

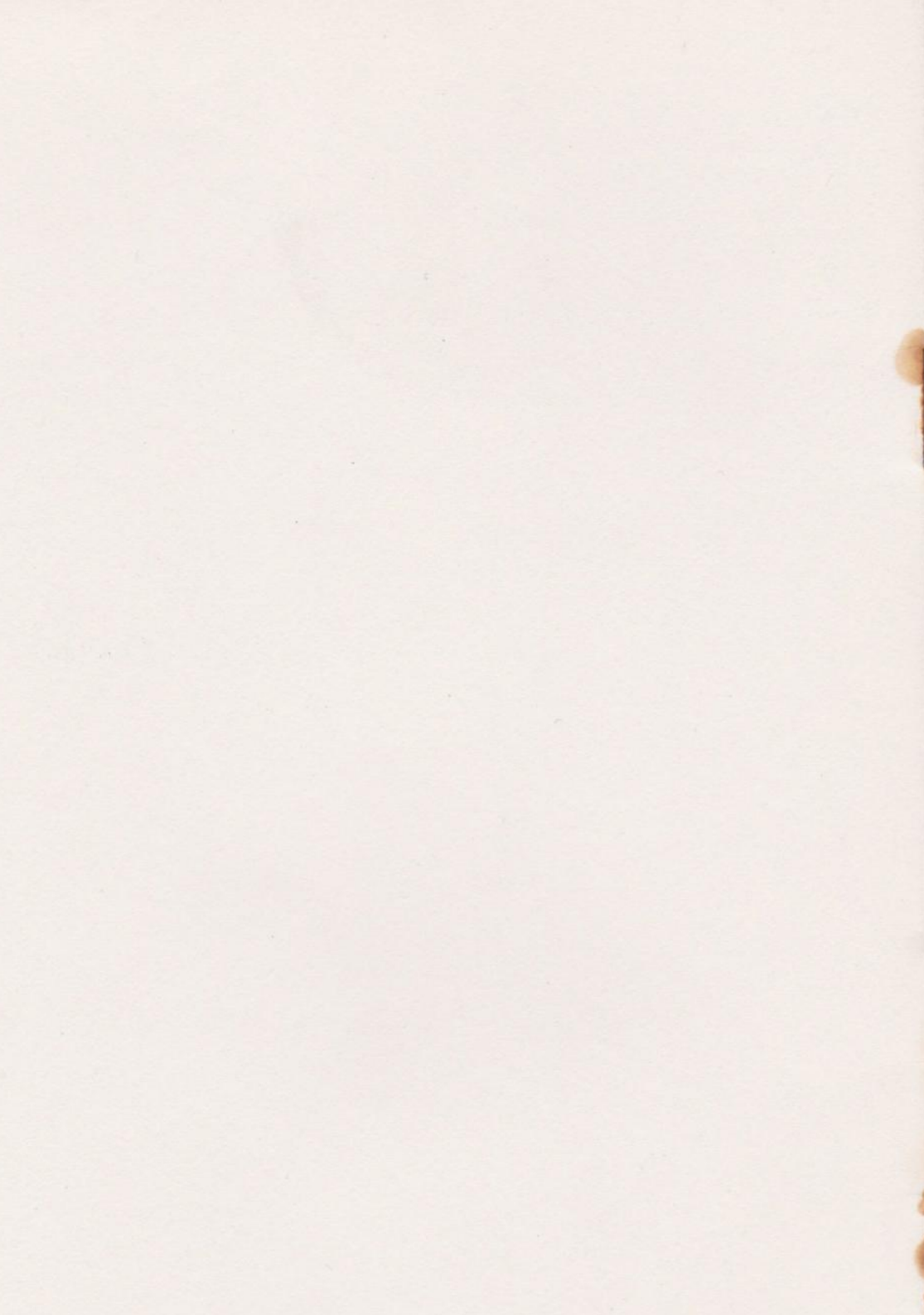


DURHAM FREEMEN AND THE GUILDS

by

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1971



THE FREEMEN OF DURHAM

The Freemen of Durham are the members of the eight Trade Guilds (otherwise Trade Gilds) known as the Barbers, Butchers, Cordwainers, Curriers, Drapers, Joiners, Masons and Plumbers. These Guilds or Companies are all that survive of the Craft and Merchant Guilds of the Middle Ages, the full list being, in order of seniority:—

Weavers and Websters	...	...	...	1450
Cordwainers (Shoemakers)	...	...	...	1458
Barber Surgeons, Waxmakers, Ropers and Stringers	...	...	...	1468
Skinners and Glovers	...	...	...	1507
Butchers	...	...	...	1520
Goldsmiths, Plumbers, Pewterers, Potters, Glaziers and Painters	...	...	...	1532
Barkers and Tanners	...	...	...	1547
Drapers and Tailors	...	...	...	1549
Merchants or Mercers	...	...	...	1561
(incorporating Grocers 1345, Mercers 1393, Salters 1394, Ironmongers 1464 and Haberdashers 1467)				
Fullers and Feltmakers	...	...	...	1565
Curriers and Tallow Chandlers	...	...	...	1570
Free Masons, Rough Masons, Wallers, Slaters, Paviours, Plasterers and Bricklayers	...	...	...	1594

Blacksmiths, Lorimers, Locksmiths, Cutlers and Bladesmiths	...	...	...	...	1610
Saddlers and Upholsterers	...	...	...	...	1659
Carpenters, Joiners, Wheelwrights, Sawyers and Coopers	...	...	...	...	1661
Dyers and Listers	...	...	...	...	1667

The dates given are those for which definite written evidence can be found. In many cases the Guilds are undoubtedly much older; the Skinners and Glovers, for instance, claimed to have been incorporated in 1327.

