



Candlemas

Issue 12

February 2026

This newsletter is to keep members up to date with what is happening within the Durham City Freemen.

Guild News

The Candlemas Guild Day was held on the 2nd February 2026 in the Guild Hall Durham

First Calls

None

Second Calls

Louise Wilkinson (Joiners Company) to be admitted via Patrimony.

Third Calls

Peter Carr (Masons Company) was admitted via Servitude.
David Cummings (Plumbers Company) was admitted via Servitude.
Eric Barlow (Plumbers Company) to be admitted via Patrimony.
(Deferred until a later date)

Diary Dates For 2026

Warden's & Deputies Meeting

5th March

Warden's Meeting

23rd April

Trustees & Wardens Meeting

24th April

May Day Guild Day

11th May

The management committee for the Freemen is set out below.

Chair; Garry Dunnill. Deputy Chair; Neil Graham. Secretary; Bryan Proud.

Wardens:

Bryan Proud	Barbers Company.
Vincent Syson	Butchers Company.
Alan Metcalf	Cordwainers Company.
Iain Wilmshurst	Curriers Company.
Dave Howard	Drapers Company.
Ann Thurlow	Joiners Company.
Neil Graham	Masons Company.
Garry Dunnill	Plumbers Company.

Deputy Wardens:

Robert Elliott	Barbers Company
Vacant	Butchers Company.
Vacant	Cordwainers Company
Vacant	Curriers Company
Trevor Carter	Drapers Company
David Neale	Joiners Company
Alan Richardson	Masons Company
Arthur Lockyear	Plumbers Company

Chair's Report

I would like to welcome new members Peter Carr and David Cummings to our Candlemas Guild Day and Ian Mackenzie from Henry Smith Charity who will be giving a talk later in the proceedings.

If I could just make an apology for sending out the first version of the agenda for today's meeting with the incorrect starting time and venue, mistakes are easy made and hope we did not confuse anyone.

We unfortunately have had 3 members who have died within this period: -

Geoff Newton – Masons Company

John Walker – Plumbers Company

Leslie Heron – Plumbers Company

This has been a quiet period since our last Guild Day meeting of the 3rd Nov. however, if you ask the Wardens, I am sure they may not agree.

We have now appointed Vincent Syson as our new Warden for the Butchers Company hope you enjoy your term in this role and continue to help wherever possible.

We also have John Attle our Official Photographer for today, I hope all goes straight forward without any hitches, thanks.

Our Yearbook for 2026 has now been printed and we will be sending it out to all members in the next few weeks, I think this is exceptionally quick as the year end was only 4 weeks ago, thanks for all your work pulling this together Bryan.

Our new web site will be going live this month and I hope it will be easier to navigate your way through and extract information, keep a watch out for this.

The Apprentice Awards are going ahead on the 5th June 2026 and is currently advertised on our old web site with application forms and criteria to apply, this will be transferred to the new site. If you have any questions on this the best Warden to catch after the meeting is Neil Graham who is leading this project for ourselves.

As mentioned at the last Guild Day Alan Richardson is making good progress with the updated Brief History of the Freeman, I'm sure this will be a good addition to our publicity material. I have known Alan for some 50 years and not sure if I should be calling him Doctor, Professor or just Alan.

The next Guild Day is 11th May 2026 and we have at least one new member coming through Louise Wilkinson into the Joiners Guild, hope you can all keep this date open.

We have two Deputy Wardens Position currently up for re-election in the Drapers Company and Plumbers Company and if any of you are interested in joining the Management Team we have Three other positions available as Deputy Wardens in the Cordwainers Company, Curriers Company and Butchers Company, you do not have to be a member of these Guilds to be a Deputy, anyone interested please contact Bryan our Secretary.

Our Press Officer, George Oliver retired on 31st December and we would like to thank George for all his work over the last 14 years, he will be a big miss, this leaves us with an opportunity if anyone is interested in helping the Freemen with this position or knows of someone who may be interested, to contact a Warden or Deputy and we can have a chat.

