

TREASURES OF THE GUILDHALL HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION REVEALED

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The Guildhall Historical Association is one of the City of London's most exclusive of gatherings and until now one of its well-kept secrets. Yet from this reclusive group there has flowed a collection of information – eclectic, sometimes esoteric but always of enormous interest, its riches reserved only for the eyes of its own coterie of members – which is phenomenal in scope and diversity.

Since its quiet foundation in the war-time days of 1944, the Guildhall Historical Association, the GHA, has privately published more than 200 papers on an astonishingly wide variety of subject. They unfold developments in the City of London's unique style of government through the centuries; relationships, often stormy, between City and the Crown; the origins of sheriffs, aldermen and mayors; the City's distinctive officials, Remembrancer, Chamberlain and Town Clerk; the Lord Mayor's attendants, Swordbearer, Marshal and Common Crier and Serjeant-at-Arms.

There are papers, too, on each of the City's famous institutions: the Bank of England, Royal Exchange, Old Bailey, Billingsgate and Smithfield Markets, the City churches and livery companies.

In addition to all of these predominant aspects of City life and history, GHA members have researched into all manner of other topics that have taken their fancy and presented papers examining the wine trade, drinking habits at Greek and Roman banquets, Shakespeare and Dickens, private banks, the City's underground waterways, swan-apping and many, many others.

Until now this cornucopia of historical research has been strictly reserved for the edification of the GHA's own small circle of members. Those same members have now agreed that because of its value and interest they should share this body of information with historians, students and, indeed, the public at large. It is therefore being made freely available to all seekers after knowledge on the internet.

These introductory paragraphs trace the GHA's origins, early history and method of working. There follows a listing of the GHA papers published to date to serve as a guide to their location on-line.

The beginnings

The Guildhall Historical Association was founded on the fourth of May 1944, the creation of five of the City Fathers, long-serving and high respected members of the City of London's governing body, the Court of Common Council. Its purpose would be to collect, publish and preserve material of historic interest connected with the City – particularly aspects of its unique style of government developed over the centuries.

It was perhaps a surprising moment to embark on such an enterprise, the eve of momentous events about to unfold on the Normandy beaches. Yet the very uncertainties felt at this crucial stage of the War may well have encouraged the five Councilmen in their plan to record for posterity happenings great and small, of earlier uncertainties successfully overcome. It is not stretching imagination too far to believe that they regarded their venture as being supportive of the great doings they knew were about to begin in France.

So it was that when the five met again on the sixteenth of June, their minute-book recorded the date as D-Day + 10!

So who were these five? The prime mover was the 71-year-old Cuthbert Whitaker who had served as Common Councilman for the Ward of Farringdon Within for the past 39 years. (He was also editor of the famous "Whitaker's Almanack"). It was at his bidding (and after considerable discussion among them) that the other four came to the May and June 1944 meetings at Guildhall House in Gresham Street.

They were Major George Vine of Aldersgate Ward; Fletcher Bremner Coates who was the Chief Commoner that year (that is the leader of the Common Council), Bread Street Ward; Major John Lockhart Gow, Bishopsgate; and Frank Brundle, Cripplegate Without, who was chairman of the City's still much needed Civil Defence Committee.

The Lord Mayor, Sir Frank Newson-Smith, had already told Whitaker of his great interest in their venture and was appointed the GHA's President, an office he would hold for the next 24 years. The five Councilmen and the Lord Mayor were the GHA's first members and formed the committee that would direct its affairs and invite others to join them.

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Although that summer of 1944 was seeing the past five years of war at last entering its final phase the conflict was far from over with London the main target for German rocket attack, some 2,500 people being killed by the V1 and V2 missiles.

But already thought was being given to the shape of post-War Britain. Parliament was engaged with legislation that would transform education and town-planning and revolutionise the country's health services. In Guildhall despite War-time calls on its members around 150 Councilmen and Aldermen were meeting regularly in Common Council where a special committee was giving thought to reconstruction of the bomb-ravaged City.

On 22nd June the Lord Mayor told the Court he had received from General Montgomery copies of the messages sent by the Commander to his troops on the eve of their embarkations for Normandy and again on their landing there. The messages were read to the assembled members who cheered the stirring words. The Lord Mayor also reported the Corporation's intention to confer the Freedom of the City upon the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand during their forthcoming visit to London.

