

Speech by Guest Speaker The Rt Hon Sir Tony Baldry

11 June 2015, Painter Stainers' Hall

Master, Wardens, Livery, Fellow Guests.

Master, on behalf of all your guests, I would like to thank the Company for your very generous hospitality this evening.

Those of us who attended the Service earlier in the evening at St. James's Garlickhithe were fortunate to be able to worship on one of the oldest Christian sites in England.

When the Romans invaded England, they developed the port of Londinium as a broad and sheltered harbour in the south of the country that gave them access to the Channel and the routes back to Rome. In the port, they built wharves, which in Middle English, were called "Hithes" to enable them to easily load and unload their ships.

Near to the wharf, which was in due course to become known as "Garlickhithe", or the wharf where garlic was unloaded from France and elsewhere, the Romans built a temple to the Gods.

A temple doubtless to enable sailors who had arrived safely from the Mediterranean to give thanks for safe passage and sailors who were about to embark on sea journeys to pray to the Gods for their safe deliverance and return to their native lands.

Then occurred the miracle of the Emperor Constantine being converted to Christianity as a consequence of a dream and in due course, St. Augustine was sent by the Pope with a mission to bring Christianity to the Angles.

In due course, the Temple to the Gods was demolished and replaced by a Christian church.

This was not unusual. The Temple had been regarded as a sacred place and it must have seemed sensible by destroying the Temple to pagan Gods to retain its sense of sacredness by using its foundations to build a Christian church.

The church was dedicated to St. James, the patron saint of Pilgrims, and indeed, in the Middle Ages, St. James's Garlickhithe was the starting and embarking place for Pilgrims setting off on the Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.

The original St. James's was repaired and renovated through the ages.

At one point, Mary Tudor bestowed St. James's on the College of Heralds for their College.

The old medieval church was last extensively repaired in 1624.

However, like so many churches in the City of London, the old St. James's was destroyed by fire in 1666, when, as the schoolboy tag goes, "the City of London was burnt to sticks".

Fortunately, like almost all of the other churches that perished in the Great Fire, St. James's was rebuilt of stone by Sir Christopher Wren, and was one of those City churches which fortunately survived the Blitz.

Below the magnificence of Wren's structure, I am sure one would still find remnants of a Roman Temple and one of the earliest churches of Christendom in England.

Over the centuries have been imported glass from all corners of the known world would have come to the wharf at Garlickhithe – Roman, Venetian, and Flemish glass.

Glass and glass vessels were widely used throughout the Roman Empire in the time of Christ.

Indeed, St. Paul uses glass as an image in one of the most difficult allegories of all – the meaning of death.

In his letter to the Corinthians St. Paul says that ".....for now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."

Glass is one of the wonders of nature, or as Ben Jonson observed, "who, when he saw the first sand or ashes by a casual intensesness of heat melted into a metallic form, rugged with excrescences and crowded with impurities, would have imagined that in this shapeless lump, they concealed so many conveniences of life as would in time constitute a great part of the happiness of the world? Thus was the first artist in glass occupied."

Livery Companies existed as much to protect local jobs and restrict and control imports, and the Companies and their Charters were a mechanism whereby the State, so far as was possible, sought to ensure that consumers were not cheated.

The Glass Sellers' Charter is no exception.

Of course, Master, in the reign of Charles II, when this Company was granted its first Charter, the word "glass" was really synonymous with a mirror - as can be demonstrated by a cursory examination of Shakespeare's plays.

So, in King Lear, there is reference to "a hoar son "glass-gazing super serviceable financial rogue" and the observation that "there never yet was a fair woman but she made mouths in a glass".

In Hamlet, there is reference to a "willow grows aslant a brook that shows its hoar leaves in the glassy stream", and in Hamlet there is also reference to "the glass of fashion and the mould of form". "You go not till I set you up a glass where you can see the inmost part of you".

And in Henry IV, “he was indeed the “glass” wherein the noble youth did dress themselves. He was the mark and glass copy and book that fashioned others”

And one of Shakespeare’s sonnets observes “Thy glass will show thee how thy beauties wear, thy dial how their precious minutes waste”.

So not surprisingly the Company’s first Charter makes reference to glass sellers and looking-glass makers within the City of London and observes that because there had been an increase to a great number of glass sellers and looking-glass makers in London and within seven miles thereof, and for the better reforming and suppressing the falsities and deceits now commonly used and practised in the wars and manufactures belonging to these trades which are made false and counterfeit to the common abuse and damage of our subjects”.

