

A Short History of the Worshipful Company of Armourers and Brasiers

The Armourers and Brasiers' Company first emerged in 1322 when a group of twenty-six Armourers and Helmetmakers was granted the right to oversee standards in the making of armour and helmets in and around the City of London. From these humble beginnings it grew in coherence and standing, and in the middle of the Wars of the Roses in 1453 was granted its first charter of incorporation by King Henry VI. In 1515 the Company absorbed the Blademakers. Its reputation was further enhanced in Henry VIII's reign by an increase in skills which emulated those of the Greenwich armourers imported by Henry from Germany and Italy. By Elizabeth I's reign, the Company was accepted as equal to the foreign armour makers.

In times of peace the Company had diversified into brass making and, when armour went out of use after the Restoration, it turned over to this secondary craft. In recognition of this change of direction Queen Anne granted what is now the Company's operative charter to the Armourers and Brasiers' Company in 1708. Unlike many City livery companies, it continued its oversight of the trade until the industrial revolution taking apprentices from all over England and from all walks of society, with special arrangements for charity children.

In the 19th Century, the brass trade moved to Birmingham and the Company lost some of its close associations but, encouraged by the City Livery Companies Commission of 1878, it held on to its association with the trade by subsidising education about and within metallurgy.

In the 20th Century the Company continued and extended this association by forming the Gauntlet Trust which encourages and funds research into Materials Science. The membership of the Company reflects this interest and its finances have been organised to maximise the Company's support.

Military Associations

Because the Armourer's craft was so closely allied to its customers, the links between the Company and the armed services have always been strong and continue so to this day. Armourers were present at the battles of Crecy and Agincourt and the Company sent men and arms to support Henry VIII during the Pilgrimage of Grace, to support Queen Elizabeth I at the time of the Armada, and to support Parliament in the Civil War. One member fought under Sir Cloudesley Shovel in the Dutch Naval Wars of Charles II's reign. Members also served in the Zulu Wars, the Boer War and the two world wars of the 20th Century. Present members have served in the Gulf and in Afghanistan.

Religious Associations

At the time of the granting of the first charter in 1453 the Armourers were also a fraternity dedicated to St George and were maintaining a chantry to St George in St Paul's Cathedral. The religious preoccupations of the Company are markedly reflected in the Charter and in the minutes throughout the Company's history. Praying to saints was abolished by Henry VIII and Parliament at the Reformation, but St George continued to be a figure of significance with the Armourers because he was the patron saint of England and of the Order of the Garter. The Company held a procession in which he was represented at a 'seemly banquet' in 1585. St George's Day has been celebrated by a sermon every year, including during the two world wars, since 1588 when the practice was instituted by the will of Roger Tyndall.

The Hall

The Company has occupied its present site since 1346 but, for legal reasons, was only able to purchase the property, first through trustees, in 1428, and outright in

1456 three years after the granting of its first charter. It is described in the first deed as "the Dragon and five shops". The money was raised among the membership who also paid for the glazing of the windows. By 1454 it consisted of "the Dragon and two shops", three of the shops having been used in the conversion of the building. The Hall narrowly escaped the Great Fire and in late 1666 had a counting house, a parlour, a buttery, a larder, a kitchen with three chimneys, a hall, a beer cellar, a lumber room, a posting room, a court room, a withdrawing room, an armoury and a place of easement.

In the 18th Century the Hall was constantly repaired and refurbished. By 1835 however, the building was costing more to maintain than it was thought to be worth and the Court decided to rebuild. The New Hall, first occupied in 1841, was designed by Joseph Henry Good, the Company's surveyor, who was also surveyor of St Andrew's Holborn and a pupil of Sir John Soane. The Livery Hall was Gothicised in 1871-3.

Treasures, Interior Decoration and Plate

When the Armourers bought the Hall in 1428 they immediately set about adapting and furnishing it and plate (from the Spanish "plata" for silver) was given to ornament the tables and to use. The Company's oldest surviving piece, recorded in an inventory of 1546, is a wooden mazer ornamented with silver. The earlier plate had to be sold, much to the Company's chagrin, to pay for Henry VIII's wars with France. A George and Dragon sculpture given and probably made by William Vynyard in 1528 was repurchased in 1975. The armour displayed in the Hall dates from 1530.

Contacts with Other Livery Companies

The first Court book records a letting of the Hall to the Founders in 1497. In 1555/6, in Mary I's reign, the Cutlers Company and the Armourers discussed an amalgamation but it failed because the Armourers, while giving way to the Cutlers as the more senior in nearly every other way, felt that the Company should be allowed to keep its Hall as the more commodious of the two, although it was conceded that the Cutlers' Hall had superior sanitary arrangements provided by the River Walbrook which flowed through its site. In James I's reign, the Farriers and the Honourable Artillery Company both shared the Hall with the Armourers on negotiated leases from 1612.

During the latter part of the 16th Century and up to 1663, the Company disputed with the Blacksmiths, the Cutlers and the Gunmakers over rights of search. A proposal by the Gunmakers to join the Company was reluctantly turned down in 1637 just before the Civil War. As a lesser Company, the Armourers were associated under the leadership of the Goldsmiths Company with the Cordwainers and the Painter Stainers for the supply of coal and corn for the City for use in times of scarcity, reluctantly for the venture in Ireland and for contributions to Parliament in the Civil War. These ancient close associations are still honoured and the Masters of these and other Companies regularly exchange hospitality.

The Company was one of the sixteen which, together with the City Corporation, contributed towards the establishment in 1878 of the City & Guilds of London Institute, the internationally renowned provider of technical and vocational qualifications. In 1910 the degree level teaching of the Institute was merged into the newly created Imperial College where it continues today in the guise of the Faculty of Engineering. The Companies' contribution towards the establishment of Imperial

College is marked by a display of their shields in the newly renamed City & Guilds building on Exhibition Road.

Women and the Company

The first charter was granted to the brothers and sisters of the craft, and women have been admitted by widowhood, often taking over their late husband's business, and patrimony throughout most of the Company's existence. Today they are admitted by redemption also, some being drawn from the Company's alumnae under the Gauntlet Trust scheme, a modern adaptation of apprenticeship. Today women comprise a quarter of the membership.

The Coat of Arms

The Company's present Coat of Arms was granted in 1709 and incorporates the former arms of the Armourers granted in 1556 with a new coat for the Brasiers. The two mottos are "Make All Sure" for the Armourers, and "We are one" for the joint Company. The supporters are two Men at Arms in plumed helmets and with drawn swords. The crest is a demi-man of arms with a mace of war. The coat was used from 1709 but illegally, due to joint oversight at the College of Arms and by the Company. The College failed to issue the Letters Patent and the Company to pay the dues. These errors were rectified with an official issue of the coat in 1970.

Today

The history of the Company is remarkably consistent in its priorities. The original armourers and helmet makers of 1322 were devoted to the craft and its standards. Their successors in the 15th Century added charitable duties, a lively participation in Christian practice and worship and in City cooperation and ceremonial. Women have participated from the beginning. All these characteristics survive today with the connections to ancient craft now combined with the Company's charitable work which is its most important activity.

Grants are made to good causes under the headings of: Community, Armed Forces, Youth & Education, Medical & Health, the Arts, Arms & Armour and Christian Mission. However, the bulk of the charitable output is focussed on Materials Science which reflects the Company's traditional interest in cutting-edge metallurgy.

A full history of the Company, Men of Metal, by Elizabeth Glover is available from Armourers' Hall on 020 7374 4000 or by emailing info@armourershall.co.uk