

J. F. Houston, *Featherbedds and Flock Bedds: The Early History of the Worshipful Company of Upholders of the City of London*, The Three Tents Press, 15 Cambridge Road, Sandy, Bedfordshire, SG19 1JE, 2006 (£25).

Before the foundation of the Furniture Makers' Company to represent the whole of the furniture industry in the mid-20th century, the making and selling of furniture in its various forms was undertaken by other city companies such as the Carpenters, the Joiners, the Turners and the Upholders. Although they first obtained ordinances as a 'mystery' as early as 1360 and received a grant of arms in 1465 (three 'sparvers' or conical bed canopies), it was not until 1626 that the Upholders were incorporated as a livery company with a royal charter.

John Houston, the company's archivist, has heroically self-published this new edition of a 1999 work, with a preface by Geoffrey Beard, bringing together, roughly chronologically, excerpts about the history of the company up until the first world war. Some of the information comes from original documents but most is from secondary sources. Most of the company's original records were destroyed in the great fire of 1666, along with their hall on St Peter's Hill. Their 'box of trophies and chest of writings' perished in another fire in 1812.

It is a shame that very little attempt has been made to add a commentary or narrative to this hard work of gathering material. A little more editing would also have avoided the occasional repetition and made the book more cohesive. The prize for this must remain with Karin Walton's introduction to the company, published in *Furniture History*, 1973.

Having said that, this volume offers some fascinating insights into the toils and tribulations of what has been in many respects a typical small livery company, including a number of things of particular interest to furniture historians. The range of the company seems to have fallen rather between a trade and a craft guild. In the early days upholders (the word meaning 'repairers'; 'upholsterers' is not commonly found before the mid-18th century) acted as auctioneers, pawnbrokers and dealers in second-hand goods, but by the 15th century they had branched out into making beds and bedding and dealing in and hiring out clothing, including livery gowns.

Many early records relate to attempts to maintain the quality of stuffing in beds, which inventories show to have been one of the most expensive areas of furnishing. Because this stuffing was in sealed bags it was easy to conceal such things as 'thistledowne', 'lime, dust, stones and other rubbish' and even 'naughty flocks that would breed worms'!

Later came the unsuccessful running dispute with the cane chair makers between 1689 and 1720 over the latter's intrusion into the upholstery market, and, in the early

18th century, more fruitfully against the Witney blanket weavers who were selling their wares within the city. They also fell out with the United Company of Undertakers who had set up in competition in what had become one of the Upholders' chief areas of business, soft furnishing and general interior decoration, along with cabinet making. Indeed, boosted by periodic attempts to force all members of the trade in London to join the company, a number of important furniture makers signed up.

By the 1820s, however, the traditional functions of the company to regulate and protect the trade had almost ceased, although it was not until 1856 that laws preventing persons other than freemen from retail trade or the exercise of craft in the city were formally rescinded; by this time freedom by servitude (apprenticeship) had dwindled to nil.

The Upholders have never been a large or important company in the city's history. In common with a number of other companies, their hall was never rebuilt and investments, particularly in rentable property, seem to have been something of a liability, with frequent payments for repairs. The financial situation was a perennial problem, linked to the limited number of members, generally around 120-130 during the 18th and early 19th centuries, but declining to barely 25 in the late 19th century. This was not unusual at the time and resulted in the thankfully inconclusive Royal Commission on Livery Companies in 1880-84. The Upholders survived and, with the 20th century livery revival, are going strong again today with a firm base in their traditional craft of upholstery.

Christopher Claxton Stevens

Scottish Interiors

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