

THE ORIGINS OF THE SOCIETY OF YOUNG FREEMEN

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The Society of Young Freemen is an organisation to which I am greatly indebted and which holds a special place in my affections. I had the honour of being its Chairman during its 25th anniversary year.

Membership of the Society of Young Freemen (or SYF for short) was my first step in my City career. The friends and connections I made as a result of my involvement with the SYF led to my membership of a number of Livery Companies, Ward Clubs and other City organisations, not to mention my ultimately standing as a Common Councilman.

I made many close friends through my involvement with the SYF and we often reminisce about our time together in the SYF. Not least, I met my husband at an SYF new members' evening at Wax Chandlers' Hall.

Having recently reached the age of 40, I am no longer eligible for membership and, as such, my time as a Young Freeman has come to an end.

Therefore, when approached to write a paper for the Guildhall Historical Association, I hope you will understand why the Society of Young Freemen seemed a fitting choice for a topic. But fear not reader, this is not an opportunity for me to self-indulgently recount memories of my time in the SYF. Rather, I seek to go back to the origin of the Society of Young Freemen, long before my time, and to consider how the SYF came into being, the purpose for which it was established and the key role played by the City of London Corporation in its inception.

My research has involved speaking to a number of Past Chairmen, obtaining sight of some of the early records of the Society and obtaining sight of some historic press cuttings, reports and minutes of the City of London Corporation's Policy and Parliamentary Committee and Public Relations Sub-Committee. This paper is my way of bringing all this information together as a record for posterity.

How the Society of Young Freemen was Established

The inaugural meeting of the Society of Young Freemen was a reception at Mansion House held on 7th December 1976. However, it is clear from my research that, leading up to this auspicious moment, there had been some considerable thought, effort and involvement of many people, not least members of the Public Relations Sub-Committee of the Policy and Parliamentary Committee.

My research led me back to a point in time almost two years earlier, where there is evidence from Committee minutes that the Policy and Parliamentary Committee had been giving serious consideration to ways in which to encourage young persons in the City to become Freemen, explaining to them what the Freedom involves, how to obtain the Freedom and considering thereafter how the Corporation could maintain contact with Freemen of the City in order to keep their interest in the City's activities. Wider issues were also being considered concurrently including, in concert with the Livery Committee, the possibility of reducing the age for admission to the Freedom from 21 to 18.

The Public Relations Sub-Committee was delegated the task of considering how to take these objectives forward. The Public Relations Sub-Committee identified 88 young persons between the ages of 21 and 30, admitted to the Freedom by Redemption, Patrimony or Service, without a Livery Company, in the period 1973–74. The Sub-Committee agreed to invite these 88 individuals to a function at Guildhall on 28th January 1976. The proposed format of the function comprised a talk on the subject of the City and the Corporation, with hospitality provided by the City. The Sub-Committee agreed that the Chairman and other representatives of the Corporation should attend this function in order to meet the 88 Young Freemen. I have not been able to find a written account of this event, but I can only surmise that it must have been successful, given the further efforts the Sub-Committee made in pursuing this initiative.

It is perhaps significant to note that the initial group of invitees was explicitly chosen to be young Freemen without a Livery Company. Over the period in question, some 702 young persons between the ages of 21 and 30 had been admitted to the Freedom, of which the 88 individuals without a Livery Company represented only a small proportion. One could postulate a possible reason for restricting the group in this way was to keep initial numbers manageable in the context of instigating a helpful discussion at the meeting, and as a way of focusing on those without a Livery Company as being the category most in need of a means of establishing an ongoing connection with the Corporation and its activities.

After the meeting on 28th January, a meeting took place between representatives of the Public Relations Sub-Committee and the Guild of Freemen on 18th February 1976 to discuss steps which might be taken to increase the number of admissions of young persons under the age of 30 to the Freedom. The outcome of this meeting was a request that the Public Relations Sub-Committee consider acting as hosts for a further discussion among Young Freemen in the near future.

