

THE CONSTRUCTORS – GENESIS AND GROWTH

John Kennedy Melling FCA, FRSA, FFB

THE CONSTRUCTORS – GENESIS AND GROWTH

John Kennedy Melling FCA, FRSA, FFB

Kaleidoscope

Forming a livery company is the opposite of buying a limited company ‘off the shelf’. If a group sets out to found a livery company or guild, as it is called outside London, they must plug in to two centres, tradition, culture, religion, and some of the better qualities of well-organised life. Two thousand years – the Romans had guilds, one is mentioned in the New Testament, they flourished in Anglo-Saxon times, after the Norman conquest, and were at their strongest worldwide in medieval times, right up to the 19th century. They carried out so many functions of commerce and industry – employers’ association, consumer protection, training the apprentices, benefit society, a social organisation, and a religious factor – for the guilds were originally religious fraternities. Perhaps the best description of guilds is that of James Anthony Froude , (1818-1894) the historian:

They were in the nature of benefit societies, from which the workmen in return for the contributions which they had made when in health and vigour to the common stock of the guild might be relieved in sickness or when disabled by their infirmities of age. This character speedily attracted donations for other charitable purposes from benevolent persons, which could not find any better trustees than the ruling members of these communities, and hence arose the numerous charitable gifts and foundations now entrusted to their care. They also possessed the character of modern clubs. They were institutions in which individuals of the same class and families assembled in social intercourse.

They were powerful – enough to force an English king to change the order of his Coronation breakfast – enough to alter the course of the Civil War and its result.

Obviously the liveries or guilds (French *Corporations*, German *Innungen*) were each based on one particular trade or craft, but this is not the Law of the Medes and Persians, because they might coalesce, fade away, absorb weaker or fading groups, or suddenly be essential for new needs, crafts or professions. Sometimes there was opposition from similar guilds, claiming poaching, theft of work areas or actual personnel, or even disputing the need for a guild trying to establish itself. (We shall see how some of these problems affected the original Builders Company – as this was the original name of the Constructors). Makers of Playing Cards disputing the Painter-Stainers painting miniature playing cards; the Carmen

battling for many years with the now extinct Woodmongers over carriage in the City; the longstanding feuds between the Saddlers and the Loriners (makers of bits and pieces), Joiners and Ceilers and Painter-Stainers – and always the fight against the foreigners, sometimes refugees, trying to set up business in the City or just outside without joining the relevant guilds.

If you try to compare the City of London guilds with those of other countries, say Scotland, Switzerland, Germany, etc. you will find two significant differences. The European Hammermen will include, Goldsmiths, Silversmiths, Pewterers, Founders, and even Surgeons(!) whereas London splits these. The workers in wood correspond with London Carpenters, Joiners and Ceilers, Turners, Coopers, Wheelwrights. There are guilds which have thrived abroad but not in London: House Servants, Maltmen, Tailors, or Cheese Carriers. Among the traditional almost communal guilds we may take note that in Vienna the premier guild is the Builders.

The other differing factor aboard is the way other guilds have established strong positions. The Guild of Chimney Sweeps in Dusseldorf – if they find a faulty chimney they must report it; the Photographers, Ladies' Tailors, Orthopaedic Shoemakers, the list continues. Of course, there is the list of new liveries seeking recognition in the City of London during the last few years – Fuellers, Firefighters, Security Professionals

Then again some guilds have faded away because there was no need for them. The Haumers, makers of those round helmets as seen in Laurence Oliver's *Henry V*, known in America as Hank Sank; the Pinner's with their Hall in Addle Street. They and the Wire Sellers were absorbed into the Girdlers. Starch Makers, Pursers, Hatband-makers, Galoche makers and Virginal makers – all faded away.

Upholders were originally also furniture makers, Fletchers and Bowyers were one guild, Broderers once included Tapicers or carpet makers, as Chaucer listed. The Watermen acted for a time as firefighters and hackney carriage drivers, but not for long. The Fellowship of Hackney Drivers started on 12th April 1990 – but there were "Hakenie horses" in Rochester in 1396, and Oliver Cromwell sanctioned a Group, the control of which was to pass from the Court of Aldermen to the City of Westminster in 1694, so today the members each adopt a name from the original fellowship.

The Tobacco Pipe Makers and Tobacco Blenders date from 20th December 1960, but the very first company had a charter of incorporation on 5th October 1619.

Some guilds adopted modern techniques to add to their influence. The Horners taking over the plastics industry; the Fan Makers the Ventilation systems, the Poulterers, the frozen food manufacturers.

