

# London Metropolitan Archives

Information Leaflet Number 14

## City Freedom Archives



## People who had to be Free

Many people assume that the Freedom of the City of London is purely an honorary award, presented only to the great and the good, or for particular bravery, for example. However, this is true of only a very small number of City Freemen. The Honorary Freedom of the City of London is indeed the highest honour that the City can bestow, but it is granted very rarely. The vast majority of City Freemen were, and are, admitted by other means, and represent a very broad cross-section of the population. Over the last 300 years, about 300,000 ordinary people have been made Free of the City of London. Even today, many men and women continue to be admitted to the City Freedom, although most of the privileges and practical reasons for doing so have now disappeared.

Before the mid-19th century, the Freedom of the City of London was a practical necessity for those who plied a trade or made their living in the City of London. Indeed, certain groups of people were compelled, on pain of prosecution, to be Free of the City, including:

- **Common Councilmen, Aldermen (including the Lord Mayor) and Sheriffs** of the City (all still have to be Free of the City today);
- **Liverymen** of the City Livery Companies (all still have to be Free of the City today);
- **Most City of London Corporation employees** (this lasted until well into the 20th century, particularly for higher grades of staff);
- **Retail traders** within the City (until the 1850s);
- **City "sworn" or licensed brokers** (until 1853)
- **Licensed victuallers** in the City of London (until 1853);
- **Journeyman employees of City Freemen** within the City of London, although, under an Act of Common Council of 1750, non-free journeymen could be employed if the master obtained a licence from the City of London Corporation.

Many other people chose to become Free of the City because of the privileges it carried with it, or for reasons of their own. However, some of those who ought to have been Free often evaded it, on grounds of cost or principle, and some were prosecuted for this.

## Rights and privileges

Historically, only City Freemen could:

- **Vote in Parliamentary elections;**
- **Vote in civic elections,** for each Ward's Common Councilmen and Alderman;

- **Be exempt from all tolls payable on animals** brought into the City for sale;
- **Be exempt from all market tolls** payable anywhere in the country;
- **Be exempt from naval impressment**;
- **Enjoy certain legal privileges** with respect to being tried and imprisoned.

All of these historic privileges are now defunct although, even today, the City Freedom continues to be a necessary qualification for certain civic offices (see **People who had to be Free** above).

Contrary to popular belief, City Freemen do **not** have the right to herd sheep, or animals of any kind over London Bridge, or any other bridges, although this belief probably stems from the Freemen's historic exemption from tolls on animals brought into the City for sale. There are a number of other popular myths about some so-called privileges of City Freemen which are equally false, and which are de-bunked in Caroline Arnold's book (see **Further Reading**, below).

## Qualifications

In order to be Free of the City, a person has to be:

**Historically, over 21 years of age.** However, the age of admission was lowered by Act of Common Council of 6 November 2008 to **18 years of age historically, a British or Commonwealth subject** by birth or naturalisation (this requirement was dropped for citizens of the European Union in 1996, and for other non-Britons in 1999). Formerly, foreign dignitaries were sometimes voted the honorary Freedom, and given an address of welcome in the Guildhall. However, most could not make the Freeman's declaration of allegiance to the British Crown in the form in which it was required of all Freemen before 1996, and so could not technically be Freemen.

Both men and women have always been able to be Free, although married women have only been admissible since 1923. Before then, a Free spinster or widow who subsequently married lost her Freedom during her marriage. A non-free widow of a City Freeman obtained the Freedom herself "by courtesy" on her husband's death, so that she could continue his business. However, such widows were not formally admitted to the Freedom, and so there are no records of them. Women who were Free of the City used to be known as "Free Sisters", a term now only maintained by some of the City Livery Companies for their own female Freemen.

Members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) were legally permitted to make an affirmation on admission in place of the Freeman's oath from 1696, and their City Freedom admission papers were usually marked with a "Q". Jewish and other non-Christian British subjects were allowed to be admitted to the City Freedom after 1830, although some Jewish Freemen were also admitted before 1738.