Down the street the Bank of England was celebrating the 250th anniversary of its foundation and had opportunely declared its 500th half-yearly dividend.

The GHA was just about to begin its own business.

The first meeting of the GHA

Cuthbert Whitaker and his associates wasted not a moment in getting the GHA under way.

The first meeting was held on 27th July 1944 with a format that has remained the same over the years. The members and their President met for lunch – albeit a modest one in those days – after which one of them would read a paper. Although there were only six of them to begin with the proceedings were carried out with proper formality. It was appropriate that Cuthbert Whitaker should give the inaugural address.

His chosen subject “Committee Allowances” was by no means a grand topic but one surprisingly full of historical disclosures from another era. He recounted the “Summer Excursions” when Councilmen and their ladies enjoyed river trips on a former state barge. The annual outings began in the 1790’s and continued into the 1880’s. They had breakfast, lunch and tea on board with a band and dancing while the vessel lay moored at some agreeable riverside spot. These entertainments only came to a stop when a puritanically-minded member of the Common Council named AlphaeusCleophas Morton put down a motion declaring that the spectacle of middle-aged and elderly aldermen and Common Councilmen dancing with their ladies in daylight, clad in frock coats and silk hats was liable to bring the Corporation into disrepute.

During 1945 and 1946 there were papers on more serious topics: John LockhardGow on “The City’s Cash” (the historic origins of the City’s private purse); Frank Brundle on more recent history of “Air Raid Precautions and Civil Defence”; George Vine on the intriguing “Special Committee” called into being during Victorian times to combat attempts by Ministers and reformers seeking to change or even abolish the City Corporation; Lt. Col. George Cullum Welch, a new member of the GHA and a future Lord Mayor on “The title and office of Chief Commoner”; and President FrankNewson-Smith on that ancient of groups “The Court of Aldermen” telling of the creation of the City’s wards and the considerable powers of aldermen since Saxon times. All these papers are preserved with 200 more and many of which are available now for inspection on the internet.

Cuthbert Whitaker was knighted for services to the City in 1946.

Exclusivity

From the start it was determined that the GHA should be positively exclusive. Membership would be confined to members of the Common Council (a definition soon amended to make it clear that aldermen were included). But this was not an association to which any councilman or alderman could apply for membership. You had to await an invitation and even when Common Council numbered 150, GHA membership only slowly increased from five to ten, then twenty and thirty. Anyone nominated for membership had to be approved by the existing members. Clearly membership was to be regarded as a privilege.

There was certainly no question of anyone outside Common Council being introduced. This exclusion extended even to the high officers of the Corporation although Desmond Heap, a notable City Comptroller and Solicitor, did write a paper recording the opening in 1863 of the world's first underground railway linking Paddington and Farringdon Street, but his paper had to be read by a GHA member, H.W. Keith Calder who it was that got the vote of thanks. Just one officer was allowed into the select circle of the GHA and that was in 1947 when P.E. Jones, Deputy Keeper of the Records, was elected as an honorary member – in recognition of the fact that it was to him members so often looked for help in researching their papers. He was soon contributing papers of his own. Subsequent Deputy Keepers and Archivists were enrolled as members – Betty Masters, James Sewell and, more recently, Deborah Jenkins and Elizabeth Scudder.

Much later the GHA lifted the barrier sufficiently to invite Town Clerk Geoffrey Rowley not only to write two papers but to have lunch with the Historians and deliver the papers in person. They were very much up the Town Clerk's street – the first on the origins of the Common Council and the second on the abolition of the Greater London Council and its effects on the City.

Conviviality

Meetings of the GHA were invariably convivial affairs with lunch before the reading of a paper. Catering facilities with the Corporation in 1944 were somewhat basic so after

two meetings in-house the Historians took themselves off to that catering mecca the Connaught Rooms just off Kingsway when even in the darkest days of war its many suites managed to provide some degree of civilised dining. The Connaught Rooms remained the GHA's main meeting place for six years with occasional forays into the halls of the Apothecaries, Tallow Chandlers, Vintners and Brewers when GHA members happened to be Masters of these Companies. In 1956 when George Cullum Welch was Lord Mayor the GHA were invited to hold a meeting in the Mansion House, something that would be repeated as other Historians came to be elevated to the mayoralty.

In July 1951 the GHA forsook the Connaught Rooms for a venue that was close by in the City and a far more appropriate meeting place – The Tallow Chandlers' hall in Dowgate Hill where they would stay for the next 20 years. It was at the Tallow Chandlers that President Frank Newson Smith first addressed the assembled members as “Fellow Historians” and that happy salutation has remained the mode of address ever since.