Take into account the Brown Bakers amalgamating with the White Bread Bakers, the Clockmakers seceding from the Blacksmiths, then the Scientific Instrument Makers leaving the Clockmakers – perhaps you can now see why kaleidoscope is the most appropriate term to describe the ever changing scene and pattern of the guilds over the centuries.

The 19th century changed the pattern even more drastically. The Reform Act of 1832 enlarging the suffrage, did the guilds much damage. In Europe Napoleon may have liked Liberté, Fraternité and Egalité but he certainly didn't think much of Quality because he abolished the guilds throughout the Continent, even in Switzerland. Later they resumed active lives as they did in London and the rest of England but at a struggle.

One London guild was down to six members, but is now back at full strength. A York guild had two members, of mature years, who were forced to call a meeting to bring in a slew of new members, whereupon one of the originals resigned. The Fullers of Coventry in 1839 were down to one survivor. The Worshipful Company of Smiths of Lichfield comprised Goldsmiths, Cardmakers, Ironmongers, Pewterers, Braziers, Plumbers, Cutlers, Nailors and Spurriers in the continental style of the Hammermen, from 1177 (smith means to pay originally as in a benefit society). No meetings were held from 1896 until 1943 when William Gallimore claimed to be admitted as the eldest son of a freeman, so the mayor called a special Court meeting and the life of the guild, was assured.

Today the Court of Alderman prescribe seven essentials before a guild can be created:

- 1 It must not be already represented
- 2 A significant number of the members must be in the actual trade or craft (many new guilds have a closed shop for the trade or profession)
- 3 Meetings must be held in the City
- 4 The members must be fit and proper and with City connections
- 5 The membership must be at least one hundred
- 6 Its financial position and funds must be sufficient to foster the actual craft
- 7 It must be able to prove that its efforts to foster its profession and to further technical education have already produced beneficial results.

Never again will there be the opportunity for such an attack as took place in the 1880s by the Liberal Member of Parliament for Chelsea, Josephs Firth Bottomley Firth, which resulted in complete vindication of the guilds' integrity in a large report in 1885, and the subsequent formation of the City and Guilds Institute (which perhaps should better have been titled Guilds and City Institute).

Those seeking to form a guild must first form a company without livery status, then seek livery status, followed by a receipt from the Court of Aldermen of letters patent, and at some time to seek the Grant of Arms separately. The Makers of Playing Cards showed their arms on the Beadle's staff in 1826, but only many years later was their position regularised by Norroy and Ulster King of arms who presented the formal grant of arms at a Court dinner on 31st March 1982!

When a guild is finally officially recognised it is allotted a number in the Order of Precedence. When the Constructors was so acknowledged in 1990, Past Master the late Merrick Burrell, commented that we were the last of the double-figure guilds. When the Information Technologists became No. 100 in 1992 the BBC invited the author to broadcast on this milestone.

The order of precedence is fixed and immutable, save when in the past some guilds have disappeared. It is significant that between the two World Wars only two new guilds were instituted and both in connection with transport. In 1926 the Honourable Company of Master Mariners, number 78, and the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators, number 81, in 1929. Companies number 79 and 80 were the Solicitors and the Farmers but dating respectively from 1944 and 1952. Two dozen new guilds have been incorporated since the end of the Second World War.

The order of precedence relating to numbers 6 and 7, Merchant Taylors and Skinners, with their famous alternation, gave us the saying "at sixes and sevens". Many other words or phrases have come into the English language: "masterpiece", "forestall", "above board", "sent to Coventry", and the "baker's dozen" or thirteen, for the members to be sure they were not giving short weight in buns or loaves, with dire punishments and humiliations to ensure they didn't break the rules again. Burning faulty hats outside the Mansion House, called by the French *la maison maison*, must have had a moving effect on the Lord Mayor as well as the defaulting liveryman, but there is a lesser-known phrase we owe to guildry. Take this short casual poem which is jotted down purely as a simple example:

If to a Constructors Dinner an honoured guest,

Your welcome will be warm and fine of course will be the fare.

The aim of fellowship must always be the best

So must tradition, like the steaks, for ever be most rare.

Sounds odd, doesn't it? It is known as the Poulterers' measure, lines of either twelve or fourteen syllables, as the Poulterers were not always too accurate in measuring out a dozen eggs

Now let us leave the kaleidoscope and see the Constructors, or rather the original Builders, set against this colourful backcloth.