Some Guilds lost their separate identities by amalgamation and some have become extinct. Similar organisations exist or existed in other towns and cities, and Freemen survive in about forty places in England and Wales. In general, they owed their powers to Royal charters, but in Durham to charters from the Bishops, since from a time before the Norman Conquest until 1836 the Bishops of Durham had almost regal powers within their diocese.

The two primary concerns of the Guilds were, very naturally, with trade. They endeavoured to maintain the standard of workmanship and to keep a local monopoly for their own members. The former was safeguarded by the activities of "Searchers" appointed by the Guilds themselves—a foreshadowing of the adoption of standards and of "quality control" as understood in modern industry—and by control over the admission of apprentices and their ultimate certification as masters of their craft on production of a "masterpiece". The latter was directed against strangers, and especially against the Scots, the traditional enemies in the north of England. To these primary objects they added others, some of which were

later taken over by Friendly Societies and Benefit Clubs, such as the payment of pensions, grants to distressed brethren, the provision of palls for use at funerals, and of masses for the souls of departed members.

Good fellowship was not neglected, and the records contain numerous references to dinners after "beating the bounds" of the common land on Framwellgate Moor, over which the Freemen at one time had rights, to annual dinners and to drink or meals at the admission of new members.

The religious aspect of guild membership was deeply rooted. All members were required to take part in the celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi (the Thursday after Trinity Sunday). The Guilds, with their banners displayed, went in procession from the Market Place to Palace Green, where they were met by the Prior and Monks of the Abbey, bearing the banner of St. Cuthbert. The Guilds then took part in the performance of religious plays. No details of these have survived, but they were probably similar to the famous Miracle Plays performed by the Guilds of York. After the dissolution of the monastery and the other changes brought about by Henry VIII in 1540, the procession still took place, but after 1660 the great annual event was moved to May 29th, Restoration Day (Oak Apple Day). The present singing on the Cathedral tower on or about May 29th, which is thought to incorporate an additional commemoration—that of the defeat of the Scots at the battle of Neville's Cross in 1346—no longer involves the Freemen.

The Freemen possess plate and coats of arms, both of which can be seen in the Guildhall, and records. Plate and records have suffered grievous losses in the past, but what remains is safeguarded.

Until after the death of Bishop Cosin in 1672, the City of Durham had no representation in the House of Commons, apart from two Commonwealth elections, the power of the "Prince Bishops" being sufficiently great to prevent it. The importance of the Freemen was greatly enhanced when representation was obtained, because they were the only electors, and the Freedom was in consequence greatly sought after. In general, Freedom could be obtained in only two ways, patrimony and servitude, i.e. by being the son of a Freeman or by serving a full apprenticeship to a Freeman working at the trade of his Guild. Occasionally "Gentlemen Freemen" were admitted—people whose influence on behalf of the Guilds was worth having. At present admission by servitude is very rare, and almost all Freedom (or Freelage) is gained by patrimony.

Until 1565, the City had been governed by the Bishop, through his Bailiff, but in that year Bishop Pilkington granted a charter which gave the citizens a measure of self-government. In 1602 Bishop Matthew granted a fresh charter, by which Freemen were made the only electors and the only candidates for election to the City Council. (In the City of London the Lord Mayor is still elected by the members of the Guilds).

The present privileges of the Freemen are:—

- (1) To share in the annual income if resident within five miles of Durham Market Place. The share is less than one pound per head, and is derived in part from the interest on funds held by trustees under the jurisdiction of the Charity Commissioners and in part from rents and wayleaves. The number of Freemen with the local residential qualification is slightly less than one hundred, but the total number of living Freemen is not accurately known.

- (2) To erect a stall in the Market Place on Market Day without payment. This right has not been claimed for many years.
- (3) To hold meetings in the Guildhall, the freehold of which belongs to the Corporation.
- (4) The right of "Herbage" on the Sands, an open space covering about eight acres on the right bank of the river, to the north of Framwellgate Bridge. This is now interpreted as the use of the surface, most of which is grassed, the Corporation owning the freehold. Income from it is shared by the Freemen and the Corporation.

The Honorary Freemen of the City are a small number of men and women who are considered to have rendered special services to the City. The selection is made, and the honour conferred, by the Mayor and Corporation, not by the Freemen, whose privileges are not shared by the honorary recipients of the title. Both kinds of Freemen, however, take the same oath of allegiance to the Crown and to the Bishop of Durham. The inclusion of the Bishop may have little practical significance to-day, but it is a link with the time when the very existence of the Freemen depended upon him.

At present the activities of the Freemen are limited (1) to the observance of Guild Days; these are held by tradition four times a year, when the Mayor, Aldermen and Town Clerk of the Corporation of Durham formally meet the Chairman of the Wardens, Guild Wardens and Freemen assembled in the Guildhall to administer the Oath of Allegiance to anyone eligible to be 'called' and subsequently, at the third 'call', 'made free'; (2) to four meetings annually with their appointed Trustees to consider matters affecting the administration of their affairs; and (3) to monthly meetings of the Wardens

under their Chairman, when any arrangements for functions of general public interest that may be appropriate to the Freeman's Rights may be made.

The Freeman of Durham have in the past played vitally important parts in the trade and government of the City, and their continuing existence and privileges, based on the equivalent of Royal Charters, are a reminder that one of the glories of Durham is its history.

