

FREEMEN OF THE CITY OF LONDON

SHEEP DRIVE ACROSS LONDON BRIDGE

SUNDAY 5TH OCTOBER 2014



On Saturday 4th October I looked out of my bedroom window in West Farleigh and took in the overcast and grey conditions, with more than a hint of rain in the air. Monday 6th would prove to be as indifferent.

However, sandwiched between those days, on Sunday 5th the conditions were perfect for an event in which, for the first time, with the enthusiastic support of family and friends, I was involved. In bright afternoon sunshine, we drove a herd of sheep across London Bridge.

How, you might rightly ask, did this unique occasion come about? Here's a little bit of history.

Wool

Over hundreds of years, wool was the mainstay of the English economy. When wool suffered, so did the country. Wool was so important that Queen Elizabeth through Parliament made all over the age of six wear woollen caps on Sundays. Charles II had a law passed requiring coffins to be lined with fleece. Wool was weighed on a Great Beam close to the present-day site of Mansion House, and the uniform unit of measurement – staple – governed exports to Europe. The woolsack has for centuries been a symbol of wealth in England – and as we know, the Lord

Chancellor to this day sits on a woolsack in the House of Lords. The royals' close interest in the trade had of course to a large extent to do with the substantial taxes they raised on the wool trade.

The real origins of the right to drive sheep across London Bridge are lost in the mists of time, but one theory is that "Freemen" were permitted to drive their flocks of sheep across the bridge without having to pay the onerous taxes.



Freemen and the Guilds

Long ago, the term 'Freeman' meant someone who was not the property of a feudal lord but who could earn money and own land. One of the oldest ceremonies is granting of the Freedom of the City of London, dating back to about 1237. Freedom meant the right to trade, and members of a Guild or Livery could carry out their trade or craft in the square mile. A fee, or 'fine', was charged and the Livery Companies would ensure that the goods and services provided would be of high standard. Freedom in the City today is still closely associated the City Livery Companies.

Another theory of the origin of the sheep drive has it that the Guilds strictly controlled the standards of work produced in the square mile. If the tradesman failed to come up to standard, the relevant Guild could destroy his tools. Since the tools of the Woolmen were in effect their sheep, it's possible that they were merely exercising their right to carry the tools of their trade across the bridge on their way to work.

There are some 110 Livery Companies in the City Of London. The most widely known include the Goldsmiths, Masons, Fletchers, Glaziers, Wheelwrights, Fishmongers, and Vintners. Among the more esoteric are the Spectaclemakers, Tobacco Pipe Makers and Tobacco Blenders, Fanmakers, and Framework Knitters, to name but a few. The more modern Companies include Fire Fighters, Air Pilots and Air Navigators, Builders Merchants, and Management Consultants.

The Companies are philanthropic, supporting education, research and welfare through ties to the craft, trade or profession associated with each one. They support

more than 160 schools and colleges and maintain links with universities, professional bodies and trade associations and provide apprenticeships and work placements. Many of the Companies are affiliated with the Armed Forces, links which go back to William the Conqueror when in 1066 he agreed with the city burghers not to invest the city – in return for enriching himself through their trade.

The Livery Company to which I belong is the Honourable Company of Master Mariners, which was formed in 1926. It was made a Livery Company in 1932, making it the first new Livery Company to be formed since 1746. King George V granted the style Honourable in 1928, in recognition of the sacrifices made by the Merchant Navy during the First World War. The title of Honourable had only ever previously been bestowed on two other companies; the Honourable East India Company and the Honourable Artillery Company. Recently the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators also took the title on obtaining their Royal Charter.

Princess Anne, the Princess Royal, was Master (some wag suggested she should have been awarded the accolade “Mistress”) of the Company from 2005 until April 2007. As you might expect, this was largely an honorary appointment and all the hard work was done by the deputy Master.



The bridges

There have been several bridges in or around the site of the present one, connecting Southwark and the City. The current bridge, a box girder construction, was opened in 1973 and replaced a 19th Century stone arch structure which in its turn superseded a medieval bridge some 600 years old.

There had been a succession of timber structures before that, the first being built by the Roman military as an element of their road building programme consolidating the conquest. It was likely a temporary pontoon type, replaced in due course by a guarded timber piled structure. The present City grew from its roots as small trading and shipping enterprises based on the north end of the bridge. The area now known as Southwark grew from a trading settlement at the south end.

In the early 5th Century, post-Roman occupation, London (Londinium) was mostly abandoned over time until the Saxons resettled there. The bridge had fallen into disrepair but Danish incursions necessitated its rebuilding as a defence measure. Subsequently new bridges were commissioned, the first stone construction being one built in the reign of Henry II, paid for by taxes on wool. This bridge featured a drawbridge to allow the passage of sailing vessels; defensive gatehouses; more than a hundred shops; and private and public latrines discharging direct into the river.