The Public Relations Sub-Committee duly agreed to this request and thus a

further meeting of young Freemen was held in the Livery Hall on June 23rd 1976. Hospitality, this time it is recorded being limited to sherry and cocktail snacks, was again provided by the Corporation. A total of 162 young Freemen were invited—the original 88 plus 74 additional young Freemen falling into the same category who were admitted during 1975. Total attendance at the meeting was 69 including the Master, Clerk and representatives of the Guild of Freemen and representatives of the Corporation. It is recorded that on this occasion, the Superintendent of Epping Forest gave an illustrated talk on the Forest.

The Chairman had initially suggested that the way in which the Corporation might maintain contact with Young Freemen in the future would be by organising two similar functions each year, one in the winter and one in the summer, both involving a talk on a City related topic, time for discussion and further time for informal conversation. Hence, at the outset, the Sub-Committee appeared to be contemplating the possibility that it, and through it the Corporation, might play an active ongoing role in organising the future meetings and activities of the Young Freemen.

However, it seems that the consensus amongst the Young Freemen attending the discussion on 23rd June was a desire for the Young Freemen themselves to take an active role in organising future meetings. The Chairman reported at a subsequent meeting of the Public Relations Sub-Committee on 12th July 1976 that the Young Freemen desired to meet more frequently than every 6 months and that they had requested that the Corporation arrange a further meeting at which the Young Freemen could discuss how they could organise their own future meetings and activities. This request was agreed by the Sub-Committee.

It is worth noting that at this same meeting the text was approved for the publication of a leaflet describing the history of the Freedom and “other appropriate information”. This further demonstrates the Corporation’s intention to encourage admission to the Freedom in general.

On 12th October 1976 a meeting of Young Freemen was held in the Livery Hall for the purpose of discussing how the Young Freemen could themselves organise, or find people to organise, their future meetings and activities. 135 Young Freemen were invited (a handwritten footnote suggests this comprised the 1973, 1974 and 1975 young Freemen who accepted previous invitations, plus Young Freemen in the same category admitted in 1976), of whom it is stated that 63 accepted and 35 attended. Additional attendees included the Master and representatives of the Guild of Freemen. The outcome of this meeting was an arrangement for a further meeting on 20th October to establish a new Young Freemen group with its own Committee, appointing officers and establishing a future programme and associated financial arrangements.

The minutes of the Public Relations Sub-Committee on 8th November 1976 record that:

- i. A Society of Young Freemen had now been formed for Freemen aged 35 or under;
- ii. The Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer of the Society had been elected;
- iii. An annual subscription of £1 had been approved;
- iv. An inaugural meeting would be held at the Mansion House on 7th December

The Sub-Committee also instructed the Public Relations Officer to give publicity to the existence of this new Society "if the Chairman of the Society so requires". Further, a grant was made to the Society to cover initial postal expenses.

The Society's records show the first Chairman to be Mrs June Evans, a Common Councilman for the Ward of Farringdon Without and a barrister residing in Middle Temple. The Secretary was Penny Lewis, who worked at Mansion House. The Treasurer was William Hunt.

This brings us to the inaugural meeting of the Society of Young Freemen on 7th December 1976 at Mansion House. An article in the City Recorder dated 16th December 1976 states that the Society of Young Freemen had been formed "to encourage more young people to become involved in the affairs of the City". It was reported that the Society was launched by the Lord Mayor, Sir Robin Gillett, on 7th December at Mansion House and that the Society was the "brainchild" of Mr Norman Hall, Chairman of the Corporation's Policy and Parliamentary Committee. The reception was attended by over 100 people, bringing together people who either live or work in the City, and others not connected with the City but interested in its traditions. Guests included representatives of some of the Livery Companies. It was reported that:

"The Society plans to hold functions at considerably lower prices that the younger element can afford. Members will have the chance to delve into the City's past and observe some of its present-day activities..."

Coverage of the Society of Young Freemen's launch can also be found in an article in *The Telegraph* and an entry in Jennifer of the Tatlers' "Jennifer's Diary".

