

The foot of Hercules

*Tallow Chandlers' Hall,
London EC4*

The livery halls were the first public buildings in the City to be reconstructed after the Great Fire in 1666.

Anya Matthews looks at one surviving hall from the period to find out why

Photographs by Will Pryce

FAMOUSLY, the Great Fire, which burned from September 2–5, 1666, destroyed a huge swathe of the City. The litany of buildings lost in the disaster rapidly became a feature of contemporary accounts and remains a commonplace of modern histories of the event: 13,000 houses, 400 streets, 87 churches, the City gates, the Royal Exchange, Newgate prison, Bridewell, the Sessions House, the Guildhall and St Paul's. Forty-four Halls belonging to livery Companies also lay in ashes. These were the headquarters of the City's guilds, corporate bodies that developed from the late Middle Ages to regulate trades and crafts. As John Evelyn noted in his diary on September 6: 'All... the Companies Halls, sumptuous buildings, arches, enteries, [were] all in dust.'

The trauma of fire was followed by a huge reconstruction effort. An inscription on the Monument erected to the Fire in 1669 declared, rather optimistically: 'Haste is seen everywhere, London rises again, whether with greater speed or greater magnificence is doubtful, three short years complete that which was considered the work of an age.' The surveying of thousands of plots and some reconstruction had been accomplished by 1669, but thousands of houses, as well as the City's public edifices and churches, remained unbuilt. Construction of the latter would continue well into the 1680s. ➤

Fig 1: The hall laid in preparation for a feast. The screen, commissioned in 1674 and since reconfigured, copies that of the Goldsmiths





By contrast, the rebuilding of the livery Halls did justify some of the inscription's hyperbole and deserve that double distinction of speed and magnificence. Of the 44 Halls burnt in the Fire, eight had been reconstructed by 1669, 10 more by 1670 and three-quarters by 1673. None of these post-Fire Halls remains wholly intact. Many were lost to bombing in 1940 and substantial fabric from the period survives in only six today. Through a narrow, barrel-vaulted passage off Dowgate Hill stands arguably the best-preserved and most evocative: that of the Tallow Chandlers.

That Companies such as the Tallow Chandlers (chartered by Edward IV in 1462) were such energetic builders after the Great Fire seems surprising. The 16th century has been regarded as the high watermark of guild power and influence, but historians have tended to characterise the Companies post 1600 as medieval anachronisms, reconciled to their own demise. The age of the Stuarts undoubtedly brought challenges: guild authority was under threat from the growth of extramural London where corporate powers could be evaded, as well as specific events such as the Civil War and so-called *quo warranto* proceedings seeking to question corporate privileges.

‘The Tallow Chandlers’ Hall is the best preserved and most evocative’

Prior to the fire, the City was a variegated and densely packed place in which the handsome merchants’ houses of Aldermanbury jostled with the filthy tenements of Aldgate. It was onto this finely grained environment that the Companies had grafted themselves. On securing a charter, or sometimes in hopes of being granted one, the Companies tended to acquire and convert courtyard town houses. It was consequently around this domestic building type—with a dominating hall and withdrawing apartments opening off it—that their corporate activities and rituals evolved.

The hall, from which these complexes took their name, expressed in architecture the identity of the company and was used for its public gatherings, such as feasts. This typically sat behind the principal elevation of the inner courtyard at ground, or sometimes first-floor, level. Usually separating the courtyard from the street was a row of income-generating shops or tenements. As they do today, each livery Company admitted members by patrimony, redemption or servitude and its hierarchy was governed by a Court of Assistants headed by the Master and Wardens. The Assistants were the oligarchic



Fig 2 above: The 1670s parlour with its panelling and doorcase. Fig 3 facing page: The entrance courtyard. The hall is at first-floor level and has a row of round upper windows

grandees and used the Court room or Court parlour as their base for the despatch of business. This was typically a withdrawing chamber adjoining the dais end of the hall. The liverymen's status was reflected in their right to wear gowns lined and trimmed with satin and fur.

All records for the period immediately after the ‘most deplorable’ Fire of September 1666 convey a profound sense of shock and dislocation at the destruction done. Plans for rebuilding presented to Charles II by Christopher Wren and John Evelyn in the week following the Fire would have seen the City's erratic medieval street plan swept away in favour of a more uniform plan of avenues, rond-points and *piazas*. The manoeuvring of the livery Halls was key to both plans, but neither materialised and the Companies stayed resolutely on their pre-Fire sites.

Hall-building projects proceeded remarkably swiftly, despite the heavy financial demands that had been placed on the Companies by both Crown and Parliament in the preceding decades and the loss of rental income in the Fire. The Acts for Rebuilding did not provide funding for the Halls' reconstruction as they did for churches and major public buildings; this went ahead largely thanks to myriad small subscriptions from the Companies' rank and file.