On the chest next to the door, we have a number of old stock ties, if anyone would like one, please feel free to take one on your way out.

A new addition to the Guild days is the opportunity for any members or visitors with questions to catch a Warden or Deputy at the end of the meeting hopefully they can answer or will take your details and come back within a few days.



Results of the recent elections

Warden of the Curriers Company

Iain Wilmshurst has been elected on the 10th December to be the Warden of the Curriers Company. Iain has been a Warden for approximately 20 years.

Warden of the Butchers Company

Vincent Syson has been elected on the 19th December to be Warden of the Butchers Company following the resignation of Mac Williams. Vincent became a Freemen in 2023.

Meet our New Freemen



Dave Cummings and Peter Carr

based in Bishop Auckland, Love Soul Radio London based in London and G Town Radio based in Gainsborough. All shows are Northern and rare soul; the music has been a passion of his for 50 years. He collects rare soul records, and he is a magician, formerly professional and now retired and a hobbyist.

Peter Carr

Peter is married with two grown up children, Liam 32 and Caitlin 29. He was born in the old terrace houses at the bottom of Brandon, which, is where ironically, he started his apprenticeship for Brandon and Byshottles council at the age of 15. He left Ushaw Moor secondary in 1971 and started for the council as an apprentice bricklayer.

He worked on the council program of demolishing the terraces and building new houses in the Brandon area.

After his apprenticeship, he worked all over the north east, most notably for Leech Homes, then Persimmon Homes, who acquired Leech Homes. Peter worked a total of 39 years' service until he retired at the age of 66.

He fills his time with golf, walking, gardening and grandchildren.

Dave Cummings

Dave Cummings is married to Monica and is currently living in Brandon.

He served his apprenticeship with a local plumbing and heating company based in Bearpark called Mechanical Engineering Services owned by Mr Bill Simpson. After five years he left and gained employment with Durham City Council.

He is now retired and has been aware of Durham City Freemen for many years and knows other Freemen, namely Brayn Proud, Mac Williams, David Howard and Neil Graham, all from his years working for Durham City Council.

Dave has many hobbies including flying radio-controlled model aeroplanes, he broadcasts a radio show for three community radio stations, Bishop FM

JOURNALIST “RETIRES” FOR A SECOND TIME

A journalist, who played a key role in charting the major resurgence and impact of the city’s Freeman across the last 15 years, has stepped down as press officer. George Oliver first retired in 2009 after 17 years as Durham Constabulary’s press and public relations manager after a career which started in the autumn of 1963.

A year later he joined the Freeman’s trustees and witnessed the start of a roller-coaster which saw membership treble and many tens of thousands of pounds donated to worthy causes across the city and surrounding area.

His professional life started in the city’s Saddler Street as a trainee journalist, indentured for three years to Bert Wilson, an army major who served in the Far East during the Second World War.

Bert returned to his former profession in regional newspapers before launching a freelance news agency in the 1950s, serving regional and national newspapers, and the region’s radio and television stations.

George, his third trainee, stayed for seven years before joining an evening newspaper, leaving in 1992 as a chief reporter to take up his police appointment.

A career irony, unrelated to his first boss, came in 1984 with an invitation to join a new specialist British Army unit – set up following a Parliamentary review of the Falklands War.

He underwent basic infantry training – at the same time becoming one of the first new recruits inducted into a 50-strong part-time team of TV, radio, and print journalists. His first commanding officer was an assistant director general of the BBC of the team based in Army HQ in Salisbury.

Travel was the unit’s bi-word and over more than a decade took George across the UK and Europe many times. He was put on “notice to move” at the start of the first Gulf War in 1991– the alert subsequently shelved because of the short duration of the conflict. He did, however, briefly spend time with British troops in the Kuwaiti desert immediately afterwards.

Subsequent assignments he was unable to take up during eleven years with the unit, a result of commitments of his police headquarters “day job,” included exercises and operations inside the Arctic Circle, South America, the Far East and South Pacific islands.