The Society of Young Freemen was now up and running under the steady Chairmanship of June Evans. A programme of events was put in place. 6 months from December 1976, the Society was formally deemed viable and over the next year the Society went from strength to strength. The rest, as they say, is history but falls outside the scope of this paper.

Why the Society of Young Freemen was Established

I would now like to turn my attention to considering the motives of the City in facilitating the establishment of the Society of Young Freemen. There was a clear objective for the City to encourage young persons to become Freemen and thereafter retain their interest in City activities. But what was behind this objective? The reasons are not formally documented in any of the material I have seen and therefore what follows is conjecture and inference on my part, reflecting on the significance of contemporaneous events.

At that time, the Corporation was coming under some intense criticism from certain elements of the Labour Party. On 7th March 1976 the Greater London Regional Council of the Labour Party voted by an overwhelming majority to abolish the City Corporation as a local government unit and to divide it between its surrounding Boroughs.

These criticisms of the Corporation were to feature prominently in some of the first events in the Society of Young Freemen's programme. The first event since the launch was held on 27th January 1977 at Guildhall and included a talk by the Remembrancer on the ancient traditions of the City of London. An article in the Civic and Livery Recorder states that the Remembrancer "spoke out firmly against criticisms towards the continuing display of pageantry and traditional ceremonial and gave strong arguments for carrying on this unique side of City life".

Then, perhaps more controversially, on 10th October 1977, the Society of Young Freemen organised a debate held at City University on the motion that "in the interest of democracy the City should be abolished". Mr Bryan Davies, Labour MP for Enfield North, proposed the motion and Mr Tony Banks, former chairman of the Greater London Council General Purposes Committee, seconded the motion. Mr Ross Fitzpatrick, a Common Councilman and Vice Chairman of the Society of Young Freemen, together with Mr Roger Evans, prospective Conservative candidate for Worley West, opposed the motion. I am pleased to report that an article in the City Recorder states that the result of the debate was complete defeat for Mr Davies and Mr Banks!

Encouraging more young people to be admitted to the Freedom, and to take an interest in the City's activities, can therefore be viewed as part of a strategy to make the Corporation stronger and more resilient in the face of this adversity, by creating an expanding nucleus of Freemen in the City with informed opinion on its activities.

Conclusion

I am now at the conclusion of my paper. I hope that I have managed to do justice to the task I set myself of recording the origins of the Society of Young Freemen.

It is clear that the Society of Young Freemen owes its very existence to the then Policy and Parliamentary Committee of the City of London and in particular to its then Chairman, Norman Hall.

From the outset, there was significant involvement from the Civic City. The first Committee of the Society of Young Freemen included a number of standing Common Councilmen and the early programme of events centred around the City Corporation's activities and were reportedly attended by a number of Corporation figures.

Over time, the Society of Young Freemen established connections with a number of Livery Companies and other City organisations, whilst retaining strong links with the Guild of Freemen. Norman Hall and other Corporation figures, including most notably Wimburn Horlock, actively supported and maintained a life-long interest in the SYF, enabling the SYF to continue to flourish. It was Wimburn Horlock who, when I was 21 and starting work in the City, proposed me for the Freedom and introduced me to the SYF.

In their turn, members of the Society of Young Freemen have made an active contribution to the Livery and the City. A number of members of the Society of Young Freemen have served as Chairmen of Ward Clubs, Masters of Livery Companies and have even gone on to serve as Common Councilmen.

The Society of Young Freemen is now approaching a mere 39 years old, which in City terms may be considered exceedingly youthful. However, even in that relatively short space of time, the SYF has evolved and changed as new generations have made their mark and introduced new ideas. I wonder whether earlier generations of members of the Society of Young Freemen would recognise the SYF of today.

Some things have remained constant, and the Society of Young Freemen continues to have the Lord Mayor as its Patron and has a long line of Past Lord Mayors as Past Presidents. However, the ongoing direct connection with the Corporation through the (now) Policy and Resources Committee has been lost and with it the SYF's formal link to its origins. Yet the challenges the City faces in the present day are not so dissimilar to those in 1976. Here is an example of how the City of London Corporation inspired a new generation of young people to take an interest in the City and its activities.