Birth of the Builders

By 1970 a concatenation of events had caused me to spend a considerable time on guild matters. In 1969 I had two books published on the same day by two different publishers, both on theatre. John Rotheroe, head of Shire publications, warned me I might be branded as a theatre writer, especially as I had been a critic for *The Stage* newspaper for 12 years. He asked what other subjects could I cover – the 19th century – police and crime, antiques, and guildry. So this became the pattern. In 1970 I was approached by the late Deputy Bernard L. Morgan CBE (Bunny), Hon. Secretary of the City Livery Club, later President and Deputy Patron, the head of the famous building company of Loweth, the King Maker of the City of London. Like Colonel R.J. Blackhan in the 1920s, if you wished to be Sherriff or Lord Mayor you needed Bunny's support. He told me I was to be the new editor of *The Liveryman*, the livery club magazine. So I was.

In 1973 the first Edition of my *Discovering London's Guilds and Liveries* was published by Shire and John Rotheroe personally took copies to all City bookshops the day before the Lord Mayor's Show. A year later I was on the Court of my mother Company, the Poulterers, by patrimony.

I found I was not only consulting City figures but my advice was sought by City Companies. I devised a Bibliography for the Coopers; I wrote *The Poulterers of London Booklet* in Jubilee year, 1977, designed for all new applicants to the guild. I also wrote and published (quite satisfactorily) *London and the Guilds of Europe History, Development and the Links of Today* in the 1970s as I was consulted by two Lord Mayors to help them link up with Europe. I personally visited the guilds of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Paris, Brussels, Vienna, Basle, Zurich, and corresponded with many others in Europe.

I met A Maxwell Caplin MBE, who was founding the new Builders' Company at a City dinner. I recall we later lunched together at the Livery Club then at the lovely Sion College on the Embankment.

He welcomed my advice on the formation as he was finding it not as straight-forward as he had hoped, and naturally I offered my help gladly as I did to other companies contacting me. He was receiving opposition from existing companies, for example, the Carpenters, number 26 in the Order of Precedence. You must recall that until the Great Fire of London in 1666 shops and houses were built of wood. He made some mistakes, not serious in themselves, but ammunition for the ungodly, as the Saint would say. He bought a Loving Cup, which was too heavy to lift even when empty. He naturally wanted to be the Founder Master, always a position of honour in a Guild history, but some criticized him for hanging on to office for more than a year (despite some Guild Masters being elected for two-year terms by constitution).

As we note in the handy and informative *Yearbook*, he called the first Meeting at the impressive Great Northern Hotel, in Kings Cross, a landmark for decades. Ten famous names in different disciplines attended, with apologies from three other personalities, most of the thirteen later Masters.

To give some indication of how the Company struggled, grew, matured and triumphed, I will quote from the relevant extracts from the entry in the six editions of my own guilds book.

1st edition 1973 No entry, of course.

2nd edition 1978 (I joined in July 1977 as a member, no livery status yet)

BUILDERS

“The Company of Builders was established in May 1976 and is restricted to leading figures in building and civil engineering and in academic spheres, such as architects and professors in relevant subjects. Prominent officers of the Faculty of Building were prime movers in its genesis and became founder office bearers. Vice President A. Maxwell Caplin, MBE, as Master; Past President C.F. Beal as Senior Warden; President Brian Scruby, CBE, as Renter Warden; and Past President and Life Vice-President F.L. Howe as Clerk and Beadle, as this company has reverted to the 15th century custom of one man holding both offices. The company was one of the first to admit properly qualified women members and soon was admitting sons of existing members.

Within the first 18 months the list had closed at 300 with a waiting list of 200 and arrangements were in hand to approach the Court of Aldermen with an application for a Charter. The first plate received consisted of a loving cup, rose bowl and a silver and ebony beadle's staff. A Company of Builders Charitable Trust was set up, and links were forged with universities and with the Guilds of Dusseldorf."

Colours: black and gold.

3rd edition 1981

BUILDERS

The small changes in the entry were the omission of the names of founding members, and to amend the last sentence to "A company of Builders Charitable Trust was set up and links were forged with universities and with the Guilds of Dusseldorf, visited in 1978, York and Sheffield."

4th edition 1988

CONSTRUCTORS (originally BUILDERS)

There were no changes other than the name, except at the end of the first paragraph was added:

"It was recognised as a City Company without livery on 8th June 1985" – and the reference to other guilds linked was omitted.

5th edition 1995

CONSTRUCTORS (99)

The alterations were – at the end of the augmented last sentence of the first paragraph was added:

"The grant of livery was made on 12th June 1990, letters patent were presented on 20th September 1990" and at the end of the second paragraph about the links, was added:

"The company also supports two travelling scholarships. The company has made many official visits to other guild cities; Dusseldorf, Sheffield, York, Aberdeen and Chester. The company's only Honorary Liveryman, the late Sir Allan Davis, served as Lord Mayor in 1985."