Before 1835, every person who wished to become a City Freeman first had to become a Freeman of one of the City Livery Companies (as the successors to the medieval trade and craft guilds are known). The Freedom, or ordinary membership, of a Livery Company, is a separate Freedom from the Freedom of the City. A person wishing to become a Liveryman (i.e. a senior member) of a Livery Company must first be a Freeman both of that Company and of the City of London. A person who is a Freeman of both the City and a Livery Company is referred to as "Citizen and [Livery Company name] of London".

People can belong to more than one City Livery Company, in which case one Company, usually the first one joined, is known as the person's Mother Company. It was fairly uncommon for a person to belong to more than one Livery Company before the 19th century.

Over the centuries, some Livery Companies lost their original trade or craft links, and so it is not at all safe to assume that someone in a Company followed the occupation of that Company: a "Citizen and Spectaclemaker of London" would not necessarily have been a working optician, for example.

## Ways of being admitted

There are four ways of becoming a Freeman, each of which can be undertaken either through, or without, the intervention of one of the Livery Companies (although before 1835, one *had* to be a Livery Company member first):

**The Honorary Freedom**, the highest honour the City of London Corporation can bestow, which is granted only by special Resolution of the Court of Common Council to distinguished and worthy people, either as individuals (e.g. Winston Churchill, Florence Nightingale) or as members of particular groups (e.g. the City Imperial Volunteers in the Boer War, the City Fire-Watchers in the 2nd World War);

**Servitude**, by which a person has to complete an apprenticeship of at least 7 (or, since 1889, 4) years' duration to a City Freeman;

**Patrimony**, open only to the legitimate and natural children of a male (or, since 1976, female) Freeman who were born **after** their parent's own Freedom admission. Since 1999, adopted children and children legitimated by the subsequent marriage of their parents have also been eligible for admission by patrimony, so long as their birth date was after the City Freedom admission of their adopter or parent;

**Redemption**, or purchase, obtainable by any one of the following ways:

- **Presentation** by an officer of the City of London Corporation or other person who had been granted the right of presenting a limited number of candidates *in lieu* of salary or as a reward for services or as a means of raising revenue by the City of London Corporation. The intending Freeman usually had to pay the

officer for presenting him or her, in addition to the usual Freedom fees, although the City Freedom archives do not note this personal fee. This right was abolished in the mid-19th century;

- **Directly petitioning the Court of Aldermen**, if becoming Free through the intervention of a City Livery Company;
- **Directly petitioning the Court of Common Council**, if no Livery Company were involved (possible after 1835 only);
- **By being on the City Parliamentary Register of Electors** (possible after 1856 only).

## Existing archives

**Freedom admissions before 1681** are not comprehensive, and personal information is usually limited, but the records consist of the following:

**1309-1312**: Letter Book D [COL/AD/01/004] contains a transcript of part of a Register of Freemen, published and indexed in RR Sharpe's *Calendar of Letter Book D* (Corporation of London, 1902);

**1437-1497**: Recognizance Rolls 13-25 [COL/RG/01/013-025] record Freemen **by redemption only** and their sureties, and there is a name index at LMA;

**1495-1649**: Repertories (i.e. proceedings) of the Court of Aldermen [COL/CA/01/01/001-064] record admissions of City Freemen **by redemption only**, [probably only about 10% of the Freemen admitted at that period] and there is a name index in LMA covering the above period;

**c.1551-1553**: Fragments of two Registers of Freemen, [COL/CHD/FR/01/001] one now held at LMA, but the other by the British Library [Egerton MS 2408], published in Charles Welch's *Register of Freemen of the City of London...*, (LAMAS, 1908,) [edition contains some errors: dates corrected in "A London Manuscript" by Bower Marsh in *Genealogist*, XXXII, (Apr 1916)];

**1668-1669**: Register of Freemen, burnt in 1786 and since conserved, with a full transcript and name index at LMA [COL/CHD/FR/01/002]

**Freedom Admissions after 1681** are fairly comprehensively recorded, the main series being:

**From 1681: City Freedom admission papers**, [COL/CHD/FR/02] comprising over 3,500 monthly bundles of documents, covering all types of admission, with a few gaps (mostly in the 1680s and 1770s-1780s) in the series (closure period applies to some 20<sup>th</sup> century and later admissions). Indexed by the Alphabets of Freedom Admissions (14 volumes), which are arranged alphabetically by initial letter only of Freeman's surname and thence in date order, month by month.