On one occasion he was available to join the British Army Training Team in South Africa. Their task – to instill in seasoned ANC guerrilla fighters the discipline and habits of regular troops. George’s task – to identify and exploit all media opportunities. Sadly, the guerrillas all walked out of their up-country barracks without notice – two days before he and the team were due to fly out.

In 2010, a year into his first retirement, his pal John Heslop, a retired head and Chairman of the Wardens, suggested he become one of the Freeman’s nine trustees, the timing coinciding with the start of a “golden age” of giving in the Freeman’s history.

It was also, by another happy coincidence, linked to the Freeman’s unanimous agreement - in the wake of the 2010 Equality Act - to admit women to what had been since the Middle Ages, an all-male preserve. The result was a steady growth in membership, from 90 to the present-day total of 270 - and rising.

“Charitable giving to scores of good causes in the city since 2010 has totaled well in excess of £400,000 – something every member of the Freeman has the right to feel enormously proud of,” said George.

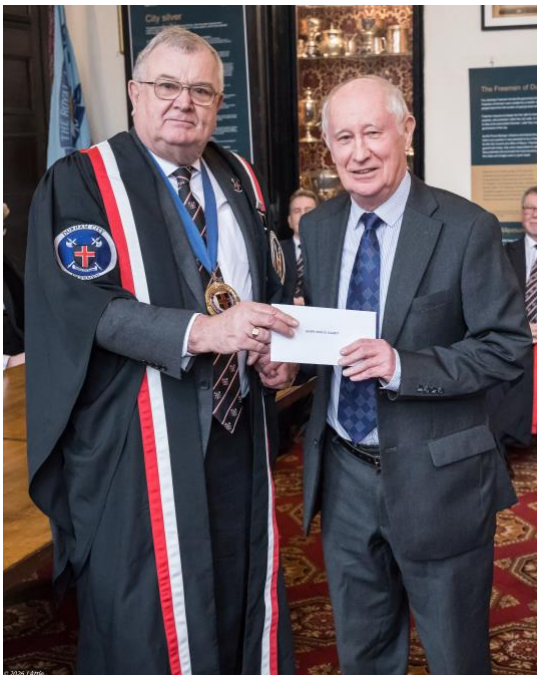
George, a member of the Butchers’ Company, insists he has been lucky to have met and worked with some gifted people from the professions, businesses and craft trades from within and around Durham and beyond. Not least among them is the Freeman’s former official photographer Geoff Kitson, a gifted plumber who has been taking snaps since his dad gave him a camera when he was nine.

“Geoff and I have had some real fun working together over many years and I’ve also had been privileged to see some of his bespoke plumbing creations in lead in both the cathedral and the roof of Durham Castle. But these are not the only legacy of his craftsmanship which are still in evidence across the city and beyond.

Bryan Proud, secretary to the Freeman said: “We thank George for all the good work he has done for the Freeman.”



Talk By Ian Mackenzie Chairman Henry Smith’s Charity



Many thanks to the Freeman for their recent donation of £500 and also the generous donation last year of over £7,500. The Henry Smith’s Trustees are pleased to report that some of this funding has already been used to support apprentices at New College.

The venue for the handover could not be more appropriate which will be explained shortly. I have been asked to say a few words about the Henry Smith’s Charity. The Charity is quite ancient but I am bound to say the history of the Freeman and the Guilds in Durham predates us by some margin.

If you carry out a google search you will find there are over forty charities registered under the name of Henry Smith. One is a multi-million-pound organisation.

This causes some disappointment to applicants who approach us when they realise we do not have vast resources. Our Charity area of benefit is solely based in Durham City. At one time there was a paid Clerk but now it is run entirely by volunteer trustees. I hope you find the history of the charity of interest which I think resonates with the history of the City Freeman.

Henry Smith was a local gentleman as the historians describe him; in modern terms he was an entrepreneur. He made his will in 1598 and died shortly afterwards. He was a very wealthy man owning coal mines across the county, farms and many dwellings.

