The City of Coventry Freemen
and
The Freemen’s Guild

A Brief History

including a description of
The City of Coventry Armorial Bearings

£1.00
The Freemen of Coventry

What is a Freeman?

Originally Freeman was a definition of status in feudal society but, in England, it later came to mean a man possessing the full privileges and immunities of a city, borough or trade guild to which admission was usually by birth, apprenticeship, gift or purchase.

To become a Freeman in Coventry one must serve as an apprentice or as a pupil for a set number of years. This must be to a trade or profession covered by a Master who is a Company representative.

An Indenture (or Certificate of Apprenticeship) is signed under seal, or by hand by the apprentice, his or her parents (or guardian), and by the Master.

It is then duly registered with the Lord Mayor’s Secretariat (Office). This document covers the training agenda and education of the apprentice and is given a start and a finishing date.

At the age of 21 years or 5 years after signing the indenture, the apprentice is then able to become a Freeman of the City by means of Servitude. It is not possible to achieve this by Patrimony (birth) or Redemption (payment) in the City of Coventry. This is unique.

A Freedom ceremony is conducted by the Lord Mayor as and when numbers are sufficient. The candidates swear an Oath of Allegiance to the City and the Monarch before being admitted.

After becoming a Freeman one can join the City of Coventry Freemen’s Guild which looks after the affairs of all Freemen.

It is a great honour to be a Freeman of this ancient City, with all its traditions and rich foundations dating back a thousand years.

It is with pride that we realise that neither money can buy the Freedom nor influence acquire it, and that it can only be obtained on one way – by Servitude.

Armed with the Oath of Allegiance, signed by the Lord Mayor under Corporate Seal, a Freeman has, in a way, a passport to any city or town in the world because it is undeniable proof that they are skilled in their particular trade or profession.
Origins of the Freemen

At Baginton the Romans built the Lunt Fort and a full gyrus for the retraining of captured Iceni Horses. The later Coventry Anglo Saxon settlement and St Osburg’s nunnery were burnt by the Danes in 1016. It was these nunnery remains that Earl Leofric gifted with half of his estates, for the creation of Coventry Priory in 1043. The centre shield of Coventry’s Coat of Arms reflects this status.

The first Freemen’s Charter is understood to date from 1153, and was obtained from Ranulf Gernon, the fourth Earl of Chester who had inherited Coventry after the Norman invasion. The Burgesses (or Freemen) of Coventry were granted the same laws and customs of Lincoln (who copied London) and the right to hold land in free burgage. This charter was confirmed by a Charter from King Henry II in 1182.

With large sheep farms at Coombe and Stoneleigh Cistercian Abbeys Coventry became the centre of the Midlands woollen cloth and associated trades. This created a wealthy City by the fourteenth century.

The earliest surviving record of an apprentice was to a merchant in 1317. There was a female apprenticed to a whittawer purse maker in 1336.

The first Merchant Guild of St Mary was formed in 1340 and permission was given to build a Guild Hall in 1342. The Guilds of St John and St Catherine were then formed in 1342 and 1343 respectively. These first three Guilds had, by 1392, amalgamated into the powerful Holy Trinity Guild which had been founded in 1364. The Guild was abolished in 1546 [by Henry VIII] because of its religious connections.

In those days it was important to become a Freeman so that one could ply one’s trade or profession without taxes or tollages. At this time the usual length of an apprenticeship was for seven years to become a Freeman.

The Freemen became very powerful people and were numbered amongst those who had voting rights. They played a very prominent part in the running of the Guilds but in those early years a merchant could obtain the Freedom of the City – for trading – by being a member.

The Guild was reformed as the City of Coventry Freemen’s Guild in 1946.
Craft Guilds grew out of the Merchant Guilds and in 1449 the following trades were in existence:

**Tailors**

**Shearmen** - Skilled worker who sheared the nap from cloth.

* Draper is a wholesaler, or especially retailer of cloth, mainly for clothing. A draper may additionally operate as a cloth merchant. The drapers were an important trade guild.

* Weavers is a textile craft in which two distinct sets of yarns or threads are interlaced to form a fabric or cloth.

**Smiths** – a person who works in metal e.g. *Blacksmith* specialises in the hand-wrought manufacture of ferrous (iron) metal objects) and *Goldsmith & Silversmith*.

**Wire- drawers** Made wire by drawing the hot metal through dies.

**Corvisors** - Originally, a leather worker using high quality Cordovan goat leather from Spain for such things as harness, gloves and riding boots.