The original by-laws of the Company of 1664 were incredibly specific about the dimensions of mirrors and looking glasses.

“Item: that no glass seller or looking glass maker, grinder or polisher of looking glasses should at any time or times hereafter make or cause to be made or put to sale any small looking glasses under the size of 10 inches unless the same be of the number and of the length and breadth hereafter mentioned; that is to say number 8 to be 10 inches in length and 8 in breadth; number 7 to be 9 inches in length and 7 in breadth; number 6 to be 7 inches in length and 5 inches and a half in breadth; and so on, and so on.

That all persons or persons of the said trade that shall make or cause to be made or put to serve at any such looking glasses contrary to the proportions or sizes and length and breadth above mentioned shall for every offence forfeit and pay to the use of the said Company the sum of 40 shillings.

In the years that followed, there was some interesting debate as to whether the Glass Sellers of London were able to produce sufficient mirrors or whether restraint of trade was artificially inflating prices, or whether glass from Venice was unreasonably undermining the market in the City of London.

The edition of 1669 observes that there are not a sufficient number of workmen in England “ to grind ye glass to supply one third part of the nation” and these for the most part “dirring botchers” and will not improve their work so long as there are so few workmen and so much work for coat glasses which they could, if not half wrought or polished as is needful for looking glasses.”

These persons when they had formally obtained prohibition brought up all the Venice looking-glasses that they could in town and then raised the price as this pleased the retailers and others which was a great prejudice to the nation and so they do now again in hopes of a prohibition by an Act of Parliament one of them having lately bought a thousand pounds of Venetian glass of one merchant and expects a greater parcel when a ship arrives this ere long expected”.

Nowadays, when one goes knocking on doors soliciting for votes, one frequently finds signs which say “No hawkers, Canvassers or Circulars and no door to door salesmen.”

This is not a new problem.

Legislation in the time of Queen Elizabeth determined that “Peddlers and Chapmen are adjudged rogues and vagabonds” and the legislation made provision that “glass men of good behaviour may travel in the country only having a licence from three Justices of the Peace”.

But there was then legislation in the reign of James I which repealed the exception for glass peddlers.

“The said licence for Glass Peddlers is repealed because under cover of this liberty rogues, vagabonds, etc. followed their trade in this way” and it enacted that “all such persons as shall wander up and down to sell glasses, shall be treated as rogues and vagabonds.”

The petition of the Glass Sellers to the House of Lords of 1689 observed “these glass hawkers and peddlers are being looked upon as the most dangerous sort for formally where commissions were granted for licensing hawkers and peddlers and these have been exempted and indeed they are very incorrigible and stubborn sort of persons that regard no laws but should they obtain liberty from a law to wander abroad they would be ten times more instant than they are even to hazard the destruction of the Company of Glass Sellers”.

It turned out that the Solicitor General had been somewhat capricious in deciding which trades were being pursued supposedly by hawkers and peddlers and the Solicitor General and the chairman of the committee “but put in what trades they thought fit and left out the rest, ours being one of them, and not thought fit to be inserted.”

Master, members of other Liveries in the City have to admire the perseverance of your company because not only did you manage to work through that particular discriminatory legislation, you managed to overcome a defect that the Company’s original Charter had not been properly enrolled by the City of London, but because the Court of Aldermen found “yet for as much as we are fully satisfied that their proceedings herein were through inadvertency and not with design to contest the authority of the Court in granting Liveries and we are credibly informed there are divers eminent and worthy citizens of this City that are only free of that Company . . . and are sufficient number to make up a competent Livery we are humbly of the opinion that it will conduce much as well to the state and Government of this City as to the encouragement of the glass manufactory which of late years is much improved especially in flint and looking glasses beyond what is done in any known part of the world, many of the said manufacturers being free of that said Company that a Livery be granted.”

Indeed, Master, your Guests are fortunate to be able to dine with the divers eminent and worthy citizens of this City who are Glass Sellers and are very grateful for your hospitality this evening.

When the Glass Sellers had a Hall they had a song, a verse of which seems to me a fitting conclusion to any speech on behalf of the guests:

“Ye Masters and Wardens assisting men to
What pleasure, what glory dwell ever with you.
Ye preside ever content, bid harmony flow.
It does one’s heart good a Glass Seller to know”

Master, I think all your guests would concur that it does our hearts good Glass Sellers to know.