

REMS VISIT TO SKINNERS' HALL and the CITY 6 June 2011

We were welcomed by Mervyn Bassett, the Beadle of the Worshipful Company of Skinners. He told us of the history of the Company and showed us over the building. The Company can be traced back to 1190. They had their first charter from Edward III in 1327 and have had a hall on their present site for 600 years. They dealt with the fur trade, mostly Ermine and sable, which were luxury items for the wealthy. Today it is not connected with the fur trade but concentrates on its three schools and two almshouses. We were told how Companies such as this one operate. It was associated with the East India Company and many of its patrons were directors of both. Many were wealthy and left legacies and now the company owns land around the Hall and in the country, providing income.

The hall was destroyed in the Great Fire and was rebuilt in the 1680s on pre-fire cellars. There was some bomb damage during the war but most of the building survives. There is a continuing programme of cleaning and restoration of the structure, paintings and furnishings. When they looked at the kitchens some years ago they took the opportunity to move them and to create a light and airy entrance hall reaching to the skylight with a gallery and a chandelier of 1780 from Russia (made for Catherine the Great, 1780). Many of the coffered ceilings remain in the Hall and various committee rooms. Much Regency and earlier furniture is still in use.

The expression "if the cap fits, wear it" comes from the way they elect their master and "at sixes and sevens" comes from the old fight with the Merchant Taylors Company over their rating in the top 12 Livery Companies. Today each year they swap the positions.

After lunch Anna Fenn took us around the City showing us the places where the coffee houses used to be where trading took place, insurance arranged (Lloyd's Coffee House) and lists were published of ships recently arrived and about to depart. The Royal Exchange was set up following Amsterdam's successful Bourse. We ended up on the river front on a recently opened foot path that goes past the columned front of the Customs House and the front of Old Billingsgate Market.

George Freeman