6th edition 2003

CONSTRUCTORS (99)

The changes were:

At the end of the first paragraph – added:

“An innovation is in admitting scholars who have completed their term as Yeomen Constructors.”

Add to the end of the second paragraph:

“Aberdeen, Chester and Heidelberg. A Forces Link Cup has been forged between the company and the 101 (London) Engineer Regiment, in the presentation of the cup known as the Shafting and Shoring Team Trophy with scroll to the regiment. The Sir Ian Dixon Scholarship is sponsored by the company together with the Chartered Institute of Building (the late Sir Ian Dixon was a Warden of the Company). In April; 2002 the Company sponsored the inaugural City University Lecture, to which all City Masters were invited. In 2003 a dinner was held in Coventry as a courtesy to country members.”

The Constructors

Now we can look at some of the changes in these five entries, and how we set about them.

You will see the name changing in 1988. This reduced the opposition to the Charter. There had been some very facetious suggestions from Company members of alternative titles!

The reference to Sir Allan Davies. I recall at a Dinner where he was present, I walked up to Maxwell in the chair, and whispered that the Loving Cup was going wrong. “Go and sort it out” he whispered back, so I went to both sprigs and told some to sit, others to stand and how, and got it organised, because we all knew that if he went back to the Court of Aldermen, even as our sponsor, this would go against us. Now it is not a grievous fault for the Cup to go wrong. One City Livery Company has recently advised members that as many do not know the procedure it will be printed, and some Liveries print the routine in the Dinner programme.

Before my first edition came out in 1973 I was invited by the Court of the Barber-Surgeons to Dinner to check if my book should be supported, even though the Clerk of the Mercers had told the Major Twelve they could support me! I was seated next to the late Sir Lionel Denny OBE, MC, JP, the doyen of past Lord Mayors, who started grilling me. I asked how many should be standing for the Loving Cup? “Three”. “Then why, Sir Lionel, are there four of your members standing?” “Because we’re doing it wrong”. We got on well after that.

The visit to Dusseldorf came about from my personal links with that beautiful German city. In the 1970s my late mother and I often visited Cologne for me to write

on different subjects. For example the magnificent new Opera House. We became friendly with Reinhard Linsel and his wife in the tourist office. When he was promoted to head the department at Wuppertal, with its overhead railway, we visited there, and he then became Head of Publicity and Protocol of the City of Dusseldorf, with its 17 museums, opera house and strong guilds. Maxwell agreed with my suggestion to take the Company there as courier, and he and I went there first to plan the operation, stay at the famous Park Hotel mentioned in so many books as *the* place to stay. We arranged the hotel, the excursions by coach and river, the banquets, and when we had sorted this out, we strolled in the park in the sunshine – when we were suddenly pursued by the largest swan I had ever seen, who was obviously anglophobe. We looked at each other, then looked not to the order of our going, but sprinted down the path until we felt it safe to slow down to a canter.

When the visit took place, I had gone on ahead a day earlier to sort out final details like the hotel rooms, dinner arrangements etc. Merrick Burrell took all the robes, and arranged for members to collect them from his car in the airport car park. When the party arrived, Maxwell asked me to give a briefing to the members. Brian Scruby whispered that I had given him a suite in the lower floor, was it right? I told him we had already arranged an excellent room for Maxwell, a river trip down the Rhine, a banquet at a *recherché* restaurant by the river where I shall never forget that the President of all the guilds asked to take my mother in to dinner. The Burgermeister gave a reception on Saturday midday at the City Hall. Gifts were exchanged, and to our horror the City's gift to the guild was much grander than ours – a mistake we never repeated. At the banquet Fred Howe asked me to be a Steward that night. On Monday morning a trip to Bonn was fixed. The present President of the guilds is the son of the Member of the German Parliament in 1978 as President, and says he well remembers our visit.

I must stress that it is not wrong for Masters to innovate a custom. (Remember the Oxford anecdote: “It is a tradition of the college that undergraduates shall not walk on the grass in the quadrangles. This tradition starts next Monday”.) When I was Master of the Poulterers I inaugurated asking a lady to respond to the Toast of Ladies and Guests at my Ladies' Night at Drapers' Hall, and my mother and my lifelong friend, Barbara Miller, the actress, responded. I also started the ‘Peel your own Prawns’ evenings at Billingsgate, as a non-expensive event.

If you look at the list of the first Masters, after Brian Scruby followed Maxwell, the next were Peter Allen, Merrick Burrell and then Dr Socrates P Christie. This was because the

original idea was to ask the Court to serve as Master in alphabetical order but this was later dropped.

