Appendix 2

Governance of the City of London

The livery companies

The importance of the livery company system to the lives of the citizens of early modern London cannot be overstated. From the medieval period onwards there were several dozen livery companies in London, representing and regulating various trades and crafts in the city such as ironmongery, drapery, and shoemaking. The Companies had jurisdiction over much of the economic and social life of their members as both a regulatory body and welfare provider. Structurally divided into a larger body of freemen and a smaller privileged group of liverymen, the livery companies were governed by a senior elite of liverymen – the Court of Assistants – from whose ranks the important annual offices of Masters and Wardens (in some companies known as Renter Wardens, although in others Renter Wardens were separate officers) were drawn. Historically, only liverymen could take part in the election of the Lord Mayor, the sheriffs and the other officers of the City. Livery companies owned halls in London for their internal bureaucratic and social purposes; and they kept extensive records of their membership, their economic activities and their entertainments, such as the Lord Mayor’s Show.

The ‘Great Twelve’

The London livery companies were numerous, to reflect the numbers of active trades in the city, but within that diversity twelve of the Companies held priority. These were known as the ‘Great Twelve’, and their order of precedence (laid down in 1516) was taken very seriously and sometimes disputed. Custom dictated that Lord Mayors were members of the Great Twelve, and, in the mid-sixteenth century at least, the same was true for the aldermen.
Members of lesser Companies were obliged to ‘translate’ into one of the Great Twelve upon election to office. The Great Twelve, in their usual order of precedence, were: the Mercers, Grocers, Drapers, Fishmongers, Goldsmiths, Skinners, Merchant Taylors, Haberdashers, Salters, Ironmongers, Vintners, Clothworkers.

The Freedom of the City

From the early fourteenth century, to be a freeman of London – that is, an economically and politically active citizen – one needed to be a member of one of the livery companies. Entry to a Company came through four means: by the fulfilment of a fixed term of apprenticeship, by the inheritance of one’s father’s own company-specific status as a freeman (freedom by ‘patrimony’), by a mixture of lobbying, patronage and purchase (freedom by ‘redemption’) or by the process called ‘translation’, where a man who was already a member of one livery company moved over into another.

The City Corporation

The City Corporation of London was the jurisdictional unit for city government over which successive charters operated. Although certain urban services (poor relief and the night-watch, among others) were administered at the very local level of parish and precinct, the primary geographical units of government were the City’s twenty-six wards. Each ward was represented by an alderman elected for life from the senior elite of the citizenry; the aldermen sat together in a twice-weekly Court in Guildhall, presided over by an annually elected Lord Mayor. Their executive rule was primarily supplemented by two annually elected Sheriffs, the Common Council (a large legislative body of regularly elected freemen that met perhaps half-a-dozen times a year) and the Common Hall (an electoral body of all the city’s liverymen who met in June and September to elect the senior city officers). London also returned four MPs at every parliamentary election.

The jurisdiction of the City Corporation extended as far as the outer limit of the wards. The city walls do not necessarily reflect the boundary of the City, which in many parts of London went beyond the walls (thus some city wards are called ‘Without’, i.e. outside the walls).