Presidents and Secretaries

In its 66 years existence the GHA has only had seven Presidents, Frank Newson Smith holding that office for a record number of 24 of those years. The Historians celebrated his 80th birthday in 1959 and in 1965, still President, he reminded them that the GHA had that year come of age. At 89 he felt constrained to pass the job over to Cullum Welch. One of the City's grandest of old men he died three years later much mourned by his fellow Historians.

Cullum Welch's distinguished tenure of office of twelve years only came to an end with his death in 1980. He was succeeded by a veteran Common Councilman, Sir Tom Kingsley-Collett, but health problems forced his resignation after a two-year stint. Alderman Sir Edward Howard who had served as Lord Mayor 1971-1972 was the next President, followed by Councilman Peter Revell-Smith, Alderman John Chalstrey and Alderman Brian Jenkins – all of whom have brought their own particular lustre to the GHA's enjoyable presidencies.

Similarly the GHA has had only seven Secretaries. Two of them were founding fathers – Fletcher Bremner Coates the first and Frank Brundle the second. There followed Alderman Alan Lamboll who held the office for a record 27 years until his resignation from the Court of Aldermen in 1982. His successor was another alderman, Ralph Hedderwick, and it is no slur on any of those who followed him to say that his famously witty minutes became one of the GHA's star attractions; a few samples follow below.

Poor Michael Scrivener's term lasted a mere three months, ended by his premature death. Councilman Tony Moss nobly stepped into the breach to be followed by the present incumbent, Alderman David Wootton.

Extracts from Ralph Hedderwick's minute-book

The minute he wrote himself on appointment: The Chairman proposed the election of Ralph Hedderwick to fill the vacancy caused by Alan Lamboll's resignation. This proposition was received with an enthusiasm matched only by the total failure of any Historian to nominate anyone else. On election the new Secretary – to his own and everybody else's surprise – found himself at a loss for words.

Another occasion: the gloom on sixteen faces was lightened almost at once when the President asked Historian Cuthbert Skilbeck to read his paper "Swan Marking, Swan Upping". A vote of thanks was ably proposed by Historian Dewhirst who added a remark about swan upmanship or possibly one upmanship of Historian Skilbeck who was sporting a tie bearing the design of a white swan couchant on a background azure and possibly rampant. His motion was warmly applauded and the Historians went their way – one being heard to whistle the Volga Boat Song and another missing his step on the bottom stair was seen to execute a pas de deux from Swan Lake.

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An agreeable custom at meetings of the GHA following publication of the New Year Honours and the Birthday Honours in January and June was the reading out by the President of the names of members who had been appointed KGB or GBE in the case of Lord Mayors, CBE in that of Chief Commoners, Knighthoods for some Sheriffs and

special honours from Buckingham Palace such as the KCVO for Councilman Colin Cole who was also Garter King of Arms.

As with the livery companies some followed fathers and other family members as members of the GHA – two George Vines, Edward and then David Howard, Tom Kingsley Collett and Christopher Collett.

Some interesting occasions

While it is undoubtedly a fact that all the GHA papers offered much of interest some were possessed of special features.

Alderman Denis Truscott accompanied his talk on “Aleconners” (at Brewers’ Hall of course) with a barrel of Whitbread’s Final Selection Extra Strong Ale while Alderman Gilbert Inglefields’ paper on “Transatlantic Threads” was celebrated with Boston Harbour tea.

In December 1966 Historian and Deputy Keeper of the Records P.E. Jones revealed to Historians new research showing that after the Great Fire an exceptionally large public convenience had been discovered in the riverside mud of Vintry, the Ward of Richard Whittington. It has offered accommodation for up to 60 of his male and 60 female of his constituents at any one time with sanitation provided by tidal flushing. Above were situated five almshouses – presumably clear of the water. This useful edifice was known as the Longhouse and had been installed there as one of Mayor Whittington’s numerous gifts to the City.

Jones was also the recipient of the GHA’s one and only Dinner. On his retirement in March 1970 to mark his 47 years service to the Corporation, 25 of them as Deputy Keeper of the Records, the Historians honoured him with a dinner. After the civic toast to the Lord Mayor and Corporation came a toast to Jones and finally a toast to the five founder members – no after dinner speeches that night but the guest of honour was prevailed upon to say a few words and happily had in his pocket his final GHA contribution, a paper on “The Office of Deputy Keeper of the Records”.