The late Peter Allen, Master 1979/80, sought my help for his year, as he mentioned at the Hustings in 2000. I had devised a series of entertainments for City of London Festivals and organisations, entitled ‘The Toast is...’ with Barbara Miller and other professional actors, actresses and musicians of my acquaintance or my practice. We staged one for Peter at Painter-Stainers Hall on 27th February 1980. Over lunch at an Italian restaurant near his Victoria office and his Arts Club, we discussed a plan to visit Sheffield, then York, then Chatsworth the seat of the Dukes of Devonshire, the present Duke, KC, PC, MC, one of our two Honorary Members. In asking me to act as Courier again, we determined not to be mean over the presentation to the Duke, although at that time some two million pounds of his trust treasures were on exhibition at the Royal Academy. I rang Peter: “What do you say to a Rowlandson print of the Dairy in Rotten Row in 1820, where his ancestor (probably) had a glass a milk after his morning canter along Rotten Row!?” Peter gasped, “What will it cost us?” “Ten guineas – there is a tiny tear in the mount, which a skilled framer, one of my clients, can mask.”

Again my mother and I went up a day early. I did a BBC Radio Sheffield broadcast and attended the dress rehearsal of an historical play directed by the City’s Publicity Officer for our dinner with the Master Cutler. BUT – the Master Cutler wasn’t keen to attend our Dinner, especially in his Cutlers’ Hall, because he wasn’t sure of our standing in the City. After much discussion he agreed.

Another night we went to the Crucible theatre to see *The Wiz*, a black version of *The Wizard of Oz*, followed by backstage tour. On Saturday afternoon we visited the historic Blu John Grotto, and I vividly recall the attractive, elegant wife of an Assistant, now a Past Master, who was wearing stiletto heels in the Grotto – I shouldn’t have worried, she was very surefooted.

On the Sunday we arrived a trifle early at Chatwsorth, but the Duke and Duchess (one of the Mitford girls) were most hospitable and delighted to see us. I have several photos of His Grace happily clasping the framed print we presented. He took the party around the palace, but Her Grace sent me round her famous chicken farm, where otherwise extinct breeds are now flourishing.

The Aberdeen visit, which in legal terms is “within the memory of man” came about fortuitously. When my mother passed away, Merrick invited me to say for a long weekend at his Edwardian country house, Vann House, once the home of the terrifying Captain T.M.

Brownrigg, head of Associated-Rediffusion, whose fourth floor office in Kingsway was known to the staff as “the quarterdeck”. The same invitation came in 1990 when my mother and my lifelong friend, Barbara Miller, passed away. Derrick fixed up a meeting with Kenneth S.A. Davies, who decided that Aberdeen would be his company visit, and asked me to organise it with Merrick and his son John, also now a Past Master, as my stewards. It was an eventful visit – an 18th century fishing village, the new entertainment complex, dinner in the Guild Hall where we taught the Lord Provost the Loving Cup, and I learnt the custom of giving the piper, the Pipe Major of the Grampian Police Drum and Fife Band, “Piper, here’s your dram” in a quaich. When we toured around, we visited a bothy, which a friend of mine and her husband had converted to a beautiful residence, who didn’t mind a coach-full of professionals examining the plans, roof, walls, floors, throughout. A pink Scottish castle, which the architect owner, who held the title of Baron therefrom, showed us round. We visited the last granite quarry, then came the surprise. We visited the workshop of a former Guild Deacon Convenor, a cabinet-maker who repaired the items from Balmoral. He asked me to call Kenneth in, and I whispered to him what to expect. He gave the Company a hand-made gavel and block, which in those days sold at over £90. Kenneth asked me to be the first to use it to summon the company to the coach, then at night I used it as Toastmaster at the Guild Hall Dinner mentioned earlier.

And finally...

We have seen how these early days have adopted, adapted, and matured the Company. Early mistakes have been rectified, new customs absorbed, the aims of the City guilds “Work Together, Pray Together, Play Together” have been adhered to, with one of the strongest guild links with Europe to date. Traditions have been followed scrupulously, and we must not forget other guilds have sometimes tried to slip a variance in, unsuccessfully. The Broderers are unique in having a Master’s Song. One year in the 1970s one Master asked a famous singer in the entertainment to sing it for him. He was booed loudly. At the same time an incoming Master of the Bakers asked if, in view of his age, meetings could be held in the morning instead of the evenings. He was warned if he couldn’t carry out his duties as did his predecessors, he should not serve!

So the Constructors have a good record, a good history, a good ethos – new members should appreciate this, as we hope they will from this account, so the company can flourish “Root and Branch for Ever”.

19 March 2004

Word count: 4606

© John Kennedy Melling (2004)