

ORIGINS OF THE GUILDS

Chester has had trade guilds for 800 years. In a document dated 1190-1193, the Earl of Chester confirmed the citizens' Guild Merchant. Individual craft companies, or guilds, later developed to protect the interests and welfare of the merchants and craftsmen of Chester.

Among the earliest guilds to emerge were the Tanners, who are first mentioned in 1361, the Weavers in 1399 and the Ironmongers and Carpenters in 1422. 19 Guilds are listed in a book of 1475-6.

In the Middle Ages the Guilds were very important to the life of the City. They encouraged trade, set wages, organised apprenticeships and work conditions and gave help to their sick or poor members.

The Guilds were also involved in the social life of Chester. They organised great events such as the Mystery Plays and the Midsummer Show.

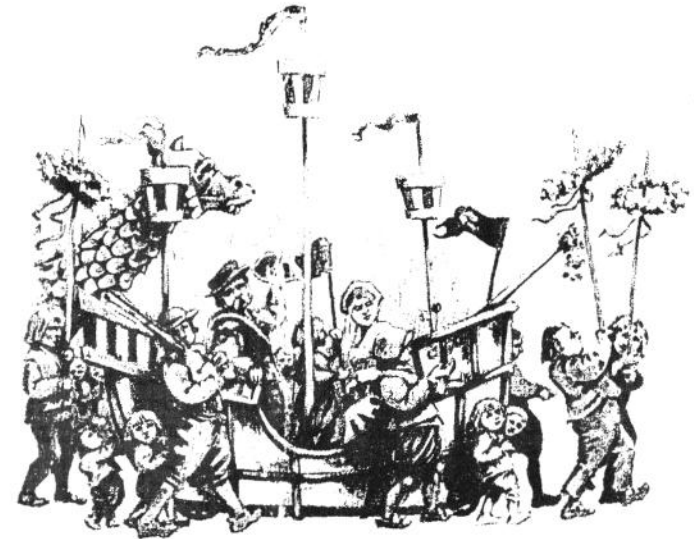


EXTINCT COMPANIES

Nineteen companies are listed in the Mayor's book for 1475-76. Of these, several later amalgamated, for example the mercers with the ironmongers and the coopers with the bowyers and fletchers. Others assumed different names, for example the barkers and the cooks, now known respectively as the Tanners' and Innkeepers' Companies. Three have become extinct: the drawers of Dee, the hewsters and the fishmongers.

In the 16th century the water leaders and drawers of Dee performed 'Noah and his Ship' in the Chester cycle of Mystery Plays. They petitioned the City for a charter in 1587. They are usually thought to have been water carriers, but may have been connected with salmon fishing.

Hewsters were dyers of cloth, and in the 16th century the Dyers' Company produced the play 'Antichrist'. The fishmongers were associated with the bellfounders, who do not appear elsewhere as a company, in producing 'Whit Sunday: The Making of the Creed'. Both companies were said to still be in existence in 1794, when they paid small subscriptions towards the St George's Plate at the Chester races; nevertheless, they were both reported in 1835 to have been long extinct.



Produced by Chester City Record Office for the Freemen and
Guilds of Chester 1992

WET AND DRY GLOVERS' COMPANY

Glovers are recorded in Chester from 1380 and stewards of their company are named in a Pentice Court roll in 1445. They are amongst the companies listed in a Mayor's book for 1475-76 and in the 16th century joined the parchment makers, to produce the play 'The Raising of Lazarus from Death to Life' in the Chester cycle of Mystery Plays.

In October 1562, when one of their members, John Harvey, was elected a Sheriff of Chester, they were involved in a serious dispute; some of the company were summoned to Ludlow to appear before the Council in the Marches of Wales.

Glove making was for long said to have been one of Chester's staple industries and survived the destruction of all the glovers' houses under the walls of the City in the siege during the Civil War.

The company had its own meeting house by the City walls at the east end of Duke Street. By 1835 it had 22 members.

Wet glovers produced their gloves in leather; dry glovers used other materials, such as cloth.



WRIGHTS' AND SLATERS' COMPANY

The wrights, slaters, tilers, daubers (house painters) and thatchers first appear in the 16th century as an association of craftsmen in the building trade; they produced 'The Nativity of Our Lord' in the Chester cycle of Mystery Plays. In 1584 the Assembly ordered the wrights, sawyers and slaters to be incorporated as a reward for work they had done 'at the new house of shambles'. By 1658, the company was known as the Carpenters', Slaters' and Sawyers' Company, but was often referred to simply as 'the Carpenters'. The thatchers' craft in Chester suffered a severe blow in 1671, when the Assembly decreed that all houses in the main street of Chester should have slate or tile roofs, in order to minimise the risk of fire.