The City Freedom papers 1681-1925 have been digitised by [Ancestry](#) and can be consulted on their website. It is necessary to have a subscription to view this, but free access to Ancestry is available at LMA and Guildhall Library.

**From 1784: Freedom Books** (*alias* Registers, or Declaration Books), [COL/CHD/FR/04] which give no more personal information about Freemen than the admission papers, but which do give the exact day of admission, often not given in the admission papers.

**New Freedom Admissions** are administered by the Chamberlain's Court, and owing to Data Protection legislation, only very limited information about such Freemen can be supplied to people other than the Freeman concerned. If you want to enquire about people made Free of the City of London very recently, you should contact the Clerk of the Chamberlain's Court, P.O. Box 270, Guildhall, London EC2P 2EJ.

Please note that replacement Freedom certificates are granted by the Chamberlain's Court **only** to living Freemen on proof of loss or destruction of their own certificates. Replacement or copy Freedom certificates of Freemen who have died cannot be made.

**Records of Apprenticeship Enrolments** exist for the apprentices of City Freemen, who were supposed to enrol their apprenticeships in the Chamberlain's Court within one year of starting them. If they did not, they had to pay a higher fee when and if they became Free of the City. Not everyone who became Free by servitude had enrolled their apprenticeship, and not everyone who did enrol it went on to complete it, or necessarily to become Free of the City. The records of apprenticeship enrolment include:

**1786-1974: Inrolment Books** [COL/CHD/AP/01/001-017], indexed in Alphabets [COL/CHD/AP/03/001-009] similar to the Freedom Admission Alphabets;

**Licences to Employ Non-Free Journeymen** 1750-1845 [COL/CHD/FR/11/05/001-010] indexed for masters and journeymen 1750-1761; indexed for masters only 1761-1810.

**Archives of Most of the City Livery Companies** are held by LMA although some still keep their own records.

## What the archives will tell you

The most useful series of the above records is the City Freedom Admission Papers from 1681, and these can include the following personal information:

**Freeman's City Livery Company** (if applicable), and **date of Company Freedom** (a separate Freedom from the City Freedom, usually on, or shortly before, the City Freedom admission date);

**Freeman's address and occupation** (usually for redemptions only, and rare in any case before 1835: note that actual occupation is not necessarily the same as the City Livery Company name);

**Freeman's age or date of birth** (for all patrimonies, and for redemptions only 1835-1837 and from the late 19th century);

**Freeman's father's details**, including name, Livery Company (if applicable), date of admission to the City Freedom (if applicable, for patrimonies only), abode and occupation (for servitudes, and most redemptions only);

**Freeman's master's details**, including name and Livery Company (if applicable, for servitudes only: note that masters' addresses and actual occupations are rarely given);

**Details of the Freeman being turned over** to a new master or mistress during his or her apprenticeship (for servitudes only).

“King’s Freeman”

The term ‘King’s Freeman’ is actually rather misleading, as they were not Freeman at all, but discharged military and naval servicemen, allowed to make a living within the City of London without having to become City Freeman first.

## **After the Wars were over... The Problem of Returning Ex-Servicemen**

Large numbers of discharged servicemen, returning to civilian life after wartime service, have always caused social and economic problems and concern for governments worried about riot and revolution. Men often joined the army or navy at a young age, or perhaps they ran away to join up in the middle of their apprenticeships, and so were never formally trained to make a living when they finally ceased their military service. This made it difficult for them to find work in civilian life, especially at the end of a long period of war (such as the Napoleonic Wars of the late 18th and early 19th centuries), when large numbers of their fellows were also looking for work. In addition, many towns and cities forbade anyone except their own Freeman to trade within their bounds. In the City of London, for example, only people who were Freeman of the City were allowed to exercise trades there, and thus returning servicemen were often hindered from finding work in the City.