Deputy Keepers always played an important role in the GHA as the prime repositories of historical information – as valued presenters of papers of their own and, in earlier times, as “ghost writers”. President Sir Edward Howard when praising a paper given by Betty Masters in May 1984 referred to what he delicately termed as her “pianissimo ghost-writing” of some Historians papers.

Ralph Hedderwick has a comment relating to her paper on Smithfield. “One of her listeners on hearing that over a million sheep had passed through Smithfield in 1821 wondered how far the mutton they had just eaten had hoofed it before slaughter.

Votes of thanks

It was part of GHA ritual that at the end of each paper a vote of thanks should be proposed by one of the Historians present, it being resolved that the paper be printed and circulated privately amongst the members and that if required the transcript be made available for commercial publication at any time in the future.

So although privacy was the watchword, members left the option open for publication of their papers to a wider public. In 1990 the wording was changed to read that the paper be printed and circulated and made available for publication in the future the “commercial” possibilities being dropped.

Until now “publication” meant the paper being printed in a set format and sent to each of the members. Papers were assembled together in volumes of which there are now nine.

Probably on more than one occasion a particular paper was seen by people outside the GHA although such an action is only once recorded in the minutes. It was when Sir Robert Bellinger’s paper “City and Financial City” was circulated via the Town Clerk to the Court of Aldermen – presumably at Bellinger’s wish to keep his fellow aldermen properly informed. And, of course, the volumes of GHA papers are held in the Guildhall Library and so have been “made public”.

Votes of thanks could become over-elaborate. In March 1982 it was recorded by Ralph Hedderwick: At the conclusion of the paper on “The Romans in London and the British in Sudan” Historian B.J. Brown proposed a vote of thanks at some length including words on London Bridge in Arizona and on Billingsgate Market where the prince of Wales was at that very moment viewing excavations of the nearby Roman wharf.

The 1980's and after

Among some of the notable GHA events of the nineteen-eighties it was not the Deputy Keeper but the Keeper of the Records himself, Town Clerk Geoffrey Rowley, who delivered a paper at the Mansion House. Then for a paper on the Old Bailey the GHA for the first time invited someone quite outside Guildhall, Judge Bernard Collis Q.C., to entertain the Historians. More history was being made in November 1987 when President Edward Howard told the assembled members that fellow-Historian Robert Bellinger was that day in the Mansion House where Lord Mayor Greville Spratt was accepting from Lady Samuel her husband's magnificent collection of Dutch paintings. Bellinger, an old friend of Lord Samuel, had been acting as intermediary between the family and Lord Mayor.

In January 1989 the President was congratulating Historian Brian Wilson, the immediate past Chief Commoner, on his appointment as CBE and GHA Treasurer John Holland on his splendid promotion at the Honourable Artillery Company to the rank of Honorary Colonel of the 105th Parachute Regiment of the Territorial Army.

That year was also being celebrated as the 150th meeting of the GHA, an event which fittingly took place at the Mansion House with Historian and Lord Mayor Christopher Collett as host.

The paper on this occasion was read by Tom Jackson who chose as his subject the “Wedding of Edward II” with over a million bottles of wine ordered for the nuptial celebrations. The speaker acknowledged at the end that his daughter had written a similar paper at university and the Lord Mayor in proposing a vote of thanks praised them both.

The following year Collett himself presented a paper in celebration of the City's great event of the time, the 800th anniversary of the mayoralty, 1189 being the year that King John bestowed upon London its first mayor, Fitz Ailwyn.

It was during the 1980's with ever-increasing catering costs being encountered in the livery halls that the GHA finally forsook Tallow Chandlers and moved into the newly completed West Wing of Guildhall, first being accommodated in the Aldermens' Dining Room there and then, as the number of members attending luncheons gradually increased, going to the Private Dining Room of the Guildhall Club where it continues to flourish.

Its membership of sixty goes on to provide a fecund source of intelligence now not only for its own exclusive circle but for all those, worldwide, interested in England's rich store of history. Among some of its more recent offerings have been "Put not your trust in princes: the City and the Tower of London", "Influence of the Huguenots on the City", Local Government, the beginning or the end", "Samuel Pepys" and "Robert Walpole", an indication of the rich diversity becoming available online.