Because their trades were so closely related, it is not surprising that quarrels broke out between this company and the Joiners' Carvers' and Turners' Company. In 1653, for example, the Assembly tried to settle one dispute by ordering that both companies should have liberty to buy and sell all such timbers and boards as they needed.

In 1794, the company was known by its present title, but in 1835 they were again as the Carpenters', Slaters' and Sawyers' Company. At that time, it comprised 21 or 22 members, who met at least once a year in a local inn.

Originally there was only one Guild, the Guild Merchant. During the Middle Ages each craft gradually set up its own Guild, to protect the interests of its own craftsmen.

Over the centuries, some crafts joined together to form larger Guilds. Few crafts were rich enough to stay independent. There were frequent disputes and Guilds often split up and joined up with other crafts.

Newer companies were formed for crafts such as the building trades which developed in the Tudor Period.

A few companies, such as the Fishmongers, no longer exist. Some trades, such as Fletchers and Bowyers, died out when the need for their products declined.

There are now 23 Chester Guilds, but few members now practice their company trade.



TRADE & CRAFTS

The Guilds reflect the economic life of Chester in the Medieval and Tudor periods. Among the most important Guilds were those providing food for the city (Bakers, Butchers, Brewers). Leather work formed the largest group of occupations and many Guilds were associated with the leather trade (Tanners, Skinners, Glovers, Saddlers, Cordwainers). Clothing and textile trades were also very important in Chester, making up a fifth of all craftsmen in the city (Weavers, Merchant Tailors, Merchant Drapers). The building and hardware trades often combined to form bigger companies (Joiners, Carvers and Turners, Wrights & Slaters).

Sometimes craftsmen involved in the same trade worked in the same part of town. Shoemakers Row was in Northgate Street, Mercers' Row in Bridge Street Row East and the Skinners' Houses were between the Castle and the River Dee.

The Smiths Company met with special Royal favour when Prince Arthur visited Chester in 1499. A silver badge showing the company's arms was presented as a reward, the story goes, for reshoeing the Prince's horse.

GUILD MEMBERSHIP

No craftsman or trader could work in Chester unless he was a freeman and a member of the relevant guild.

Apprentices served at least seven years to learn their trade. They could then become freemen of the City and then seek admission to the appropriate craft guild.

To become a freeman, a man had to be the son of a freeman, have served his apprenticeship to a freeman or be admitted by order of the City Assembly. Today almost all freemen and Guild members are admitted by birth. New freemen are enrolled at the annual Pentice Court.

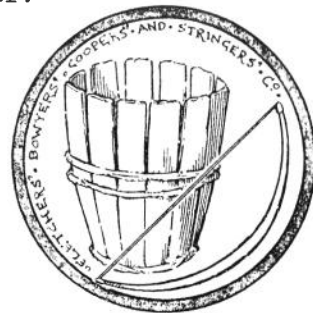
The Guilds were always quite small, varying in size from 20 to 60 members. Women could not become freemen, but widows of guild members who carried on the family business could be admitted to a guild.

POLITICS & TRADE

The Guilds controlled the economic life of Chester. A craftsman had to be a member of a Guild to set himself up in business and he could practice no other craft than his own. Outsiders could only trade in the City if they paid tolls or came to the special Fairs held in the summer and autumn.

There were often disputes, as each Guild fought to protect its own position and prosperity. To settle these disagreements and to enforce their privileges, the Guilds turned to the Mayor or the City Assembly.

The Assembly was the ancestor of the modern day City Council. Its members were mostly also Guild members, so the Guilds were able to influence the political life of the City. Until 1835, only Freemen could vote in city and parliamentary elections. The Guilds continue to work closely with the City Council to promote the prosperity and image of Chester.



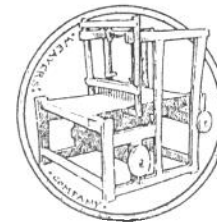
TANNERS' COMPANY

Trades concerned with leather were important in Chester in the Middle Ages and the tanners probably existed as an organised body in 1361, when they offered the Black Prince twenty marks (£13 6s 8d) and a perpetual annual payment of 6s 8d for letters patent forbidding others to meddle with this craft. This charter, granted in 1362, was rescinded in 1370. In the list of companies in a Mayor's book for 1475-76 they appear under the alternative name of barkers, because oak bark was used in the tanning process.