## **Government measures to relieve distress**

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Government tried to make it easier for ex-servicemen to enter or re-enter trades, without being hindered by local byelaws or customs which would otherwise have prevented them from exercising particular trades, or working in certain localities. The Government passed three Acts of

Parliament [24 Geo III, Sess. 2, cap. 6 (1784, repealed 1871), 42 Geo III, cap. 69 (1801/1802, repealed 1872) and 56 Geo III, cap. 77 (1816, repealed 1873)] to this end. The Acts permitted servicemen (but not deserters) who had served in the armed forces at any time after 1 April 1763 and their families to exercise trades on their discharge, 'notwithstanding local byelaws' such as the requirement to be City Freemen in order to be allowed to work within the 'Square Mile' of the City. Thus, in the City of London, the ex-servicemen who took advantage of the Acts were misleadingly known as 'King's Freemen', although they were not Freemen of any description. The Acts simply allowed them to behave as if they were, for working purposes.

## **Becoming a King's Freeman in the City of London**

To become a 'King's Freeman' in the City of London, the ex-serviceman or his family had to produce his discharge certificate, and sometimes other documents, in order to obtain a certificate of entitlement from the City Chamberlain. This certificate of entitlement prevented the City's officers from prosecuting the ex-serviceman for being a non-free trader, and allowed him or his family to make their living there without having to be admitted as a City Freeman.

## **Records of King's Freemen in LMA**

LMA holds about 4,000 sets of discharge papers for 'King's Freemen' with a slip index by name [COL/CHD/FR/11/04]. Many of the discharge papers are in very poor physical condition, and cannot therefore be handled or photocopied, but the slip index extracts most of the information contained in the papers themselves. These discharge papers were the papers submitted by servicemen or their families to the City Chamberlain in return for certificates of entitlement. The certificates of entitlement were issued between 1784 and 1873 (with a gap between 1815 and 1854). However, it should be emphasised that these covering dates are not necessarily the dates of the discharge papers themselves. A person might have been discharged years before he needed to obtain a certificate of entitlement, so his discharge papers might well date from before 1784. In fact, most of the discharge papers date from about the 1760s to the late 1820s. There are few later ones, probably because more people were ignoring the Freedom requirement after the 1820s and, after the 1850s, traders in the City did not need to be Freemen (and thus, there was nothing to hinder the ex-serviceman from setting up in business there). The discharge papers themselves are not in any chronological or alphabetical order, and the numeration system used (which is not original) was imposed before the records were deposited and sheds no light on how the records were originally arranged. There are no certificates of entitlement as such amongst the discharge papers. The date of issue of the certificate of entitlement is not usually stated, although it can be inferred sometimes from dated certificates of events which took place at an earlier date (for example, a minister's certificate of a baptism

which took place at his church in 1790 might be dated 1826: this might mean that the certificate of entitlement was obtained in 1826, or later). The discharge certificates note the relevant military or naval service, sometimes with a description of the serviceman, and the name of the hospital, if the ex-serviceman were a pensioner (e.g. a Chelsea Pensioner). If the person applying for the certificate of entitlement was a member of the ex-serviceman's family, then the papers sometimes include certificates of marriage or baptism, to prove the family members' relationship to the ex-serviceman. LMA also holds some other military and naval records, although these tend to be limited to units with a City of London link, such as the City of London Imperial Volunteers of the Boer War or the City Trained Bands. Not all of these contain details of individual servicemen. Many other records about military and naval servicemen are held elsewhere, most notably at **The National Archives**.

## Further reading

*My Ancestors Were Freemen of the City of London* by Vivienne E. Aldous (Society of Genealogists, 1999), concentrates particularly on the historic City Freedom admission papers, and the information contained in them which is likely to be useful to family historians.

*Sheep Over London Bridge: The Freedom of the City of London*, by Caroline Arnold (Corporation of London, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2001), is a popular guide to the City Freedom generally, including the present-day admission procedures in a City of London context.

*The Chamberlain of the City of London, 1237-1987*, by Betty R. Masters, (Corporation of London, 1988 [out of print]), especially Chapter 8, "The Chamberlain's Court: Freedom and Apprenticeship". This is a scholarly but readable book about the whole history and function of the Chamberlain of London from the Middle Ages, including his jurisdiction over City apprentices and Freemen.

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