1598 was a grim time for Durham city. It suffered a terrible plague, one of many at that time. I suppose it was the equivalent of covid but without the benefit of vaccinations. It is said 1000 inhabitants died of the plague, perhaps one third of the population of the city. It was about this time that Shakespeare wrote Hamlet, his son Hamnet having died from the plague. It was the end of the Elizabethan era and a time of religious strife.

One commentary says the only light in the gloom at the time for the city was Henry Smith's will. Henry had one child, a daughter Grace. She had become a catholic sympathiser after witnessing the execution of four catholic priests at Dryburn. This was the time of great religious strife and Henry Smith called his daughter Graceless Grace. He disinherited her and left most of his fortune to the city. As his will says "*He freely gave his assets to the city of Durham so that some good trade may be devised for setting of the youth and other idle persons to work whereby some profit may arise to the benefit of the city and the relief of those that are past work.*"

Things did not always go smoothly for the charity. Over its 400 year history there have been a number of inquiries into its finances. All I am pleased to say many centuries ago. The first trustees bought a property which I understand was on the site of the current Town Hall. It was originally owned by the Neville family and was referred to as a Palace, also known as the Bulls Head (the crest of the Nevilles) in New Place. The property was confiscated from the Nevilles because of their involvement in a catholic uprising. It was bought for £150 and the trustees set up a cloth making factory in 1614 to employ young people. Sadly, it failed as did many of the trustees' ventures over the years largely through, it is said, reckless speculation often on the initiative of one or two of the old Mayors of Durham. The City Mayor was a trustee from the early days of the charity and I am pleased to say the current Mayor Gary Hutchinson, is still one of our trustees.

In 1612 it is said that the trustees purchased a chest to hold the deeds and documents of the charity together with a sum of £577 ten shillings and two pence which would have been a substantial sum and perhaps explains why it was to have 4 locks. The chest was originally housed in the town chamber. It may well be the one now housed in the Guildhall. If you look carefully, it has 4 locks.

The Charity no longer has any land or properties. The site of the Town Hall was sold in 1926 for the sum of £4,000. The most remarkable thing is the charity is still operating – 428 years so far. Twenty years ago,

the Charity mainly provided small sums to elderly Durham residents at Christmas. The trustees decided to concentrate more on younger residents in line with the original objects of the Charity and 15 years ago set up an award initiative with New College to support apprentices in purchasing tools and equipment for their chosen careers. Last December with the help of the donation from the Freeman we supported 16 apprentices.

We also provide funding to most of the local secondary schools, the Sixth Form in particular and provide grants to local community associations and other organisations like Waddington Street and St Cuthberts Hospice. We have also supported an initiative with the Durham Market Company.

The trustees aim to avoid reckless speculation and ensure the Charity endures for many more years. Your donation today will help us to continue supporting local deserving initiatives and local young people in particular. The charity in the past has received similar donations and at one time was referred to as the Corporation Money.

Thank you so much for your cheque and thank you for inviting me to your Candlemas meeting.

The information for this talk relies largely on -“The history and antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham” by William Hutchinson published in 1876 (available in the Durham reference library) and also some anecdotes from previous Henry Smith’s Chairmen.



Management Vacancies

The Wardens and Deputies are always on the lookout for capable Freeman to come and help with the management of the guild. The usual starting point is a deputy where you will get to understand how the guild is managed. The time commitment is about 4 meetings per year. The meetings are scheduled to last from 6.00 until 7.30 on a Thursday night usually in the Guild Hall.

We currently have three Deputy Warden vacancies: Butchers, Cordwainers and Curriers. You do not have to belong to one of the companies to apply as they are open to all. Training will be given once you have been elected.

Come and help us move the Freeman into the future, we are hoping to enhance the Apprentice Award Scheme and to increase member involvement in the organisation. If you are interested, then please get in touch via the secretary.



Any comments on the format, content, and any future ideas you may have for content please get in touch via secretary@durhamcityfreemen.org

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