**Mercers** - a merchant or trader who deals in textiles.

**Dyer** A person who works with dye.

**Walkers or *Fullers**
a person who works in woollen clothmaking which involves the cleansing of cloth to eliminate oils, dirt, and other impurities, and making it thicker.

**Butchers**

**Bakers**
Early Trades in Coventry (cont.)

Barbers

Fishmongers

Pinner s Pin maker.

Tilers - Worked with roof and floor tiles.

Girdlers - a maker of belts and girdles, (no longer closely related to their original trade).

Whittawers - white leather worker; made saddles and harnesses.

Wrights is a Skilled workman, especially in constructing items. Used together with the trade i.e. wheelwright. From the Old English word "wryhta" or "wyrhta", meaning worker or maker.

Skinners - dealer in hides.

Barkers - a person who attempts to attract patrons to entertainment events, such as a circus or funfair, by exhorting passing public.

**Tanners - Tanned (cured) animal hides for leather making.

Saddlers - makes, repairs sells saddles or other furnishings for horses.

Cordmakers A person who twisted yarn together for dress trimming (Cord sewing)".

Masons - Stone cutter or dressser.

Cooks

** Still in existence

With acknowledgements to the website - Old Occupations terms - http://rmhh.co.uk/occup/s.html
Freemen’s Rights

Freemen had the right to graze their cattle on common land within and surrounding the City until 1927, but this privilege still appeared on the oaths until 1937.

Coventry wanted to expand and offered to buy back some of the common land. The Freemen were not keen to exchange their rights for hard cash and preferred to receive other lands in lieu.

They were mindful of the times of 1828 and 1834 when land they held was obtained by compulsory purchase for the purposes of constructing the Holyhead Road Turnpike and the London to Birmingham railway line respectively.

In 1843 the moneys paid to the Freemen by the London and Birmingham Railway Company and the Holyhead Road Commissioners were used to found the Freemen’s Pension Fund (the Freemen’s Seniority Fund). To this day certain Senior Freemen are entitled to payments from it.

Subsequent Inclosure Awards were made in 1860 and 1875 when a mixture of cash and other lands were offered.

Acts of Parliament

1772 This Act enabled all eligible applicants who had served a 7 year apprenticeship to obtain their freedom. Also in 1772 the Corporation was given the exclusive right of swearing in new Freemen, a right abused at subsequent elections. In 1780 the Mayor enrolled a number of men as Freemen for their voting powers. These were called “Mushroom Freemen” as they sprung up overnight!

1781 Abuses arising from the previous Act were corrected by laying down procedure that had to be followed to admit a Freeman. It was then not necessary to serve one’s time to a Freeman but could be to a Company or organisation.

1920 The qualifying period of apprenticeship necessary for admission to freedom of the City was reduced to 5 years. This was confirmed by an Act in 1927.

1981 The qualifying period was still five years but could be made up of increments of time (as prescribed by the trade or profession) plus a period of working time in the trade or profession.
City of Coventry Armorial Bearings

Original Arms

The crest, a cat-a-mountain, or wild cat, is generally considered to symbolise watchfulness.

The shield is coloured Red and Green. The Red half represents the Earl Leofric and the Green half the Coventry Priory.

The device is a golden elephant and on its back a gold castle with three domed turrets.

Revised Arms - with supporters

In 1959, the supporters comprising the Eagle of Leofric (husband of Lady Godiva) and the Phoenix were granted to the coat of arms.

The Black Eagle recalls the ancient Coventry and the Phoenix arising from the flames represents the new Coventry, reborn out of the ashes of the old.

The helmet, with the visor closed, is that of an esquire, as with all boroughs.

The motto “Camera Principis” (the Prince’s Chamber) is held to refer to Edward, the Black Prince.

The Manor at Cheylesmore was at one time owned by Edward’s grandmother Queen Isabella, and eventually passed to him.
The City of Coventry Freemen’s Guild

Since its incorporation in 1946 The Freemen’s Guild has looked after the affairs of the Freemen.

**Principal Objectives**
To do everything possible to enhance the good reputation of the City of Coventry and to further the welfare of all its citizens.

To encourage and assist the Citizens and Freemen of Coventry to realise their public and civic responsibilities and to serve their City in every way which individually and collectively is open to them.

With proper regard to the general public interest and without infringing the rights, duties and powers of The Lord Mayor, the City Councillors, the Magistrates and the other governing authorities of Coventry, to maintain and develop the rights and privileges of the admitted Citizens and Freemen of Coventry.

To afford means of mutual information between Freemen of the City of Coventry.

The Freemen’s Guild holds regular meetings and organises many social events for their members throughout the year.

For further information, and on how to join The Guild please contact The Clerk to the Guild - telephone 024 7668 9863