



Matthew Davies, Ann Saunders. *The History of the Merchant Taylors Company.* Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2004. xiv + 316 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-902653-99-0.



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A Great London Livery Company

This volume commemorates the 500th anniversary of the granting of a charter by Henry VII in 1503 to the Merchant Taylors Company of London. Beautifully produced and slip-cased, the book is also lavishly illustrated with some rarely seen items: the frontispiece shows the earlier of two pre-Reformation hearse-cloths which still belong to the company, a rare item dating from c.1480-1500. The description of “Merchant Taylors” recognized the growing numbers of members of the company who traded in cloth and other goods, rather than in finished garments. The charter also confirmed the rise of the company to a position among the “Great Twelve” companies of the city of London, and the large membership enabled the construction of a hall and chapel. The company still flourishes, with a modern focus on charitable and educational work as well as on lucrative property development in the city. Its original hall on Threadneedle Street was destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666, and its successor was again destroyed at the start of World War II, so the present buildings of the company are just over fifty years old, but still in the same shell on the same site. The book echoes the modern buildings by charting the story of the company and its members up to the 1950s. Divided

into three sections, it covers the medieval fraternity of St. John the Baptist, from which the company emerged; the company’s history across the tumultuous years from Reformation to Restoration; and lastly, the company in the modern world.

Although the focus is firmly on the Merchant Taylors, there is much material for social historians, including chapters on education and on the daily life of Elizabethan Londoners. Two of the greatest educational benefactors of the sixteenth century were both Merchant Taylors. Sir William Harper founded a trust which now supports four nationally renowned schools in his home town of Bedford, not merely his original benefaction of Bedford Grammar School, while Sir Thomas White was the founder of St. John’s College, Oxford. Merchant Taylors School itself educated many notable figures, including no less than six of the scholar-translators who produced the King James or Authorized version of the Bible in 1611. There is also plenty of evidence gathered here on a number of important themes in the wider history of London, and of towns in general, including trade and industry, apprenticeship, the impact of religious change, and the

foundation of educational and other charities.

The authors, Dr. Matthew Davies of the Centre for Metropolitan History at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, and Dr. Ann Saunders, who has many previous publications on London to her

credit, both deserve congratulations. They have fulfilled a commission from the Merchant Taylors Company by researching and writing a handsome and scholarly volume that is far more than a work of commemorative piety: here is a distinguished contribution to the history of one of the world's great cities.

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