The medieval bridge suffered a number of fires during its lifetime, and serious traffic congestion. In the early 18th Century the Lord Mayor decreed that all northbound traffic (into the City) must keep to the west, or left, side; all southbound to the east – which may be the origin of our present traffic orientation. By the end of the 18th Century it was apparent that a new bridge was needed to replace the current one, by then more than 600 years old. The replacement, built 30m upstream, opened in 1831 at which stage the old structure was demolished.

In 1968, this bridge was sold to an American entrepreneur, Robert P McCulloch, who had it dismantled and shipped to Arizona where it was reconstructed piece by piece at Lake Havasu City. Construction of the current bridge began in 1967, was completed in 1972, and opened the following year.



Our sheep drive

Our good friends Chris and Wendy Stockwell from the village, and Jim Conibeare, whom I had known since seafaring days, had generously agreed to support us, together with our daughter Sara, her partner Nigel and our little grandson Joshua. In view of the arduous task before us, we thought it important to take sustenance so repaired to my Livery Company headquarters, HQS “Wellington” on the embankment at Temple where we had a little tour in order to work up a thirst, duly assuaged with a couple of glasses which washed down some sandwiches.





Energy generation time



The Sheep Drive is a popular event, which necessitates closing off a lane of London Bridge to accommodate the sheep, and placement of safety railings for the several hundred spectators. There were many Livery Companies attending, so everything had to be organised into precisely timed slots – ours being 3:30 pm. Lesley, my wife, and I duly presented ourselves to the marshals at the City end on time, me in full fig of The Honourable Company's navy blue robes and carrying a rather handsome shepherd's crook which was handed down to me years ago, courtesy of my father. I hadn't really envisaged using it in anger, but now was my chance!

The little flock of sheep allotted to us was herded into place by their loving shepherds, and in the company of several other Freemen we set off southbound toward Southwark. As it turned out, we didn't make it right across the bridge as the sheep were organised to be turned back halfway across and from there we all sauntered back to our starting point. Other groups were doing the same thing from the opposite, Southwark, end.







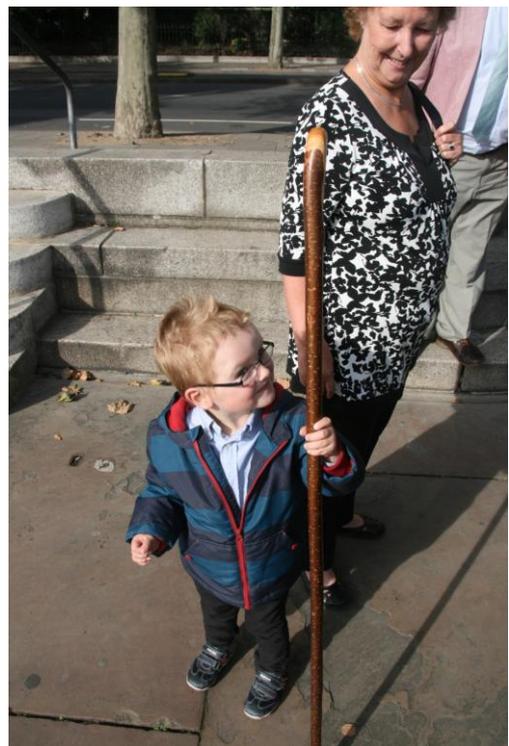


In point of fact there was very little driving as such – the sheep had been doing this route for much of the day in shifts, and knew perfectly well where to go, with the gentle encouragement of their shepherds. The animals seemed happy enough, although it's rather difficult to tell with sheep, is it not?





A mini-flock ...



...and a mini-shepherd

On arrival back at our starting point, Lesley and I were presented with rather handsome certificates just to prove that we had completed this daunting task.



Our friends and family cheered us in, at which point it seemed a good idea to repair to a local hostelry for a refreshing ale or two.

The Worshipful Company of Woolmen undertakes the immense logistics of organising the Sheep drive; and it is planned that the event will be a regular, annual one, bringing wider exposure to the Worshipful Company and all other of the Livery Companies involved, and benefitting the philanthropic work that they do.

We had a great day. Participants and spectators both, and family and friends, enjoy a unique occasion affording a glimpse into London's traditional past as well as its dynamic present. The costumes alone are worth the journey; ceremonial robes mingling with colourful fancy dress (more than one Bo-Peep to be seen) make it an unforgettable occasion.



Anyone wishing to attend next year's event, and I recommend it, can keep updated on date and times through the Woolmen's website on <http://woolmen.com/>, or by contacting them on 020 8310 5860.

