

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE COMPANY

The origins of the Worshipful Company of Blacksmiths are lost in time. However, recent research for the new History of the Company has disclosed a first reference to the Company in the records of the City of London as March 1299. It is known that from the 1300's to the Reformation the Company was known as a Fraternity, having strong religious connotations. The Patron Saint of the Fraternity was St. Loie who is a French Saint from the Limoges region and today is the Patron Saint of the Blacksmiths. (He is sometimes referred to as St. Eloye or St. Loije but in Latin he is referred to as St. Eligius).

Our main Charters were granted in 1571, 1604 and 1638 enabling us to become the fully-fledged Livery Company we are today, but the earliest written records we have in our possession are dated 1496.

The term Livery is a relic of feudalism; originally indicating not only clothing but the allowance of food and wine which the barons, prelates and monastic houses granted to their servants. It was from the monastic orders that the Guilds, in 1346, adopted a particular mode of dress, which at one time consisted of a coat, a surcoat and a gown. The latter with its hood being reserved for ceremonial occasions. Today, when an applicant takes his Oath as a Liveryman, he should be clothed with the livery which is the gown. If a hood is used it should be placed over the right shoulder. Up to the late 18th century the Livery exercised virtually complete control over the craft, their role in life being:

1. Protection of the customer from shoddy workmanship;
2. Protection of apprentices from the harshness of their Master, and
3. Ensuring the Master did not over-charge for his wares.

In those days a person could trade within the walls of the City only if he possessed the Freedom of the City of London and by the same token he could take unto himself an apprentice. It followed that an apprentice, as soon as he had served his indenture, during which he learned the "mystery" of his Craft, he would obtain his Freedom of the Company or Guild and be free to serve any Master or to set up on his own.

In the case of our Company or Livery, it enabled the free blacksmith to trade and practise his Craft inside the City boundaries and within a four mile radius of the City Walls (by a later Charter increased to seven miles, probably as a means of removing the noise of the hammers and the accompanying smells from the over-crowded housing areas).

Today, no one can become a Liveryman of a Livery Company without first obtaining the Freedom of the City, but such entry to a Company does not necessarily require a proficiency in the Craft. Regrettably almost all the privileges attached to the honour of the Freedom of the City have been eroded through time.

In 1785 we sold our Livery Hall in the City of London as our control over the Craft largely disappeared. Of necessity blacksmiths moved away from the City and it was impossible to control their wares. Apprentices began to come under the wing of several of the unions which sprang up for the purpose of their protection. However, apprentices are still welcomed today under the aegis of the Company and the City of London and our support of the craft has been greatly strengthened through our Awards system and by establishing criteria necessary for the progressive stages of the awards.