The Tallow Chandlers began their rebuilding project in January 1668, commissioning four houses on the street front of their Hall site to designs by the leading City carpenter and surveyor Edward Jerman. Once rented, these helped fund reconstruction of the complex behind, although the Company was still

obliged to borrow £3,000. Economies were inevitable and the carpenter William Stanton was requested to make the street door case ‘of good Oken Timber well carved and not of stone’ yet ‘in sure manner and for the honor of the Company’.

On Jerman's death in November 1668, the master bricklayer Capt John Caine took over as surveyor and it was to his designs that the Hall proper was built. Caine was then also working under the surveyor and joiner Thomas Whiting at Brewers' Hall, near Cripplegate. Photographs of that building (destroyed in 1940) indicate that Caine borrowed heavily from Whiting's designs; in particular, the principal elevation's arrangement of segmental arches on Tuscan columns, beneath two neat rows of square-headed and round windows.

Progress was slow until, in November 1670, ‘several livery men being desirous to promote and encourage the rebuilding of this Companies Comon Hall did freely subscribe towards the rebuilding’. The following June, it ‘was unanimously agreed that the carcasse of this Companies publique hall shalbe erected and carried up with as much expedicon as conveniently may’.

The impetus came, as in all the Companies, from a dedicated committee for rebuilding comprising a handful of enthusiastic liverymen. One of this committee's tasks was to select the best ‘patterns’ and ‘models’ for building and fitting up. Competitive comparison—particularly emulation of the greater Companies by the lesser—was common. The Tallow ➤

