominant organism that was the City of London, and rehearses the various ways in which their tentacles reached out to the nation at large, through regulation, patronage, charity, education, migration and cultural example. As a medievalist, he is also concerned to emphasize the depth of their roots. This, and their multi-faceted and flexible roles as craft, neighbourhood, religious and charitable concerns, is perhaps the secret of

their longevity. Finally, Joe Ward similarly re-emphasizes the national, indeed international, significance of the London companies and their role within a cosmopolitan city that reached out to the nation at large and which constituted the hub of international commerce: features that sit somewhat paradoxically with periodic attempts to restrict competition from foreigners, both English and alien.

This compact volume conjures a clear impression of what was undoubtedly a most successful and stimulating conference, the proceedings of which fully deserve publication. Perhaps with one exception, each essay focuses squarely upon the central subject matter of the London companies, and additional coherence is produced by the excellent introduction, stimulating responses and an appropriate degree of cross-referencing. There are no weak links here, and even if some contributions are more empirical than analytical, others more interpretative and firmly situated within an evolving historiography, each makes a significant contribution on its own terms. It is particularly pleasing to see such a successful manifestation of cross-fertilization between university-based historians and historians operating in very different professional contexts.

These essays have added considerably to our understanding of the development of the London companies in the early modern period, adding new layers of sophistication to nuance, and occasionally subvert, conventional wisdom. And if the detailed research on which they are based occasionally raises the question of typicality, and the broad claims made for their wider significance occasionally exceed the bounds of evidence and belief, they will still have established a framework, or set of frameworks, for future work, which must now commence from a very different starting point indeed. As for broader historiographical issues, this collection reaffirms the crucial importance of the early modern period as one of transition, with quantitative change in the first half evolving into qualitative change in the second. And if the chronologies offered here are a little disparate, it is the later part of the seventeenth century that again emerges as pivotal, underpinned by demographic and economic developments, but with the civil war years re-staking their claim as a crucial catalyst of change.

The editors are grateful to Professor Goose for his thorough and generous review: they write 'We are obviously unable to speak for our individual contributors, but as we feel that his review does not highlight any general concerns about the collection as a whole or any of the individual chapters, we are happy to accept his review without further comment'.

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