By the later 16th century, they had established their position as the company producing the first in the cycle of Mystery Plays, 'The Falling of Lucifer'. Despite this privileged position, the tanners appear not to have received a charter of incorporation.

In the early 18th century, they corresponded with Chester's members of parliament over the tax on leather and the export of oak bark to Ireland.

In 1835, the company comprised 10 members and met annually in an inn.



WEAVERS' COMPANY

The weaving trade in Chester was both important and organised by 1399, when many master weavers took part in an affray against the journeymen opposite St Peter's Church on the feast of Corpus Christi. Stewards of the company are named in a Pentice Court roll in 1438-39 and by the middle of the 15th century, it was apparently associated with the fullers and the chaloners. The former, based in the fulling mills on the Handbridge side of the Dee, carried out part of the cloth finishing process; the latter were blanket makers. The weavers and walkers (or fullers) appear together in a list of companies in 1475-76 and in the Chester cycle of Mystery Plays produced the last play, 'The Last Judgement'.

In the 15th century, the journeymen weavers had their own company, but it had disappeared long before the weavers received their charter from the Mayor and Citizens in 1583.

For most of the 18th century, the company met in a building in St John's Churchyard, probably the Hermitage, used earlier by the Shoemakers' Company. By the end of the century, however, the company held its meeting in local inns, for example the 'Boot' in Eastgate Street, the 'Pied Bull' in Northgate Street and the 'Blossoms' in Foregate Street. By 1835, the company had 10 members.

SKINNERS' AND FELTMAKERS' COMPANY

In 1433, the Mayor and Sheriffs of Chester were ordered to find and punish all 'foreigners' who used the trade of skinner and shoemaker within the liberties of Chester. Stewards of the Skinners' Company are named in a Pentice Court roll for 1448-49 and the company is amongst those listed in a Mayor's book for 1475-76. In 1483, Edward, Prince of Wales, ordered that no skinner or shoemaker was to practice that trade in Chester without licence of the company on pain of £10.

In 1608, there were 36 masters in the company. The skimmers mainly pursued their trade in the south part of the City, near the river. Skinner Lane was closed in the early 19th century because of the rebuilding of Chester Castle. In 1835, there were only two members of the company, but it had revived by 1863, when new rules and regulations were issued.



SMITHS', CUTLERS' AND PLUMBERS' COMPANY

The Smiths' Company is amongst those listed in a Mayors' book for 1475-76. In 1501, the cutlers, pewterers, founders, cardmakers, girdlers, [arrow]head makers, wiredrawers and spurriers appear to be associated with the smiths in the same company, but in 1521 the founders and pewterers still had their own stewards who entered into an agreement with the stewards of the smiths to combine for the Whitsun play, Corpus Christi procession and maintenance of the priest of St Loy's Chapel. The plumbers were incorporated in the company in the early 17th century.

Relationships within the company were often strained, for example in 1626, when the Assembly was asked to arbitrate between members using each other's trades and in 1681, when the pewterers unsuccessfully petitioned for separation.

In the Chester cycle of Mystery Plays, the smiths, furbbers (polishers of weapons and armour) and pewterers produced 'The Purification of Our Lady'.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the company had its own meeting house in Commonhall Lane. By 1835, however, the 10 remaining members held their annual meetings in an inn, their meeting house having been sold in 1778.

No charter to the company has survived, but the Smiths' Company has a silver badge presented by Arthur, Prince of Wales, when he visited Chester in 1499.

CHARITIES

The Guilds gave help to their sick and poor. The archives contain many references to payments to old and 'decayed' members. Sometimes nursing care was paid for by a member's guild. The Guilds often also gave help to craftsmen from other towns who were travelling through Chester.

Some Guilds had a rule which required members to attend brethren's funerals, which could also be paid for by the company.

The Owen Jones Charity was established in 1658 and still benefits the Guilds today. Owen Jones was a butcher who owned land at Minera, near Wrexham. When he died, he left the income from the land to the Guilds.

Originally, poor freemen were supported by money from the charity. Today it is used to give education grants.



ENTERTAINMENTS

The Guilds have always played an important part in Chester's social life. In the Middle Ages they produced the Chester Mystery Plays. The Plays were stories which the Guilds performed over three days. Each scene was performed by a guild or group of guilds on carriages which were pulled around the City. The plays were banned in the 1570s, but have been revived in the last 40 years.

