

Society Outings

VISIT TO GOLDSMITHS' HALL AND FREEMASONS' HALL

Report by Derek Leach

Expectations were high amongst those climbing aboard the packed coach at 8am on 15th October with the prospect of viewing two grand, but quite different, buildings in the City. With traffic heavy we arrived at Goldsmiths' Hall just in time for our guided tour. The exterior of the building was impressive with its facade of Portland stone and six massive Corinthian columns with the company's arms over the door, but this was nothing compared to the interior that awaited us.

There has been a Goldsmiths' Hall on the site since 1339 when nineteen goldsmiths bought a merchant's house in Foster Lane for the use of the company. Its first royal charter is dated 1327 when the standard of gold and silver wares was first regulated. In 1478 a proper Assay Office was established and now over five million items a year are assayed by Goldsmiths' Hall - hence the term 'hallmarking'. A replacement hall in the Palladian style was built in 1636 but was a victim of the Great Fire in 1666 although quickly rebuilt. The building was severely neglected during the Napoleonic Wars period and was

replaced by the third hall in 1835 which was even larger, covering half an acre.

Passing through cast iron gates into an oak panelled reception area, we gasped as we entered the Staircase Hall lined with marble of ten different colours. There was a richly moulded and gilded dome, marble statues of the four seasons and the arms of Richard II (marking the incorporation of the Goldsmiths' Company in 1393), the City of London arms (Goldsmiths' being a City Livery Company) and those of William IV (king when this building was opened in 1835).

We climbed the beautiful staircase, having to choose whether to go left or right to the first floor landing, and then admiring the gilded wooden figure of St. Dunstan, the company's patron saint, made for the company's barge in 1744. Prominent were the arms of six major benefactors who through their legacies of properties and land in the City provide most of the Goldsmiths' income today. Much of this is used for various charitable purposes with a large proportion



Staircase Hall

spent on education. £80 million has been invested recently in a new college for goldsmith apprentices.

The Livery Hall was the piece de resistance with its richly decorated ceiling, the company's ceremonial plate on display, four matching chandeliers each with 48 candles, musicians' gallery and paintings of various monarchs. Cleverly placed at each end of the room were large mirrors reflecting the chandeliers and giving the impression that the room was endless. Recently redecorated, the hall used several thousand books of gold leaf which exhausted the country's supply for the year!

We then moved into the Court Room where the Prime Warden, his two Assistant Wardens and the Court of Assistants conduct their business at a long banjo shaped table. This room incorporates some features from the 1735 building but also a Roman stone altar found when digging foundations for the 1835 building. It is here that new freemen sign their oath of loyalty and receive the freedom of the company. How does one become a freeman of the company? Either your father was a freeman, you were apprenticed to a freeman or you were highly recommended (usually because of business etc skills that you possess). In days gone by you could buy the freemanship!

The Drawing Room was severely bomb damaged during WW2 but has been



The Livery Hall

beautifully restored. The most striking feature is the 12 cwt one inch thick carpet, woven in 1902 and a replica of the 1835 original, with the company's coat of arms prominent. Fortunately, the carpet, furniture, candelabra and mantelpiece survived the bombing.

The former Dining Room is now the Exhibition Room with the walls lined with

showcases displaying one of the finest collections of English silver in the country. Whilst the oldest piece dates from 1561, new modern pieces are added each year.

The only regret as we left was the ban on photographs and the lack of a shop even to buy postcards!

After a bite to eat and a stroll round Covent Garden where we enjoyed the street entertainer playing the crowd, we were taken to Freemasons' Hall or, more correctly, the United Grand Lodge of England. Founded in 1717 by twelve Lodges, a similar group was also founded in 1752 but they combined in 1813 with the motto 'Hear, see and be silent'. At every Grand Lodge meeting the ceremonial pouch containing the Articles of Union is present (in case anybody forgets the rules) together with the ceremonial swords!

This enormous Grade II listed grand art deco building, completed in 1933 and costing some £55 million in today's money, is often used, like the

Goldsmiths' Hall for film and TV scenes. Our tour began in the library before moving into the Grand Officers' Robing Room where personal regalia is added to the morning suit 'uniform'. The room is dominated by three large thrones, dating from 1791 when the Prince Regent was installed as Grand Master and still used for installations. The Duke of Kent is the present Grand Master. Whilst members of the royal family have often been Grand Master, the monarch never is. We moved down the Processional Corridor, which used the last remaining Tasmanian black wood forest to line its walls, to the impressive Peace Memorial Building. At one end was a solid bronze highly ornate peace shrine containing the names of 3075 freemasons who lost their lives during the First World War. At the far end were the fabulous 12 foot high solid bronze doors to the Temple where eight bronze panels depicted scenes from the building of King Solomon's Temple. Each door weighs 1.25 tons yet the light pressure of one finger opened them!

Entering the Grand Temple one could only gasp at its size and decoration - 130 by 90 feet with 1725 seats excluding the balcony. Below the impressive ceiling a mosaic ran



Freemasons' Hall

round all the walls with 1.5 million mosaic tiles depicting the five noble orders of architecture. This was said to be one of the finest mosaics in Europe, taking two years to design and another two and a half to make! Everything had some symbolic meaning even the black and white chequered carpet which all lodges possess. In the 'auditorium' were thrones for the Grand

Master, Senior Warden and Junior Warden.

Above this ceremonial floor are two floors containing 22 private Lodges that we did not see. Once again photography was banned but at least there were postcards to buy.

So ended a most interesting trip with thanks to Pat and Patrick for organising the visits and looking after us.



Grand Temple