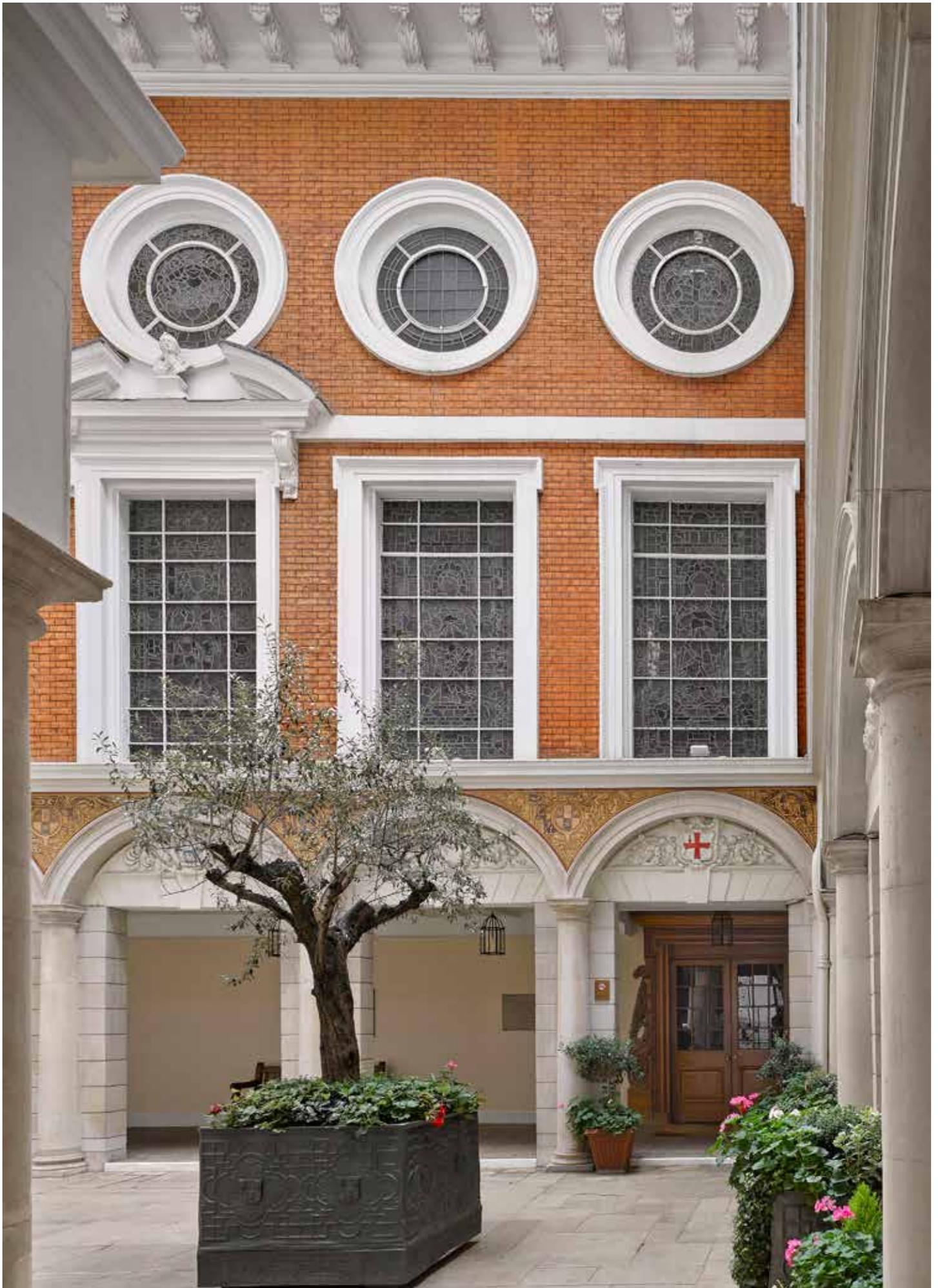




Fig 4: The Court room opens off the main stair to the hall and is furnished to accommodate the ceremonial of the livery company

Chandlers, jostling with the Barber-Surgeons for 'the seventeenth place of rank and degree', seem to have been particularly alert on this score. When commissioning their new hall screen (**Fig 1**) from the leading joiner John Symes in 1674, they instructed that it should 'have a front as is in the plot drawne for the Upper end of Goldsmiths Hall'. In so doing, it was aspiring to one of the City's most prestigious models.

Occasionally, a civic grandee with political ambitions stepped in and paid for the fitting up of a specific room. At Tallow Chandlers' Hall, this role was fulfilled, in 1675, by the high Tory Lord Mayor Sir Joseph Sheldon (nephew of Gilbert, Archbishop of Canterbury, who built the Sheldonian Theatre at Oxford). Sheldon defrayed the cost of wainscoting the very fine extant Hall parlour (**Fig 2**) and 'treated' with the joiner (probably Symes again) directly. His arms fill a festooned cartouche breaching the pediment of the sham doorcase at the room's east end. The room's chimneypiece has a fine, carved bay-leaf architrave (apparently a favourite feature of Symes's, found also at Vintners' Hall), an acanthus frieze and an overmantel crowned with the Stuart royal arms and carved festoons.

The Companies' response to the completion of their new buildings was, unsurprisingly, one of enormous relief. The Halls were at the centre of restored civic order and ritual and the Tallow Chandlers' Court noted proudly on Lord Mayor's Day, 1671, that the livery was able to dine 'att and in their new rebuilt Comon Hall'. The Halls might be 'new

rebuilt', but, as far as the Companies were concerned, they were still ancient in essence.

The Tallow Chandlers, like most Companies, replicated its pre-Fire courtyard plan and recreated the arrangement of screening the hall from the street. This gave the street gate a particularly important symbolic function, which carried with it an expectation of ornament; scrollwork, festoons, swags, garlanded ionic capitals, swan-necks and over-sized coats of arms under shell hoods were among the devices deployed. Such frontispieces operated as an index of what lay beyond.

‘Now, 350 years after the Great Fire, the flame of history is unextinguished’

Indeed, the 18th-century topographer John Strype (for whom the Tallow Chandlers' was 'a very neat building') likened the relationship of Hall complex to street gate to the way 'Hercules body may be judged by his foot'.

Subsequent centuries have seen the Tallow Chandlers' headquarters altered, but not beyond recognition to those who commissioned and built them. The street range was redeveloped in the late 19th century, truncating the inner courtyard (**Fig 3**) of tuck-pointed red brick by a bay. Inside, the main staircase was entirely rebuilt in about 1900, although some

of the original twisted balusters survive on the uppermost storey. The hall room's ceiling is mid 19th century, but a plausible evocation of the original by the Company's post-Fire plasterer, John Blount. The glass in the hall's archaising oriel carries the arms of 19 Companies made homeless by enemy action and was added in 1969, shortly after the removal of the musicians' gallery. Only the room's main windows, which were filled with stained glass in 1903, significantly disrupt an interior otherwise redolent of the Restoration.

The Tallow Chandlers continue to make embellishments to their building and its fittings; for example, this summer has seen the Hall's chandeliers replaced by Madson Black of Bicester. Company activity—led by the present Master, Richard Fleck, and Clerk, Brigadier David Homer—evolves and yet evokes corporate origins in imaginative ways. There may be fewer chandlers among the Company's 120 freemen and 180 liverymen, but there are members of BP and the Oils and Fats trade, who provide power and provision to 21st-century Britain. Charitable activity continues to underpin corporate life. Education is a priority and the Company has formal affiliations with schools in Hornsey and Greenwich. Company business is still despatched by gowned assistants from the benches of the wainscotted Court room (**Fig 4**), where prospective freemen still wait nervously at the bar for admission to the ranks. Now, 350 years since the Great Fire burnt out, the flame of several centuries of history remains unextinguished. 🐦