The Guilds also staged the Midsummer Show. This was a procession through Chester, with giants, stiltwalkers and characters from the Mystery Plays.

The Show was held every year from about 1498-9 until the 1670s. There were also contests and races on the Roodee. An early version of football, without many rules, was played through the streets. It was banned in 1540, because it led to fights.

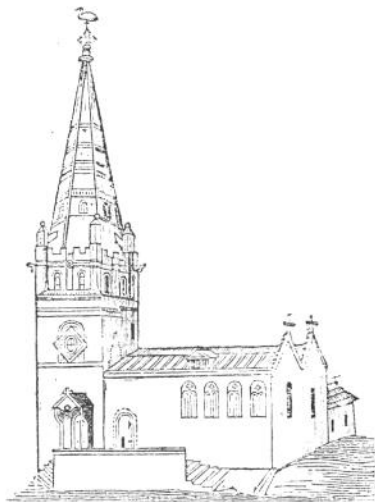
THE GUILDS TODAY

23 of the original Guilds survive. New freemen are admitted each year at the Pentice Court ceremony in the Town Hall. The Lord Mayor of Chester presides over the Court. The Guilds then walk in procession through the City to the Guildhall. In 1992 the Freemen and Guilds decided to admit women for the first time.

Every autumn the Guilds hold a banquet in the Guildhall, followed by a service at St Peter's Church.

The Guildhall is used for many events and social functions, as well as meetings of the Guilds Council.

The Freemen and Guilds of Chester keep close links with the Freemen of England and with the Guilds of other historic cities, such as York and Coventry.



THE GUILDHALL

The Guilds have only had a Guildhall since the early 1960's. In earlier times, the Guilds met in rented rooms. Many companies used rooms in the Phoenix Tower, now called King Charles Tower.

The Guildhall was a church until about 1960. Holy Trinity Church was founded in the Middle Ages but altered in later centuries. In the 1860s it was virtually rebuilt by the Chester architect, James Harrison. The church used to have a spire steeple. There were many memorials, including one to the Reverend Matthew Henry, the famous Presbyterian, who died in 1714.

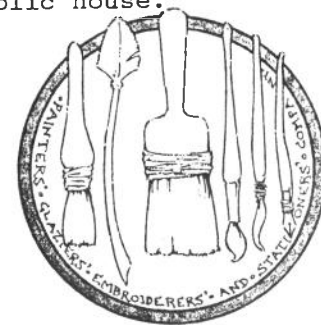
The Museum is housed in the old vestry of the church. The Guildhall is used for both public and Guild events. There is a Council Chamber for meetings of the Guilds Council and Committees.

PAINTERS', GLAZIERS, EMBROIDERERS' AND STATIONERS' COMPANY

These four crafts developed in the early 16th century. The painters were heraldic painters: the glaziers catered for the growing use of glass; the embroiderers embellished materials and the stationers were concerned with bookbinding and book selling. In 1534, members of these crafts successfully petitioned the Mayor, Aldermen and Common Council for a charter of incorporation. In their petition, they cited their long association in the production of 'The Shepherd's Offering' in the Chester cycle of Mystery Plays.

Amongst the company's best known members in the 17th century were the four Randle Holmes, heraldic painters, antiquarians and officials of the College of Arms. During the Civil War, Randle Holme II made hasty sketches of the City's gilt plate, melted down to pay Charles I's Irish troops. In 1655 he made the first recorded attempt to organise the city's records.

In the 17th century, the company met in the Phoenix Tower which was named after the painters' emblem of a golden phoenix. During the Siege of Chester, the company was forced to abandon the tower because of ordnance planted on it. It was later restored to the company which met there until c.1765. By 1835, its 23 members were meeting annually in a public house.



SADDLERS' AND CURRIERS' COMPANY

Saddlers are recorded in Chester from 1392-93. In 1472, their company was given a monopoly by Edward IV to last for 40 years. In the 16th century cycle of Mystery Plays, the saddlers produced 'The Castle of Emmaus and the Apostles'. In 1639, the company was granted another charter, on this occasion by the City. The saddlers amalgamated with the curriers, who were leather dressers. The company was one of the three responsible for presenting prizes for the Shrove Tuesday races held on the Roodee after 1540.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, they fought to protect their craft against the shoemakers and the cutlers. Their dispute with the latter was over the sale of spurs.

The saddlers originally had their own meeting place, the Saddlers' Tower on the city walls at the east end of Abbey Street. It was demolished in 1774. By 1835, in spite of the continuing demand for their products, the company had only 5 members.