

ROCC

PRESS CUTTINGS

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**The City's influence
may not wane if it
listens to a new set
of freemen and
women. John
Kavanagh explains**

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WHEN FREEMEN OF THE CITY UNITE

Tony Cleaver is one of the few people in the UK allowed to drive sheep across London Bridge. This is not a perk of his job as head of IBM in the UK but one of the more unusual rights afforded by his membership of the Company of Information Technologists.

In return for such doubtful benefits the company's members, known as freemen, have to meet certain obligations which date back hundreds of years but are still highly relevant today.

At the same time the company is looking to the future to help financial institutions in the City of London to exploit information technology to keep themselves competitive and enable the City to fight off bids by other capitals to become Europe's main financial centre.

The company was formed in 1987 - but it is part of a tradition which goes back to the days when master craftsmen got together in guilds covering their specialist trades.

Most guilds started in the late Middle Ages in big cities as social or religious bodies but they gradually became the regulatory organisations for their members' trades. They set standards of wages, apprenticeships and workmanship.

Initially members were roughly equal: each generally sold goods he made himself, from his own workshop. But as the population grew more imaginative guild members found new ways to exploit the expanding market and became richer than their colleagues.

These more powerful people gained control of the regulation of their guild's specialist craft and by the fourteenth century they were introducing measures to boost their own business by keeping out potential competitors. These measures included high guild membership fees and expensive livery or distinctive clothes for special occasions.

This not only kept some newcomers out of a guild but also meant that the existing members became split into two classes: the original freemen and the liverymen, the people who could afford the livery. Indeed, the guilds gradually became known as livery companies.

Guilds had always done charitable work, not only looking after their own members in times of hardship but also helping to set up schools and almshouses.

Today the livery companies concentrate almost entirely on

charitable and educational work - and the Company of Information Technologists has taken up these obligations with enthusiasm. But many of the original aims and later developments of the livery company movement are still reflected in comments from the new company's members.

"When IT Year in 1982 gave the industry public recognition a lot of senior people started thinking it would be nice to become respectable in our old age," says Mike Aldrich, head of computer company Rocc.

"The idea of joining a livery company came up and some thought about applying to the Tinsmiths but that didn't seem totally appropriate. Then someone had the idea of trying to start our own livery company."

That someone was Alan Benjamin, who has just retired as a director of computing services group Sema. He was director of IT Year and was invited to address a lunch of the elected aldermen of the City of London. He spoke then about the need for City institutions to invest in information technology and in related skills or face decline in the importance of London as a financial centre.

"As a result of conversations that day and later it emerged that it would be a good idea to create a mechanism for improving the City's awareness of information technology - and that the best way to do it would be to form an institution which the City understood, combining very ancient traditions with very modern ideas," Benjamin says.

Members have varying levels of commitment to this aim of improving awareness in the City.

Aldrich at Rocc, for example, emerges as a staunch traditionalist with his view that the company is "a great social get-together of old mates".

Des Lee, head of computing and communications at Lloyd's, takes the same view and sees business benefits.

"Senior people meet through their user associations or the Computing Services Association and so on but there's not often a chance for a cross-mix," he says.

"The company enables me to meet socially people like Arnold Weinstock, head of GEC, Roger Graham of services group BIS and Des Pitcher, who's been a Unisys director and is now chief executive of Littlewoods. It's a terrific opportunity to meet top people from suppliers, al-

though I would like to see more users represented."

The list of members or freemen certainly reads like a who's who of the industry: David Baldwin of Hewlett-Packard, Peter Bonfield of ICL, Geoff Shingles of Digital Equipment, Colin Southgate of Thorn EMI, Philip Swinstead of SD-Scicon, Geoff Unwin of Hoskyns and around 230 others at the last count, mostly with similar seniority.

New members are normally proposed by an existing freeman. They have to be computing people or experienced users.

Members pay £250 to join - this goes straight into the company's charitable trust - and £60 a year for running costs.

In addition there are social events such as dinners, receptions and a golf day. Visits to computing installations are

now being organised four times a year. These events, too, raise money - big money. A raffle and dinner raised £12,000 for the Red Cross. A special needs school in Hackney has been presented with a computer for teaching. And the trust fund has reached £150,000.

The old tradition of costs keeping people out refuses to die: one freeman, who prefers to stay unnamed, says the

events are too expensive. "I wear my tie with pride and I'm sure the company is a good thing - but it is expensive," he says. "It costs over £100 for two people for a dinner. It seems to be aimed at people with a lot of money, especially City people, who can probably get their firms to pay."

Lee at Lloyd's sympathises but says, "Perhaps it's expensive compared with the British Computer Society and a users

association - but it's cheap compared with other livery companies and generally good value for money."

With the trust fund well established the company is now looking at long-running projects.

First it has set up a £200,000 bursary with the City University Business School. A three-year project here will involve an investigation of the future information technology skills needed in the City and is thus in line with the aims outlined by Benjamin. The project will be run by Carole Brooke, a Cambridge graduate who has worked in insurance, the public sector and recruitment services as a user and provider of computing services. She will get a PhD from

it. "The availability of appropriately skilled people in key jobs will affect the extent to which opportunities offered by IT are converted into competitive advantage," Brooke says.

"We are looking at the next five to 10 years and will develop ways of linking business strategies to IT skills and training needs."

Four commercial backers - British Telecom, National Westminster Bank, Nationwide Anglia Building Society and Prudential - are putting in money and specialist staff time.

Members of the company are also being asked to take part; they are being sent questionnaires to gather their views on the likely developments of the next 10 years.

The trust fund will make discretionary donations to different charities - but meanwhile the company has picked one charity as the recipient of all profits from its dinners and golf days.

The Skin Treatment and Research Trust, based at Westminster Hospital, works on replacement skin, grown in a laboratory, for people with skin diseases.

In recognition of this support the charity has appointed as its chairman Barney Gibbens, chairman of Sema and

The company's status is that of a City Company Without Livery. Getting livery can take seven years. "We're very keen indeed to get livery," says Benjamin. "It will improve our status, which will help us in spreading awareness about the need to invest in IT and IT skills."

Meanwhile the company is observing all the traditions. It does not have funny handshakes or secret signs but it has kept to the accepted titles of Master, Warden and Assis-

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tant: the current Master is ICL director Alan Rousell, who will be succeeded by Robin Laidlaw, information technology director at British Gas.

The company has a coat of arms with a clever Latin motto with IT in the middle: cito, meaning swiftly. It has appointed a beadle to ensure procedures are properly observed on formal occasions. And it is holding its dinners and other events at places such as the Merchant Taylors' Hall and the Tallow Chandlers' Hall.

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But tradition comes second: as its leaders say, it has too many important tasks in hand to wonder whether Tony Cleaver will ever drive sheep across London Bridge. The idea is that people of between 14 and 21 who seem likely to go into computing but unlikely to go to university will be paired with freemen, who will act as their educational and professional mentors to encourage and help with their development. This will last seven years, the traditional apprenticeship period.